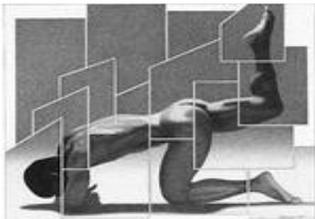
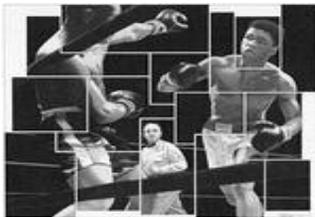


News

In Pen and Ink: They are unschooled, undisciplined, and often unpopular, but it's outsider artists like the convict who drew this who can sometimes shape mainstream culture

By Ella Lawrence - published: December 27, 2006

Some artists create best in crowded cafes, the burbling noise of city life rolling over their shoulders as they hunch over their work, a forgotten latte cooling beside them; others require complete silence. Some artists work best in huge, wide-open spaces; others prefer to be closed in, no pretty views to divert attention. Artist William Noguera's preferred method is to fold a wool blanket on top of an upside-down five-gallon bucket. It supports his large frame as he pushes his mattress to the side. Bent over the bed frame, he lays down layer after layer of dots. From his drafting pen to the 20-by-30-foot Strathmore paper, the ink transforms a blank page to a hyper-realistic photo-image after hundreds of hours of painstaking labor. He has time to spare.



Four feet wide by 10 feet long, this artist's working space is utterly free from distractions. Precise scale drawings of it and the artist's descriptions show that it's free from pretty much everything except for a bed, a toilet, and a few sketchbooks. Those books contain the vivid dream images Noguera has transmitted from his internal landscape to paper during his 18 years on San Quentin's Death Row.



Resting his elbows on the bed frame, Noguera resembles an overgrown schoolboy intently working at his desk, but there is no schoolboy innocence in here.

Two yellow fluorescent wall fixtures give a harsh glow similar to institutional bathroom lighting. Depending on the season and the time of the day, ambient lighting may leak in from outside.



Although Noguera has been an artist his entire life, it was only after being incarcerated for the murder of his girlfriend's mother in 1983 that his art became instrumental to his sanity.

Noguera had never gotten along with his girlfriend Dominique Navarro's mother Juanita, and in the days prior to her death, neighbors reported, relations between the two were especially strained. After the death of her mother, Dominique stood to inherit her house in Orange County and a life-insurance policy. The jury decided that the murder was committed for financial gain, and sentenced 18-year-old Noguera to death in 1992 on one count of first-degree murder with deadly weapons: a martial arts tonfa and a wooden dowel. His 16-year-old girlfriend was charged with conspiracy to commit murder and first-degree murder, tried as a juvenile, convicted, and sentenced to the custody of the Youth Authority; her conviction was affirmed on appeal.

"Yes, someone got killed," Noguera says. "I was under the influence of anabolic steroids for competition in martial arts at the time, and for something that took possibly a minute I've spent 23 years of my life in prison. It's very tragic and I don't live a day without thinking about it. I'm very sorry it happened for everyone involved."



Noguera represents all that makes us uncomfortable in art. His work is inspired by dreams, angry ones. His passion is evident and entirely raw. "There's anger in my art," Noguera says, "But I'm searching for beauty." He also acknowledges that what people who view his work see, is actually bitterness. The man who sits on Death Row is really an art-world freak — unschooled, untutored, and undisciplined — but it is artists like him who can sometimes shape mainstream culture.

At San Quentin, surrounded by child molesters, rapists, and other criminals (which he says kills him inside) Noguera creates a private sphere through his art, which is — quite literally — his escape. Hunched over that bucket for 10 to 11 hours straight, Noguera retreats inside himself to a black-and-white world, painstakingly dropping his dreams, in

ink, onto the page.

Without Cézanne's anxiety, without Van Gogh's mental tortures, and without his own anger, the artists' works would not have any meaning, he explains. And although the passion that drives Noguera's art is largely derived from the brutal surroundings he creates them in, he hopes viewers will "look beyond that and relate the anger and the tortured past to the beauty that is there in my work," he says.

"My art is not a luxury, it is a necessity," Noguera says. Each day as he wakes up, something inside him is begging to get out, and he must work. "If I don't create, I can't function," he explains.

Barely discernable from a black-and-white photograph until closely viewed, Noguera's pen-and-ink stippling's are hyper-realistic, neo-cubist portraits and dreamscapes.

But how to get his artwork from prison cell to gallery wall? Art lovers recognize the talent in his rawness, but confronted with its source, art-opening attendees may choke on their brie and Chardonnay.

There is a San Francisco organization that seeks out artists like Noguera, artists that nobody else will touch. Noguera first contacted the Institute for Unpopular Culture (happily known as IFUC) in 2004, and reading the typed letter Noguera sent from San Quentin, founder David Ferguson knew he'd just found the challenge of his career.

"Dear Mr. Ferguson,

My name is William A. Noguera. I'm an artist who is seeking help in giving my art a voice. For the past 21 years I've been a prisoner, the last 17 of these years ... condemned to die at San Quentin Prison. Most men's soul's [sic] have died when faced with these circumstances. Everyday [sic] I look into the faces of the men who surround me and their souls are lost. I ... have found an escape route from death ... to a world I create in my art. ... I seek your help because I can't seem to break through the barrier of the art world. I've had some success but without any real support its [sic] very difficult.

*I hope you are well and I hope to hear from you soon.
Thank you for your time and efforts, it is appreciated.*

*Sincerely,
William A. Noguera"*

While he didn't know it at the time, Noguera had found a home for his talents, an institute that would begin to work to champion his art. IFUC promotes artistic attempts to challenge and destabilize the status quo. By sponsoring subversive, or unpopular, artistic visions, the Institute hopes to alleviate the artist's need to cater to public opinion in order to make a living. Dedicated to restoring art to its inherently personal nature, rather than the repetitive products of many art-school graduates, IFUC intends to preserve diversity of opinion and richness of experience.

The Institute has a long history of seeing diamonds in the rough, incubating the careers of talented artists, even if they are in the shape of the mentally unstable, the condemned, or the socially dysfunctional. IFUC's associate director Cassandra Richardson describes the profile of the IFUC artist as someone who is struggling because no one else will give them a chance, someone whose artwork is in some way or shape out on the fringe.

IFUC's founder David Ferguson is no stranger to being out there. Decades ago, often working closely with Andy Warhol and his Factory of Superstars, Ferguson produced concerts for the likes of Iggy Pop, the Avengers, and the Cockettes (the theater troupe that produced outsider-legend Divine, and from which Alice Cooper and David Bowie drew influence).

"[Andy and I] had a little treaty that he would do the weirdos on the East Coast, and I would do the weirdos on the West Coast," Ferguson laughs.

Through his early punk-rock music label, CD Presents, Ferguson influenced the careers of musicians like Henry Rollins and the band Public Image. The growing influence of the punk-rock scene attracted artists from other genres, including the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, who designed an album cover for the Offs (also on Ferguson's label) in 1984.

Working with "people who were challenging, controversial, and talented," over the years, Ferguson developed a knack for spotting and bringing to fame such artists as Courtney Love, Fat Mike of NOFX, and San Franciscan metal artist Dan Das Mann, whose large-scale sculpture of a mother and child towers along the Embarcadero.

Warhol's personal influence was far-reaching, and Ferguson remembers that, "it was just really nice that he was always willing to take people under his wing and help them with their careers."

The most famous example of Warhol's mentorship is of course the artist Basquiat, who was "just a graffiti kid," much like modern graffiti artist Barry McGee, who Ferguson mentored in the early stages of his career. Ferguson believes that Noguera deserves equal billing with these two great rebel iconoclasts.

"Andy was the kind of extremely radical person who really altered the way people saw reality, like Marcel Duchamp," Ferguson says, "but now they are both as mainstream as can be." Art that draws inspiration from Duchamp and Warhol isn't relevant anymore, Ferguson believes, so he's looking for artists who are. Artists like Noguera.

Noguera is currently undergoing an appeals process through his attorney Robert Bryan, who specializes in death penalty litigation. The former chairperson of the Washington-based National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, Bryan has also been the lead counsel for journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal since 2003.

"This is the challenge of my career," Ferguson says, "to break through all those assumptions about Noguera, to adequately show that someone can be decent with a story like that behind them."

In his part of San Quentin, the idea of rehabilitation is inconceivable; the men and women there are condemned to die, and there is no escape. Noguera has nothing to gain by being well behaved or productive, and wants to make it clear that his art is not about rehabilitation, or redemption. He does not want fame, or notoriety, as a "prison artist." He just makes art because he has to.

In a phone interview, Noguera says that as he sits down on his bucket and hunches over the bunk, he begins to lose himself in the images he brings from his inside to the outside world, and he begins to lose the fear of his surroundings.

"At that point, a door opens, and a child steps through. The man that I am today is just the vehicle to translate these things for that little boy."

Counting among his influences Picasso, Cézanne, Raphael, Dali, Brice Marden, and Mark Roscoe, Noguera says, "I've looked on all of these works with an uneducated eye, the eye of a child. No one ever told me what their art should mean." Noguera believes it takes a lifetime for an artist to "figure out the way back to their childhood days, and to see the world through childlike eyes."

One of the only people on "the outside" who also visits Noguera inside the cell space he calls home and studio is Rev. Stephen Barber, SJ, a Jesuit Catholic priest whose ministry is the men (more than 650 of them) condemned to death at San Quentin. When asked about Noguera's status as a "prison artist," Barber says, "I'd challenge anyone to guess where William lives by looking at his art. I've never seen a piece of work of his that would give away the context in which it's created."

Listening to Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 is profoundly moving on its own, Barber reasons, and realizing that the great composer was deaf when he wrote it only intensifies the work.

"[Noguera's] work is incredible," says Dorka Keehn, whose radio show, Keehn on Art, broadcasts weekly throughout the Bay Area and on Air America Radio. "It's insane, the precision."

"I'm interested in the transformation he's going through as an artist," says Keehn. "I think there's some sort of release happening inside of him."

What first drew Keehn to Noguera's work is its angst; the internal struggle apparent especially in his dreamscapes. Unless the work is a portrait, Noguera's inspirations are his dreams. "All I ever see are images, like photographs," he says. And the resulting works are photo-realistic. Although the only work Noguera has showed so far has been pen-and-ink stippling, he's beginning to dabble in oil. Since first seeing some of Basquiat's work two years ago, Noguera has "been haunted by images of abstract colors. I can describe [his oil paintings] as extremely juicy. The colors are very metaphoric," he explains.

Noguera considers his art as a vehicle for his escape from Death Row, both figuratively and literally. Escaping from Death Row through his internal dream world and the process of putting it on paper, Noguera is also literally escaping, drop by drop. Each time he refills the ink chamber of his drafting pen, Noguera mixes in a few drops of his own blood.

"It's my little hysterical laugh," he says. "You put me in here, but when someone carries a work out, they're carrying a little part of me out."

Creepy, right? But it's sometimes the "weirdos" that change the way we think, and real creativity often comes from almost-crazy people under almost-impossible circumstances. The eccentric Van Gogh sold only one painting in his entire life, and although Warhol and Duchamp are some of the most emulated painters today, in their respective times they weren't exactly mainstream. And although IFUC's founder describes "unpopular culture" as a term more referential to something outside of the mainstream than to something disliked, representing an artist on Death Row doesn't exactly make IFUC the most popular kid on the block.

"We find someone like William and attempt to influence culture with something that might seem pretty challenging," Ferguson says of his decision to represent Noguera. And if his history of influencing culture through punk rock is any indication — after all, what once was a rebellious youth movement that shocked mainstream culture is now a fashion statement, and bands like Green Day and Nirvana are the music of a generation — Noguera just might be the next big thing.

Try this at home: Map out a space on your living room floor, 4 feet by 10 feet, able to touch both walls with your arms. Now add a sink, a toilet, and a bed. Imagine being alone in there for more than two decades.

At Noguera's show in March, artist Francisco Recabarren of Blueprint Studios re-created a replica of Noguera's cell smack in the middle of the fancy Space Gallery, amid Noguera's well-lit works and formally dressed attendees milling about in black-and-white attire.

During the show, Noguera placed a collect call; the only call allowed out from San Quentin. There is a beep every 60 seconds, and just in case you might forget that your conversation with the condemned is being recorded, a man's voice lets you know every few minutes that Big Brother is really listening.

Addressing his audience through a speakerphone placed inside the re-created prison cell and later into Ferguson's mobile phone (which was passed around from guest to guest), Noguera chatted with the audience about his work.

Rev. Barber says of the event, "You could watch people react not only to the cell, but to the voice that was coming from that cell. It was oddly disjointed."

This piece of theater heightened the context. But why re-create a prison cell when Noguera desperately wants to be known not as a "prison artist" or in his words, "a drawing monkey in a cage," but as an artist through his own merit? Well, we don't listen to Beethoven's Ninth because it was made by a deaf guy; we listen to it because of its genius. And the merit of Noguera's art is only amplified when the viewer learns when and how it was created.

Barber attended Noguera's show not only to see Noguera's work in a well-lit, professional setting, but to speak with those who are interested about the man who created it. People wondered: What is it that keeps people going when they're sitting in a cell all day long? How do they maintain their personal integrity and their mental health?

Barber believes Noguera keeps sane through creating art, and IFUC supports him.

"William is the ultimate challenge of calling us on our rhetoric," Ferguson says. "There's nothing easy about that one."

Nothing about the Institute for Unpopular Culture seems very easy. Funding, for example. Who wants to give money to an institute that supports murderers, the mentally unstable, and the socially dysfunctional? It seems the donors don't want you to know who they are.

"Most of our donors prefer to stay anonymous, so their families and lives aren't affected by everyone knowing they have all this money," explains Cassandra Richardson, IFUC's associate director and CFO. One of IFUC's major donors, she says, "has resources on such a high level, he fears for the safety of his family. His kids are in school under fake names."

And perhaps it's for the best that an institute supporting artists, some of whom are darkly on the fringe, keeps its major funding sources well hidden. "I'm not saying our artists would approach the donors with a lot of money, but we work with some artists who are mentally unstable," Richardson explains.

One of IFUC's more annoying artists is Clinton Fein, of the controversial sociopolitical Web site Annoy.com. During Fein's legal battle against Janet Reno in the Supreme Court, IFUC's interns provided numerous hours of legal research to support Fein's case. *ApolloMedia v. Reno* challenged the constitutionality of the Communications Decency Act, which would have prevented artists from distributing offensive work on the Internet. Fein won the case in 1997.

Artist Susan Murdoch, also supported by IFUC, retreats to an annual "self-sentenced sabbatical" and study of Mexican culture, "voyaging against the tide of immigration to produce an alternative vision of Christianity, femininity, and spiritual iconography," according to her spokesperson at IFUC. Her paintings of holy vaginas, masturbation, and Madonnas with in-utero Jesuses have provoked quite a bit of controversy in Mexico.

IFUC has also worked with the Mission District's Creativity Explored, a San Francisco organization that enables developmentally disabled adults to express themselves artistically in ways that are both rewarding to the artist and appreciated by others.

One of IFUC's donors was willing to go on the record to talk about the role of the outsider in art. John Brower is a Canadian rock concert producer, who in 1969 brought John Lennon and Yoko Ono to Toronto for the "Live Peace in Toronto" concert.

Of Ferguson's ability to see talent where others see madness, Brower says, "David has the ability to look at people in different stages in their creative expression and see that, after a lot of polishing, they have something valuable to bring to the community."

For people who are outsiders in the art world — and the real world — to be showcased in a first-class manner is what Brower finds Ferguson has done with the Institute. And by doing this, Ferguson, and IFUC, is often at the inception of the blossoming of an aspect of culture.

"I feel a great privilege to be on the edge of things that have been rejected by contemporary culture," Ferguson says. "It feels to us that this is the path of the future."

In accordance with the philosophy of rejecting contemporary culture, IFUC eschews running the foundation on more than just a few thousand dollars a month. "We could easily get funding to run it on a lot of money," Ferguson says, "but it seems antithetical to what we're doing." Much of the business that takes place at IFUC is volunteer-driven, or works given in trade. For example, a film editor who owed thousands of dollars in parking tickets was able to work them off through DPT's Project 20 (a program that allows you to work off the price of your parking tickets through community service) by donating time to two of Creativity Explored's volunteers, who'd run out of IFUC funding during the making of their documentary film.

Entirely donor-funded, IFUC gets about \$100,000 a year from various sources and "turns around and gives the money away as quickly as we can — as soon as the checks have cleared!" Because Noguera, as an inmate on Death Row, cannot legally do business, the proceeds from the sale of his artwork goes into a fund for the future education of his son.

Taking no commission and teaching no technique, IFUC thumbs its nose at the art world that so often dictates what art is by what will sell based on a few trendy galleries.

Pablo Picasso's fragmented face looks out from behind a plastic sheet. Cassandra Richardson is nervously approaching potential art buyers with it, getting ready to present the work of Noguera, who by law can't attend his own opening. By now she's growing used to the brush-offs and looks of horror that often follow when she begins to talk about the talented artist she represents. "Even in wonderfully liberal San Francisco," her boss says, "we have people warn us that working with him will taint our future here at the Institute."

Picasso's portrait, broken up into dozens of overlapping boxes, is composed of shaded cubes of black and white and grey, meshing seamlessly together in homage to one of Noguera's biggest influences. All of Noguera's art work is broken up into boxes, fragmented pieces of his dream world mapped out in carefully measured increments.

The Divine Proportion, a study of a male nude, is broken up and put back together with a series of angles that reflect the nude's raised leg. Noguera says that there is a measurement between the squares and angles that adds up to the "Number of God." This number, Noguera says, is the "perfect number, the number of every human being." The measurement of each human's hip to the floor, divided by the measurement between the floor and that same person's knee, is always the same. A clue to how to find this number is hidden in a poem written on the back of The Divine Proportion. Noguera's meticulous crafting of riddles and dots is a signature of his work, just like the bloody fingerprint he includes on the back of every original piece.

We describe outsiders as people who don't fit in, people outside of popular culture, people who make us feel uncomfortable. In prison terminology, an outsider is someone who's not locked up. William Noguera is an outsider on the "inside," creating cutting-edge art that would stand on its own even were it not crafted during hours crouched on a plastic bucket under dim institutional light.

"I know it sounds corny," says the Rev. Barber, "But to see him live from day to day as a human being, it's an occasion to restore your faith in the survival of the human spirit. The work he does holds onto his humanity. That's why he does it."