

“This Is Our Bridge... And We Built It Ourselves!”
The Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners
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In January and February we travel as we have for the past eleven years, selecting art for the Twelfth Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners.* Traveling, we move between two problematically parallel universes, prisons and what prisoners call “the world,” that is, prisons and the towns depending upon them economically, or prisons and a largely indifferent citizenry. Traveling, we know that in the early 70s Michigan had three prisons and 3,000 prisoners and now has 50 prisons and over 51,000 prisoners, and we are aware of the enormity of what has happened in this country. We move between these universes some forty times. Sometimes we see the art in the lobby. Mostly we meet the artists inside. This year we have spoken with over 150 artists.

We park in the visitor lot, extract a portfolio from the trunk, enter the lobby, shake the snow off, present ID’s to the officer on duty, secure our belongings, greet our liaison, usually the Special Activities Director. We pass through the metal detector, are shaken down, then cross the prison yard to a room in the education unit where the artists have laid out their work and sitting around the edge, waiting. We are all expectant, quietly excited, and hopeful about our encounter. We shake hands, greet the artists we know, meet those we don’t. This happens once a year: we are all aware of how precious our time is together. Some have worked all year for this moment, have developed new techniques and imagery and come closer to themselves in their work. Others are new, unsure what to expect.

The room is quiet as we look at the art. We ask questions, take everyone seriously. They leave the room while we talk and decide, then call them back one at a time for intense moments of discussion. We are moved by the responses of artists accepted for the first time, eager to listen to those who have repeated, supportive of those we deny: we articulate their strengths and weaknesses, encourage them to find authenticity, suggest that they view the exhibition video we send each year and to seek tutelage from other artists. Many will submit next year more deeply felt or carefully rendered work and make it into the exhibition.

At the Florence Crane prison, we are stunned by three highly detailed, patterned colored pencil drawings by Frankie Davis, by the deepening of visual themes he first identified several years ago. Something very important has happened. When we tell him how much we love the work, he asks, “Can I speak?” He talks quietly, eloquently, about the drawings, wants to keep speaking, emotion brimming in his eyes. We acknowledge the care he has put into his work, his growth, and he responds, “It is because of you all.” He must leave, but can’t: it is hard to say good-bye to his work, to end this conversation, so rare in prison. We may see him next year, maybe not. At every prison we meet a Frankie Davis, a Cynthia Casey. We watch them converse with each other about their art, straighten with pride, light up with ideas, become so exuberant that they walk on air. Something electric is palpable as we meet, believe, and celebrate across universes.

Across universes. We intend the Exhibition to connect inside and outside communities. Artists’ artistic and biographical statements appear in a book for gallery visitors. Artists in their cells the night of the opening reception imagine what is happening, feel appreciated. Visitors, whose punitive stereotypes of prisoners have been broken by the range of beauty and talent they witness, write to individual and all artists in the visitors’ book, and each artist receives their responses in a packet with reviews, fliers, and other items. The responses, charged with the magic and power of the exhibition, move some artists to tears. Individual artists receive letters from School of Art and Design students and faculty offering supportive, challenging critiques of their work. Later, a video of the opening reception and works exhibited arrives, and our liaison convenes the artists for a showing or screens it over the prison TV network, stimulating the artists to new development and risk. In the fall we send a letter inviting each artist to submit again. We have a small scholarship fund for artists who come home and a Linkage Project that connects returning artists with mentors. Oliver Evans, Chancellor and Vice President of Kendall College of Art and Design extends an invitation to all prison artists to apply for admission.

Across universes. It is impossible to overestimate what this means to those inside. As Nancy Jean King writes: "One aspect to this exhibit was having the chance to display our work to the community. Not only to share our thoughts, our talents and our dreams, but to say: 'This is our bridge to you, and we built it ourselves!' Because, you see, many of us want to strengthen the rungs and come across to the other side. Expressing ourselves, sharing those expressions with a community we have been separated from, that is why we became involved. It would be such a beautiful thing if we could help to put cracks in the stereotypes and myths about prison and prisoners. If these exhibits serve to bring us and the community closer together, or makes the community more receptive to us, what could be more wonderful than that?"

Prisons are complicated, rich, difficult sites of human storage and confinement, humiliation, degradation, and danger - continuous for many prisoners with the denial of access, neglect, abuse, and lack of personal space that characterized their homes and neighborhoods – sites of resistance, creativity, and growth. At the Straits prison, Shon Varner submits an image of hell seen through a key hole. He hasn't submitted since 1996 because he has been going through the hell in his painting. He thanks us for seeding the Straits workshop, for the exhibition, and again we see the brimming eyes, the search for words. We don't know his experience, but clearly this is truly significant connection is keeping him alive. Jimmy Santiago Baca says that prisoners, like himself once, are at risk of crossing a line where they become numb forever, at risk of having the light of their spirit go out. The exhibition is a lifeline, a locus of resistance. This is what matters.

What happens in those selection rooms is significant. We respect and admire these men and women, are clear that like us they are trying to grow into powerful people. We believe in them. This is rare in prison, strengthening. And they are in a room *together* and before and afterwards seek each other out, exchange ideas, apprentice and instruct, form workshops of their own with leadership from artists like John Lonchar, Ed Mast, Eric Pasha, Fred Ross, and Rod Strelau, and significant small communities are established in an alienating world where friendship and trust can be dangerous. Transferred artists find similar communities in other prisons: because of the exhibition, a general community of artists has sprung up across the system, producing art on a level and in an amount unprecedented in this country.

At the Newberry prison, one highly skilled but frightening drawing implies violence toward women, something we will not exhibit. The new assistant deputy warden listens intently as we explain our decision to the artist (who is incarcerated for forgery) and suggest alternative ways he might explore terror. She hears our respect and encouragement, hears us praise some beautifully rendered charcoal drawings of dark devilish figures that she had thought were bad, and she tells us that she has learned something important. We share with the officers at the desk what we are doing, share our spirit and respect, they look forward to our coming, and in a small way, now and then, this enlarges the community of support the artists build.

Family members enter the gallery, participate in our yearly panel of family members of the incarcerated, speak at the opening reception, purchase art, receive the unsold work in their homes, and something shifts a little. The son of James Gostlin, who has been incarcerated 40 years, weeps when he reads on the wall his father's statement about art helping him control the overwhelming loneliness of prison. Jerry Moore's mother looks down the stairwell in Ypsilanti at her son's art and her eyes widen with new realization. The exhibition opens possibilities of connection in the face of the pain of the past.

And we continue to incarcerate in record numbers. 50 percent of the children of prisoners will come to prison. Poverty spreads in our cities and rural areas. And so the exhibition is not very much. It is not the radical shift in perception, policy, and governance necessary so that the national shame of mass incarceration will finally end. But it is something, a seed, an opportunity, possibility, pride, potential, the birth of resistance, community, a bridge we can cross.

* The exhibition opens March 27 and closes April 11 and is accompanied by a series of speakers and panels. For information: 734-647-7673; www.prisonarts.org; or email prisonart@umich.edu.