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THE ARTS

INMATE DRAWS DARK PORTRAIT OF DEATH ROW

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The image is a cliché in comic strips and movies. An inmate ruefully scratches hatch marks onto his cell wall to mark another day of incarceration.

Death row inmate William Noguera, however, tracks his time with neo-pointillist pen and ink drawings that are as much a record of time served as maps of his emotional journey. His work is on permanent exhibit at La Galerie Internationale in Palo Alto.

“With every drawing, I’m constantly thinking about my own death, how it’s going to feel to die,” says Noguera during a phone interview from his cell. “I always have to live with death. Every single day. Sometimes, I’ll wake up in the morning and forget that I’m in prison for a split second. Then the sun shines through a window and casts shadows of the bars on the wall.”

Skeptics, however, feel little sympathy. Noguera was convicted of murdering his girlfriend’s mother in 1983 and was sentenced to death five years later.

But Noguera’s current counsel, San Francisco attorney Robert Bryan, characterizes the conviction in a letter as a “travesty of justice.” The case is on appeal, with the defense contending Noguera was in a steroid-induced haze when the victim boasted she had forced her daughter to abort a child by the devout Catholic.

Noguera lives in a 4-by-10 foot cell in San Quentin’s East Block. Art helps him pass the time.

“I used to compare it to the way an alcoholic drinks to get away from where he’s at – art was my alcohol,” says Noguera, 36. “I couldn’t describe how difficult it is to deal with the everyday process of being behind bars, so I started putting it on paper.”

Noguera describes the results as “monochromatic-metaphoric-surrealism done in ink stipplings.” His compositions are doleful allegories of the circumstances of his life and marked by motifs of chains, clocks, and looming skulls. The works with titles such as “Last Words,” “He Who I Once Was” and “Father’s Rage” often are accompanied by a poem.

Noguera creates his pen-and-ink works on a makeshift easel he assembles daily from his steel bed frame. There, hunched over his paper while seated on a bucket, Noguera applies the millions of near-microscopic dots that comprise his drawings. Each 20-by-28 foot [sic] piece can take anywhere from 270 to 350 hours.

“I’m more interested in being known as an artist than some guy who draws and is getting notoriety because I happen to be on death row,” Noguera says.

“We loved his work immediately. It stands alone,” says La Galerie co-owner Linda Renaud, who was introduced to Noguera’s drawings through a mutual friend and was initially unaware the artist was on Death Row.

“There’s fluidity to his work – there’s no rigidity in the way it’s laid out. His work definitely comes from the heart, and he’s working through a lot of issues.”

Noguera’s prints sell for around \$500, and originals are valued in the mid- to high thousands. According to the gallery, the works have been purchased by professionals in Silicon Valley and in the legal community. Noguera donates his earnings to the Children’s Make-A-Wish Foundation.

“What makes me draw is the memory, the memory of what was and what has happened,” he says.

“My works are inspired by pain and the the torture I’ve gone through. You may say I’m crazy for saing this, but if I were not in the situation I’m in now, I would not be the artist that I am,” says Noguera who earned a degree in criminal justice and a paralegal certificate while imprisoned.

“A lot of guys in here try to forget that they’re here, they try to live away from it. But for me, it actually inspires my work. I’m working with a timeline.”

If Noguera’s legal appeals fail, he estimates he will be executed in four to five years.

Though he says he is remorseful and regrets committing the crime that has consumed half his life, Noguera remains philosophical about his time “inside.”

“I think what it has done to me is make me realize how valuable life is,” he says. “It has opened my eyes to appreciate the littlest of things – a phone call or a friendship with somebody. Every day I live is an accomplishment – I’ve lived one more day in this world that’s so close to yours yet so apart. This is the worst hole in the world. Anyone who thinks this is a country club or a nice place to be is completely delusional. But it has made me a person that I am comfortable with. I was a very young, immature kid. Now I’m a guy with a college degree, a paralegal certificate and perhaps someday I’ll be considered an accomplished artist.”



ARTISTIC EXPRESSION: Death row inmate William Noguera titled this pen and ink drawing “Last Words”