

Dutra's art raises questions about her profiting behind bars

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December 15, 2007 12:00 AM

STOCKTON - Before she was convicted of helping poison to death a Woodbridge attorney, aspiring artist Sarah Dutra used charcoals and watercolors while studying abroad at an exclusive institute in Florence, Italy.

These days, locked away in her cell at a Chowchilla women's prison, Dutra, 27, reaches for lipstick and mascara for colors when art supplies run dry. And to sketch her sister recently, she carefully unglued a white envelope for her canvas. Despite a lack of supplies, her skill as an artist won praise recently from the prosecutor who successfully argued to keep her behind bars.

Dutra's pieces have yet to hit the open market, but San Joaquin County Deputy District Attorney Thomas Testa said he feared Dutra could be the next criminal to cash in on her notoriety.

Online barter for murder memorabilia, known in some ghoulish circles as "murderabilia," is on the rise - giving anybody with a computer and a taste for artwork of grim origins a chance to bid on a Manson, a Gacy or even a Ramirez.

Web sites with names such as murderauction.com sell everything from locks of hair to greeting cards and artwork from nefarious figures such as child murderer John Wayne Gacy Jr. and the Night Stalker, Richard Ramirez.

A painting by cult leader Charles Manson fetched \$1,000, while a hand-drawn greeting card of two fairies by Sacramento mass murderer/landlady Dorothea Puente, who is in the same California prison as Dutra, has a starting bid of \$50.

Texas crime victims advocate Andy Kahan said that laws - California has one - designed to prevent prisoners from profiting on their dirty acts are rarely enforced, largely because the online sales are done through third parties and across state lines, he said.

"You shouldn't be able to rob, rape and murder and then turn around and make a buck off it," said Kahan, director of the Mayor's Crime Victims Office in Houston. Kahan is leading the charge to kill the murderabilia industry.

He's pushing a proposed federal law that would shut down a number of online auction sites that cater to the macabre by outlawing murderabilia trade through the U.S. mail.

California's bulging prison population and death row is a major source of art, said Kahan, who has no qualms if the profit from prisoners' work goes toward repaying a victim's relatives, but not the convict.

"You've got to draw the line somewhere," Kahan said.

For his part, Testa said he fears Dutra may secretly sell her art and keep the profit - escaping a portion of her sentence ordering payment of \$178,085 to her victims. Dutra's sentence also included 11 years in state prison for helping Laren Sims in 2001 kill Laurence McNabney, Sims' husband.

Dutra was close to graduating from California State University, Sacramento, and working in McNabney's law office at the time.

Sims, 36, hanged herself in a Florida jail, leaving Dutra to stand trial alone and draw all the attention for the sensational crime that garnered wide media coverage and spawned two true-crime books.

Sims and Dutra had fed McNabney horse tranquilizer on Sept. 11, 2001, at a Southern California horse show, drove his body back to his Woodbridge home, stowed him in a refrigerator and eventually buried him in a Linden vineyard. They partied for three months on cash drained from McNabney's Sacramento law firm.

Dutra lost an appeal last week in San Joaquin County Superior Court, sending the Vacaville woman back to prison until late 2011. Her defense attorney brought two of Dutra's works to court for the hearing to emphasize her human side.

A large oil painting exhibited in court depicted a cafe scene, and a smaller sketch drawn on the envelope showed her younger sister, Rachel, riding a bicycle through Yosemite Valley with her arms pointing straight out from her sides. Testa said he has no proof Dutra is plotting any art sales.

"I hope I'm wrong," said Testa, an art maven who admitted he admired the smaller sketch of Dutra's sister. "If her art does fetch a price, that should go to where the judge ordered it."

Dutra's attorney, San Joaquin County Deputy Public Defender Keith Arthur, said no vast body of Dutra's artwork is in circulation, as far as he knew. He also confessed having no eye for art, yet he noted the dark-light contrast of her cafe scene.

"The value they had to me is that prison did not crush her spirit," he said. "She's still struggling toward the light, like we all do."

Still others argue that art plays an important role in a prisoner's otherwise hard life.

Ed Mead, a former prisoner in Washington, runs a site at prisonart.com helping inmates sell their art from \$30 to \$300. He refuses to deal with notorious criminals, and he said art gives prisoners a skill and sense of self-worth.

"You keep them in a cage day in and day out and expect them to come out better people," Mead said. "Come on."

Cassandra Richardson, a neophyte San Francisco art dealer, represents William Noguera, sentenced to San Quentin State Prison's death row in 1988. Richardson sells his original pointillism works for up to \$12,000. Limited-edition copies go for \$500, she said.

"Collectors who go through me are by no means death row addicts," said Richardson, who described Noguera patrons as the "forward thinking" who oppose capital punishment. "This is not something they do to glorify the crime."

You won't see any of Dutra's artwork hanging in the home of JoDee Bebout. McNabney's ex-wife and mother of his two grown children has remarried and even forgiven Dutra, she said.

But Bebout doesn't understand why anybody would delight in artwork created by Dutra or any convict. Without Dutra's notoriety tied to McNabney's horrible death, her artwork would have no value, Bebout said. She saw the two pieces brought to court.

"It gave me an icky chill," she said of Dutra's cafe scene. "Now that she's a high-profile killer, maybe there's a weirdo out there who may buy it."

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