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Billy Noguera has spent nine years on Death Row for murder, where his talent as a pointillist artist was discovered. Rebecca Butlin tells his remarkable story.

Cellular Seurat

Looking at a picture of a stunning young woman with her hair swept back, it is difficult to imagine the circumstances in which it was painted. The neo-pointillist detail would be hard to achieve in the best-appointed studio, with unlimited access to life classes, let alone in the solitude of a 4ft x 10ft prison cell. The picture is aptly named Stormbringer, for it was a metaphorical storm that landed Billy Noguera in his current situation.



He first discovered his talent for painting and drawing while awaiting execution in San Quentin prison in California. Nine years later he continues to turn out work in the same cell, but he now has his own business card, art dealer and several prestigious patrons. He has also recently found a weird freedom on the Internet, where he has opened his own Website, the morbidly named Dead Man Drawing.

If it were not for a violent quarrel in April 1983, Columbian-born Noguera might never have realized his creative talent. His 16-year old girlfriend had become pregnant and her mother had forced her to have an abortion. Noguera confronted her, and a fight broke out during which he killed the mother.

In 1988, aged just 23, Noguera was convicted of murder, sentenced to death and sent to San Quentin. He is now on Death Row awaiting the result of an appeal.

Noguera's art is as intriguing as his case. When he arrived in San Quentin, one of his main concerns was to find a way to support his family. He began to draw, partly to help him cope with the frustration of being told there was nothing he could do to help them. It quickly became apparent that he had real talent. He says that he felt he had found his vocation in life and decided

he wanted to become a recognized artist whose reputation went beyond the prison gates to the heart of the art world itself. With 16 hours in his cell each day, he had plenty of time to practice – but little support or tuition.

While San Quentin provides an art studio for inmates, prisoners on Death Row are not allowed to use it. So Noguera had to make his own makeshift studio in his tiny cell. He managed to acquire a large bucket to sit on and, by pushing his mattress back from the frame, was able to use it as a flat base on which to paint. He is 6ft 1in tall and finds sitting in this cramped position for hours at a time extremely uncomfortable.

Noguera develops his images by first drawing a rough sketch in pencil, then enhancing this with a Rapidograph technical pen. After this comes the painstaking process of making hundred of tiny dots, which, seen from a distance, create a whole picture. This style of painting is called pen-and-ink stippling and can be seen as a form of neo-pointillism.

Because he lacked stimulation in his cramped and bare cell, Noguera's early work tended to be derivative, based upon his interpretation of other artists' work. As he says: "It is truly difficult to be creatively inspired in this environment."

As his talent has grown, however, so too has his imagination; now an increasing number of Noguera's paintings are wholly original expressions of what life on Death Row is like. In a recent letter, he admits that these are physically and emotionally demanding to produce: "I'm going through a difficult time, as I always do when working on my original works. I have to think and feel about what frightens me the most in order to express myself through art."

He still has to draw his technique from whatever scraps of information come his way in jail. A 1994 picture, *Wiped Out*, for instance, is based on a work by artist Jim Daly, many of whose pictures Noguera had seen in magazines. Yet, in spirit, it is entirely his own, combining the theme of lost innocence with a yearning for a time when life was simple. The painting depicts two young boys playing a game of marbles. *Radio Daze*, which was also painted in 1994 is another interpretation of a Daly piece and shows a young boy lost in a daydream while listening to the radio. Noguera says that songs have the unique quality of capturing some moment from the past in a way that transports him "away from a life behind bars to somewhere safe."

Forbidden, painted in 1989, an unusually symbolic picture, was created as a wedding present for a friend. At first sight the picture looks had and threatening, with two thumbs on the ends of which stretch long pink nails. The hands are in black gloves. Noguera explains that the nails represent his friend's colorful personality and her need to transform herself for life with her husband is represented by the thong tying her gloves together.

Noguera maintains his art has given him the courage to face his own mortality. Perhaps the most saddening of his original works is *Last Words*. The picture depicts a face with a pair of hands holding a piece of paper, on which is written:

*The duration of man is as the semblance of dust
As the time runs its dogged course
The inevitable end draws near
The razor gleams a wicked smile slicing through the fear
The horizon beckons as a fateful friend
I am but a silhouette close to the end*



Even if these pictures had not been painted in such daunting circumstances, they would still seem touching and heartfelt. The technique that Noguera has evolved enables him to capture the intense emotions that are his inspiration, each having been engrained painstakingly in the medium.

Since arriving on Death Row, Billy Noguera has obtained a college degree in criminal justice and a paralegal certificate. He says that as well as inspiring him, his painting and drawing enable him to give the public a unique insight into the soul of a man who, in his words, “has one foot in the grave.”

As well as seeking to provide for his family, whether he wins his appeal or not, Noguera also seeks to make a contribution to society. He recently began two new art pieces that will be placed on sale on his Website, with proceeds going to the Make-A-Wish Foundation and the Children’s Cancer Foundation. He is also setting up his own charitable organization, called From Death To Life.

Noguera’s lawyer says his client’s case exemplifies the fate of about 3,000 people across the United States who are on Death Row simply because they are too poor to afford competent legal representation. After nine years, Noguera still awaits the result of his appeal and lives each day under the shadows of the death penalty.

His philosophy of life is a simple one: no matter who you are and in what circumstances you find yourself, you can always help others. Much of Noguera’s work goes to charitable organizations.

It is as an artist that Noguera wishes to be recognized. The progression that can be seen in his work in terms both of technique and emotional intensity, together with the increasing interest being shown by America’s art establishment, testifies to his ability. Time will blur his reputation as a Death Row artist – but his work will have to stand on its own merit.