

ARTISTIC, ON THE FACE OF IT

But sketches prove what you get ain't always what you see

By **DAVE SALTONSTALL**

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YOU'VE ALL SEEN those police sketches — fierce-looking fugitives drawn in pencil, the word "WANTED" ominously stamped beneath their faces.

Most take a quick glance and move on, but not Manhattan artist Kerri Scharlin. She lingered over one such mug in 1991 and came up with an idea that speaks volumes about art, human perception and the vagaries of police work.

Her plan was simple: Get 17 artist friends to describe her face to top New York City Police Department sketchers, then compare the portraits to how she really looks.

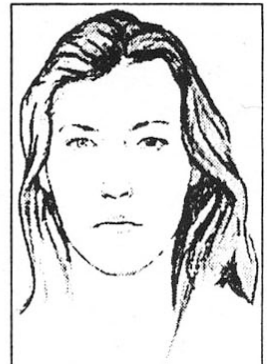
The results, in many cases, were wildly off-base.

COULD THAT BE ME?

"I literally thought I was getting the wrong sketches back," said Scharlin, 31, a Miami native and Barnard College graduate. "I sort of expected there would be a type that emerged from all of them, but most came up with definitely opposite characteristics."

Her angular face appeared round in some. Her straight brown hair was heavily coiffed and parted sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left. Her full, round lips were compressed into a thin, sinister sneer.

And these descriptions came from her friends, not the crime victims who typically get only a fleeting, terrified glimpse of their assailants.



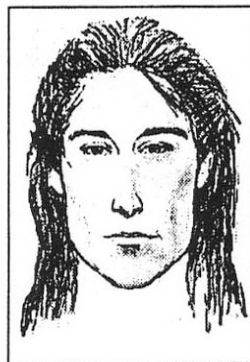
So what gives? Are people's minds just too obtuse to remember the precise slant of a friend's cheekbone, the peculiar shape of the nose? Or do sketch artists inevitably bring their pre-conceptions to each subject?

MANY DIFFERENT LOOKS

The answers are as varied as the 17 faces that were presented in June at Postmasters Gallery on Greene St. and now adorn Scharlin's SoHo studio.

"Part of it is that I honestly think I look different at different times, and maybe everyone does," said Scharlin, who also believes friends tend to gloss over physical details. "I think it's more of a spirit that people retain (in their minds), which is very hard to re-create."

The three New York City Police Department sketch artists who participated in the project — they did so knowingly and on their own time — have chosen not to talk about the project, out of



FACTS SKETCHY Not all the police sketches of subject Kerri Scharlin are a match. Some, like the one over her left shoulder, have the hair wrong. Others, like the one upper right, make her look sinister. A total of 17 sketches were done by three artists, and no two look alike. The police say the object is to get a ballpark resemblance, giving investigators a place to start looking.

SUSAN WATTS

respect for Scharlin. "It is really her show," said one.

But other sketchers who heard about the project said it's no surprise that the images came out as varied as they did. Police sketch work is not a science, it's an art, they argued, and building a sketch based on second-

hand recollections is difficult.

Furthermore, they said, victims of violent crimes often have an uncanny ability — and desire — to recall the face of their attacker, whereas Scharlin's describers had no such incentive.

"The object of the game is

to get a ballpark resemblance, so that police or other witnesses can have a place to start," said a veteran Connecticut police officer who has drawn more than 1,000 sketches.

Cheryl Donegan, one of Scharlin's friends whose description came out "comi-

cally wrong," in Scharlin's words, said she knew as soon as she saw her version that "it wasn't right."

"The problem is that the visual experience is just so infinitely complex that you run into this wall of how to explain in language what you see with your eyes," said Donegan, 31, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design.