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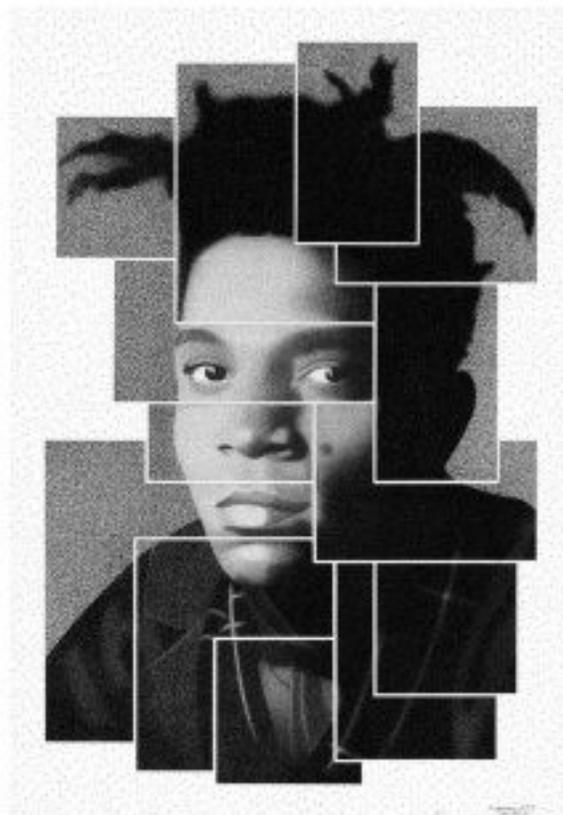
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Making Good Use of Time

by hadi reinhertz

Once a month, sometimes twice, I walk through the visitor's gate at San Quentin, submit my body and clothes to a search, then walk 600 yards through another checkpoint, a double bulletproof door, and another.

Once "there" I put about eight dollars into vending machines for unpalatable coffee, quickly melting ice cream and shrink-wrapped sandwiches, then with my tray in hand, I am locked into a small cage with a man who has been on Death row for some twenty years, himself living in a very similar cage. We sit and talk. We are surrounded by other cages filled with other men and their visitors, many of them women and children. All of us are visiting with men who have been convicted of one or more murders, people the justice system found guilty of taking another person's life who are now awaiting execution.



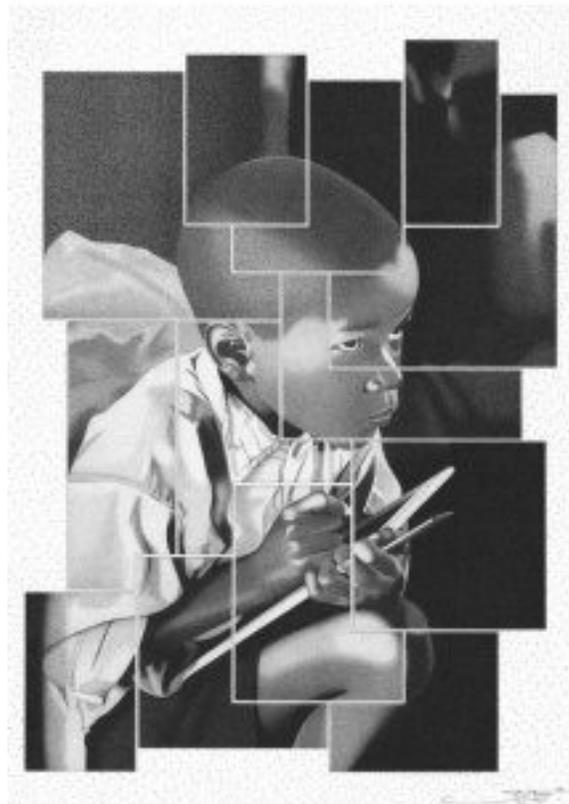
Along with the others, I sit and talk, pass the two hours allotted in conversation. Of course, I don't know what the others discuss, sometimes, I notice, there are card games, dominoes, bible reading, and I have to admit to some curiosity about the conversations around us...but it's just that, a curiosity that cannot be satisfied, and so I return to the conversation I am having with Bill, as he begins to describe his latest art project; the layout, the subject, the proposed final product.

Two years ago, the Vallejo Art Guild hosted an exhibit featuring the works of William Noguera, the man I visit. As a result of that show, The Institute for Unpopular Culture took an interest in Bill's work and last month mounted a show at a gallery on Polk Street. The show was well received, covered by KQED, and visited by more than three hundred people.

This presents a dilemma for Bill. He is not interested in marketing himself as a "freak," as someone who should gain attention because he's on Death Row, and here he is being underwritten by "The Institute for Unpopular Culture."

So his art, and our conversation are caught in the net of paradox, because I am present in this setting exactly because he is on Death Row.

Why, in particular am I the person who is here? A friend of mine who lived in Marin County was traveling in Europe, and read an article about Bill's work. Implicit in the article was the fact that if Bill had not been convicted of murder, if he had not been incarcerated for some twenty years (so far), he would not be the artist that he is. His talent would have existed only as a potentiality, and most likely would not have ever manifested. Further, he might not now even be alive. As a student of a mystical path my friend recognized what we call the "alchemical process of the human spirit" and started visiting Bill. He moved away and asked if I might have an interest in continuing the contact. I have, and Bill and I have developed a deep friendship.



Paradox. The subjects of Bill's artworks are an intense exploration of his subconscious and the images that emerge are the result of this examination, exactly the act of contemplation in which many people do not partake. I am sitting with a person who indeed may never have tapped into this process except for the circumstances of his incarceration.

There is an intense compassion in the works which Bill produces. Compassion is an emotion which is aroused through identification with the circumstances of another person, their plight, their life circumstances. It is instructive that this act of compassion is taking place in one of the most benighted locales of our society, and the vehicle for this act is a person the State has marked for death.

Each visit I make with Bill is a meditation on creativity, on the human spirit, on the questions of who kills and what is the meaning of that crime. Beyond that, each visit raises the question of meaningfulness here we sit relating to one another, a friendship which would never have happened under any other circumstances than the crime of which Bill was convicted.

What can we establish now in this relationship of reader and writer ?

For one thing the possibility of the benefit of information when viewing Mr. Noguera's work (www.ifuc.org) and discerning much more of the consciousness behind the hand of art that created the works on view. Remember that the pieces are not created as a plea for forgiveness, nor for some sort of redemption, but are created as a statement about the nature of the human experience and the creative consciousness which rises and processes even under terrible circumstances.

There is a theory that art is motivated from stress, from unusual circumstances, the "starving artist theory? But that is not the case. Art is an integral aspect of our humanness and in fact every day each of us has the impulse to create. It is a matter of hearing that inner call and acting on it, in some way, manner or form. Our human inheritance is Beauty.