

William Noguera creates art on death row

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Every day for hours on end, William Noguera huddles over paper propped on his steel bed, stippling thousands on thousands of dots that form the images in his fine photo-realist ink drawings.

"I have a sense of urgency when I work, a drive that's inside me. Because I don't know how much time I have," said Noguera, who's been on Death Row at San Quentin State Prison since 1988. "When the rhythm and flow are going, there's no stopping me. I go for two to three days."

Convicted of murdering his girlfriend's mother in 1983 when he was 18, Noguera has had a quarter century to contemplate his life and develop the remarkable technique that lets him express himself in dreamlike montages whose style he calls "hyperrealistic, neo-cubism." There's an intensity to these subtly shaded black-and-white pictures, a batch of which are on view at the Braunstein/Quay Gallery in San Francisco.

"Someone told me this was the most unbelievable use of black-and-white they'd seen in years," said longtime gallery owner Ruth Braunstein, who saw the work and wanted to show it. She'd heard Noguera was in prison but didn't know why.

"He's an unbelievable draftsman, and I like this kind of storytelling art," said Braunstein, standing before Noguera's "Voices Carry." It's a montage of images that speak of loss and loneliness: a little girl seen from behind, gazing out a window (Noguera was thinking of his little sister at the time of their parents' divorce), empty bar stools and tables, a pair of calla lilies, a curtain blowing in an empty room, an ice-chilled cross.

"I don't know what the story is, but I can use my imagination. What I love is that he's using a very old form of mark-making, stippling, and making it work."

Braunstein was intrigued by Noguera's story - his appeals are exhausted at the state level but will be heard in federal court - "but I think the work holds up in and of itself."

Taught to draw as a child

A surfer and martial artist from the Southern California town of Hacienda Heights, Noguera, who's of French Colombian ancestry, learned to draw from his parents, both artists. From his father, a mechanic who sculpted in marble, wood and titanium, "I learned the art of patience," said Noguera, sitting in a tiny visiting room at San Quentin.

A fit, charismatic man with a graying goatee, intelligent brown eyes and a polite, proud manner, he was brought into the room handcuffed and then released before greeting a reporter and Cassandra Richardson, his friend and art agent. Scott Peterson, the infamous star of Death Row, sat in the next glass birdcage.

"I'm a fundamentalist when it comes to art," said Noguera, 43, who speaks passionately about Rembrandt, Titian, Rubens, modernists like Rothko and contemporary figures like Brice Marden and Christopher Wahl. He studies their art in journals and prison library books. "Da Vinci said, 'Learn to imitate the masters, and whatever else you do, people will accept it,' " he said.

Art "is not a luxury for me, it's a necessity," Noguera said. "There's a transcendence. I rise above the situation. As soon as I pick up the pen, I'm gone from this place. Art gives me the freedom I crave. The only thing I have is my imagination. Art for me is about childhood, going back to when things were simple and innocent. The man before you is just a vehicle for that little boy."

Drawn freehand mostly from photographs, the work may look beautiful, "but there's a lot of pain. If I draw a beautiful woman, I miss that woman." He wants to "trigger an emotion for you, whatever it might be - love, hatred, passion. I'm not concerned if people understand my work. My intentions are irrelevant," added Noguera, who calls his 4-by-10-foot cell his studio.

By law, Noguera can't profit financially from his work. Forty percent of the proceeds from the sale of his drawings - which fetch between \$5,000 and \$12,000 - goes to Richardson's company, Camorra Fine Art, and the rest goes to Noguera's family (his parents, two sisters and a son live in Southern California). Richardson, who picks up the work at the prison hobby shop, first met Noguera in 2004, when she worked for the San Francisco-based Institute for Unpopular Culture. He'd written asking for help getting his work out there.

Richardson fell in love with Noguera's art. But knowing he'd killed somebody - Jovita Navarro, a La Habra woman whose then-16-year-old daughter was also convicted of murder - she was leery about speaking with him. When they finally did talk by phone, she said, she was struck by his candor and sincerity, and eventually began visiting him in San Quentin.

Case is on appeal

He'd been sent up by a jury that believed he killed for financial gain because Dominique Navarro stood to inherit some insurance money and the home of her mother, who'd been brutally beaten and choked. The more she learned about it, Richardson said, she came to agree with Noguera's appellate lawyer, Robert R. Bryan, that Noguera deserved a new trial.

"What I'm comfortable saying is that he was in love with this girl and he never had a good relationship with her mother," Richardson said. "The girlfriend got pregnant and the mother basically forced her to get an abortion. William is a devout Catholic. He walked in and lost it and killed her."

Noguera said he can't discuss the case because it's on appeal. "I live with it every day," he said. "I have regret, remorse, and I'm terribly sorry for what happened."

Does he think about being executed? "It crosses my mind," he said. "Any man who told you he wasn't scared would be a liar."

The other night, about 20 people came by the Braunstein/Quay gallery to preview his show and hear from Noguera via speaker phone from San Quentin. A taped voice informed them that the collect call would be monitored. Painter Wilma Parker had been dazzled by the drawings that afternoon, not knowing the backstory. Hearing it, she was intrigued.

"I wanted to hear his voice and how he feels about his art," said Parker, who told the artist: "I was blown away by your work. It's very beautiful. Could you elaborate a little more on your technique? It looks like pointillism."

Noguera, who expressed thanks and gratitude - he'd told the crowd he had "100 butterflies in his stomach" - replied: "It is a form of pointillism. Basically, all these thousands of dots cling together to form a realistic image." He recounted how he'd been thrown in the hole for 27 days when first arrested, read "The Count of Monte Cristo" - which inspired his "A Stone for Edmund Dantes" - and began drawing all over the walls. "It poured out of me like water, and I haven't stopped since."

Touched, Braunstein, 84, told Noguera: "This is a unique experience for me. I've never done anything in the gallery like this in my life. Your work just talked to me when I first saw it." A few days earlier, during a phone interview, Noguera said he hoped to be seen as an artist, not an inmate doing art.

"This place where I must live is irrelevant to my art," he said. "It has no bearing on it. However, I realize your audience finds it interesting. But I would ask them to transcend this, and use their capacity to feel and truly see my work as an entity of its own, judged in isolation from me."

William Noguera: Drawings. Through June 21. Braunstein/Quay Gallery, 430 Clementina St., SF. (415) 278-9850.

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