

visual art

Intersection for the Arts multidisciplinary series, “The Prison Project,” takes a look at visual art made by those affected by the California criminal justice system.

Unchain my art

"The Prison Project" shines a light on works by artists touched by incarceration

03.18.08 - 11:42 pm | Amber Whiteside | Visual Art Arts & Culture Volume 42, Issue 25

REVIEW The United States has the highest incarceration rate of any nation in the world, with more than 1.8 million people currently behind bars. But perhaps more disturbing is the fact that the largest state on the so-called left coast is the most prison-happy: California spends the most money in the nation on corrections while ranking 43rd in funding education.

This according to "Golden Rules: A Guide to the California Prison System," a booklet designed by Kelly Beile and Emily Wright, which presents startling statistics on the industry and economics behind this state's prison system as part of "The Prison Project," Intersection for the Arts's continuing multidisciplinary exploration into California's criminal justice system. The book was produced in conjunction with an exhibition of work by an array of artists directly affected by the correctional facilities in our state.

With so little money being put into education for California's unoffending citizens, it's not surprising that next to nothing is spent on rehabilitation programs for prisoners. Thankfully, through private funding and grants, programs such as San Quentin's Arts in Corrections and the William James Foundation's Prison Arts Project exist to offer a creative outlet to inmates.

Arts in Corrections student Ronnie Goodman uses acrylic on canvas board to record daily life as a prisoner at San Quentin. In *Under the Bullet Holes Shat* (2007), Goodman captures the undifferentiated backs of inmates exiting the prison yard as beams of light stream through bullet holes in the tented tarp roof. One figure — perhaps the artist — hangs back from the crowd, a solitary man without a face.

The solitary man is a recurring subject in the show. In the work of Robert Stansbury, who died on San Quentin's death row in 1991, the male subject appears alone with nature, walking on a beach or cooking his meat over a campfire. Stansbury was entirely self-taught, since programs such as Arts-in-Corrections are only available to "mainline" prisoners, not those on death row.

