

ARTslant

San Francisco

The Slant

GALLERY HOP AROUND TOWN WITH JOLENE TORR (March 2, 2008)

Outsider Art from the Inside by Jolene Torr

The Prison Project Group Show

Intersection for the Arts/ Intersection 5M
925 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94109
February 20, 2008 - March 29, 2008



Picture a balled mass of multi-colored threads hovering cloud-like in a corner of the gallery, its sinewy fibers tangled like a clog of hair. Beneath it, the carefully divided piles of blue threads and green. Each piece of thread is six-inches long and represents ten individuals: blue for inmates in the California prison system, green for the guards and prison staff, and multi-colored for the families of prisoners and victims. These meticulously intertwined threads demonstrate how over 8 million people (of our 36.5 million population) are connected and affected by the prison system. There are thousands of threads.

This is one piece in the group show "The Prison Project" now showing at Intersection for the Arts. The show features work by inmates in the California Prison system as well as artists on the outside and activists campaigning for prisoner awareness and rights. The exhibit is part of Intersection for the Arts's larger effort to contextualize the criminal justice system through various art events, workshops, and forums. Part of experiencing the show is understanding why these works are here and what is being asked of the viewer. There are only two cultural institutions operating in California prisons.

Since art should be a part of life, a psychological necessity, what happens when budget cuts eliminate funding for these types of programs? How are people expected to successfully rehabilitate into society without first being able to explore and work through their demons?



And to widen the lens: how are you personally connected to the prison system? Don't feel left out, because chances are, you've bought something assembled in the California prison system. To help build a framework to better understand what messed-up priorities we have in this state, Intersection provides a library of information to prove how connected we all are to and by the system: the industry of incarceration.

But even without the political perspective, the artwork itself is fascinating. The folk art of one inmate, Larry Machado, delicately crafted from the bones of gophers and other small animals, bending and arcing to form a model motorcycle. Serpent-tailed dream things and hovering alien beings inhabit a Dada dreamscape in another inmate's work. The painstaking pointillism and skilled detail of one death-row prisoner's photo-realistic pieces promise to impress. The artist, William Noguera, ritualistically mixes his blood in the ink he uses so that at least symbolically part of him will go free.

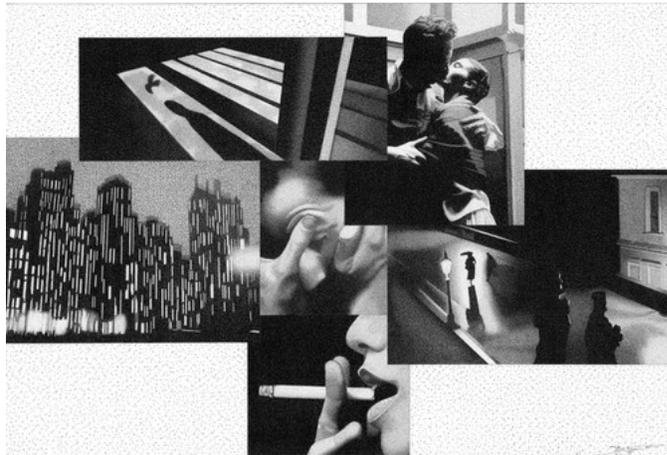


And then there are the bizarre and unsettling little acrylic paintings of one prisoner, Robert Stansbury, and based on his statement, "I 'HAVE' found the perfect dramatic style to say what 'I' want to say...perhaps that is one of the big reasons I am so excited about it," I am eternally curious to know what he is trying to communicate with his beachscape or his campfire or his lone pheasant in a field. Some of the artists' statements suggest a similar sort of urge to decipher the world, its complicated parts and their own psyches, which proves that this impulse to tell a story and to connect is a basic, human need. Simple. And belaboring over the choices in style and technique is as much a struggle for the incarcerated artists as it is to those on the outside, proving that it's tough to polarize: what is art? And what is criminal?



The gallery is at first a gallery, and the work inside may be judged on any individual's personal aesthetics, but with all the interdisciplinary methods of connecting the exhibit's themes, the gallery becomes a forum. It is a means for discourse and dialogue, to explore relationships, artistic freedom, layers of narrative, politics. "The Prison Project" contextualizes the work within the gallery so the viewer cannot help but think of life on the inside, and hopefully, bring it with him or her to the world outside.

--Jolene Torr



(*Images, from top to bottom: *The Prison Project*, February 20 - March 29, 2008; Intersection for the Arts, **William Noguera, Voices Carry, 2007, ink on paper, courtesy of the Artist**, Intersection for the Arts and Camorra Fine Art. *The Prison Project*, February 20 - March 29, 2008; Intersection for the Arts, Lamaldita and Comparulos, *You and Me*, 2008, plaster, wood, paint, toilet top, vinyl, letters and performance, courtesy of the Artists and Intersection for the Arts. *The Prison Project*, February 20 - March 29, 2008; Intersection for the Arts, Larry Machado, *Bone Shaker*, 1981-82, mixed media including gopher, rat, cat, mouse bones and abalone chips, courtesy of the Artist, Intersection for the Arts and William James Association. *The Prison Project*, February 20 - March 29, 2008; Intersection for the Arts, Sara Thustra, *Free The Free*, 2007, acrylic on wood panel, courtesy of the Artist and Intersection for the Arts. *The Prison Project*, February 20 - March 29, 2008; Intersection for the Arts, **William Noguera, To Lie in Amsterdam, 2006, ink on paper, courtesy of the Artist**, Intersection for the Arts and Camorra Fine Art.)

Posted by [Jolene Torr](#) on 03/02/08