

Vol. 7, No. 5, 2008

ART AS LIFELINE

WILLIAM NOGUERA



reviewed by
LYDIA SCHRUFER

William Noguera is an artist and a death row convict at San Quentin State Prison. His friend and art dealer, Cassandra Richardson, the director of Camorra Fine Art, introduced me to William Noguera's art at which point I strongly felt that his story, both so sad and yet uplifting, needed to be told.

The interview with William was conducted through Cassandra via telephone: they are in weekly contact. The second part is an imaginary 'Charlie Rose' interview written by William because for the initial interview the prison was on lock down and William couldn't be reached by telephone so the questions had to be mailed to him.

The following is the introduction to William Noguera by Cassandra Richardson.

VISIONS FROM THE PEN(ITENTIARY)



Artistic expression has meant salvation for William Noguera, a San Quentin resident and current California death row inmate who creates thought-provoking, critically-acclaimed pen & ink drawings from his 4' x 10' cell. Imprisoned since 1983, William Noguera's story is that of a man who has found a way to keep hope alive in the face of injustice, brutality and unjust incarceration.

Noguera sits on California's death row for the death of his former girlfriend's mother. He currently awaits the results of double-decades long appeals process; his case and conviction have been called by many, "a travesty of justice."

During his first year in prison, which included 27 consecutive days in solitary confinement, Noguera began drawing on the walls of his cell. Since then, unschooled and untrained, he's continued to create art in a pointillist style which

he describes as "monochromatic neo-cubism in ink stippling." Hundreds of thousands of individual dots are painstakingly rendered, evincing images of startling reality; each piece requires 3-6 months for completion.

In 2008, Noguera told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Art is not a luxury for me, it's a necessity . . . 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." At times, Noguera is driven to work for up to 12 hours a day in order to create an alternative world that is not inhabited by rapists, murderers and child molesters. He is still paying a debt some 25 years later for a brief moment of teenage rage.

Often, those condemned to death find religion as a comfort, but William has found his salvation in art -- a monk-like routine that keeps him far removed from crime, drugs, gang-affiliation and the common plagues of penitentiary life. Each carefully placed drop of ink transports him to another time and place, a reminder of the boy he was in the free world, and the man he has become.



William Noguera is represented exclusively by Camorra Fine Art, a San Francisco-based art agency specializing in the contemporary and controversial.

LYDIA SCHRUFER: How did William come to your attention?

CASSANDRA RICHARDSON: I'll never forget the day I first connected with William Noguera. It was March 17, 2004, and I was working at an inspired little art-oriented non-profit called the Institute For Unpopular Culture. It was our mission to fiscally support and finance "outsider" artistic vision, and boy did one flit across our radar screen that day! A letter arrived, postmarked San Quentin, Death Row; my hands shook as I

carefully opened William's first epistle. He had heard about the ground-breaking work of the Institute through a network of friends on the outside, and wrote to ask, respectfully, if we might take a chance on him? The brutal eloquence of his first words made my heart-pound, the chilling beauty of his original drawings sealed the deal, and thus a friendship was forged between two of the most unlikely candidates.

I've since left the Institute to start my own business, Camorra Fine Art, an artist representation agency specializing in the contemporary controversial. William Noguera tops my client roster! We have been working together for over four years now, and it is his unwavering belief that got me where I am today.

LYDIA SCHRUFER: Are you the only gallery representing his work?

CASSANDRA RICHARDSON: Indeed, I am his only agent, though William and I often collaborate with other galleries. In the coming year, we are committed to extending his realm of influence to L.A., New York, London, and Berlin.

LYDIA SCHRUFER: Is he permitted to receive profits from the sale of his work or does the money go towards an appeal fund or . . . ?



CASSANDRA RICHARDSON: William is not permitted to receive proceeds from the sale of his work, nor is he interested in such financial gain. To date, all profits have been recycled into our exhibition and promotional efforts, and in the future, will be divided among his family and organizations for victims' advocacy and victims' rights.

LYDIA SCHRUFER: Who supplies his art materials?

CASSANDRA RICHARDSON: The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) carefully regulates the art supplies and creative materials to which inmates have access, with special strictures placed on the Condemned. This is why, for example, William has developed a unique painting technique, as many of the thinning agents used in normal acrylic/oil-based application are forbidden. William purchases all of his own art supplies from an approved outside vendor, who then ships it to San Quentin for inspection before delivery to his cell.

LYDIA SCHRUFER: Are you part of a movement lobbying for William's release?

CASSANDRA RICHARDSON: It is my great hope that William's artistic genius coupled with my public relations efforts will one day make his a household name. Though William's permanent "artist-in-residency" at San Quentin is decidedly newsworthy, it is my firm belief that his formidable talent supersedes the shock value of his situation. His work deserves a grand audience, and with such international attention comes the unstoppable force of the court of public opinion. We certainly aim to leverage this acclaim by spotlighting issues of his case and his appeal.

LYDIA SCHRUFER: What are his chances, does he really have any hope of release?

CASSANDRA RICHARDSON: William is deeply embedded in the appeals process of the Federal District Courts, but as is now stands, art is his only version of freedom, and so it may go for the remainder of his natural life. What is important to recognize is that he has created a life worth living, even from behind prison walls. Despite the sentence of death, he communicates a message of hope . . . the transcendence of a soul through art.

As an aside, Lydia, you have been the only journalist to-date to ask about his chances for release, as opposed to the looming date of his execution. Thank you for this, and for helping to disseminate the story of this worthy & inspiring man.

AUGUST 24TH, 2008 IMAGINARY INTERVIEW WITH CHARLIE ROSE

CR: Today I find myself within the world of William A. Noguera, an artist whose work has recently received critical acclaim from the art establishment in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and London. He is fast becoming the talk of the art world. From his cell at San Quentin Prison, I had the opportunity to meet and speak with the artist.

CR: Good morning William.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Good morning.

CR: This is a unique and rare opportunity to speak with you and see where it is that you work. I must say, I feel trapped; it must require a great deal of effort for you to transport from your surroundings?



WILLIAM NOGUERA: Well yes, I transcend this place by finding my way back to childhood. As I've said before, it is within one's childhood that we find truth. We make real to others our innermost feelings about all we care for.

CR: What about your childhood do you remember most and what is it that your childhood wants to say?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: It's not so much what I remember about my childhood that matters.

It's the state of mind, the innocence, the way we used to look at things. That child has a voice, and he say's "I am here, I am somebody, I made this, won't you look?"

CR: Let's talk about your childhood, specifically your artistic training. A lot has been made about the fact that you're unschooled and self-taught. Is this true?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: It is and it isn't. What I mean is I've never attended art school or an art academy, however, in my opinion, I had the best teachers one could ask for: my parents. They are both artists and completely different in their approach. My mother is a painter and from the age of two, she began to instruct me in the fundamentals of drawing. I learned technique, shading, composition and depth perception. Then my father, who is a talented craftsmen and sculptor, taught me how to work and learn to feel the materials with my hands. I remember falling asleep at his feet as he worked the night through. I owe them both a great debt for what they gave me.

CR: You mentioned fundamentals. How important is this to you?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: It's the beginning and the end. I'm a fundamentalist through and through. All of my work begins with a structured base in the fundamentals of drawing -- even my most abstract pieces.

CR: Your technique is unique and very impressive (laughs).

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Well yes, (laughs) my artistic voice is something I have worked very hard at.

CR: Describe your technique and talk about the ink stippling work which is entirely in dots.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Ah yes, when I draw/create in ink I like the voice ink stippling gives me. It's all done by placing thousands upon thousands of micro dots together to form a hyper-realistic image.

CR: Some of your earlier works, such as *Adam's Eden and Under Nails*, are all in dots; but you continue to evolve and work in different styles.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: That is so. The desire of all artists for independence, for newness, for originality is really the desire for revolution. Revolution means existence for the artist.

CR: It seems that your later work is radically different than your earlier work. Is that because you are a different person?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: The medium is maybe different, but the artist is still me.

CR: Talk about your work as a whole. What are your intentions?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: What I'm trying to say is really irrelevant. I believe in intentional fallacy, a literary theory which holds that meaning cannot be found in the author's articulated intentions but can only be gleaned by close independent reading of the text. In the same way, if the idea is applied to the art, then the art itself is an entity that must be judged in isolation from its creator.

CR: Nicely put (laughs). Where is your work headed?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: (Laughs) My work in my earlier years was very direct: Black & White, hyper-realistic pieces like *Anna May Wong* and realistic montage such as *Voices Carry*.

These pieces have a *Driven Sincerity* to them. However, along the way I began to be driven to abstraction. I believe I've always been an abstractionist. Even my realistic work is broken up into geometric abstract forms, so the change to abstract painting was not that far of a leap.

CR: I'm looking at *Black Days* and the *Reinterpretation of Ophelia*. It seems you are still using ink stippling, but there's a change.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Yes, these pieces are ink neo-cubism, acrylic wash, with three dimensional veins on masonite, and constituted the body of work just prior to my embrace of abstract art. Although I continue to work in all mediums, I have found a particular comfort zone with all abstract painting, or action painting as many have come to refer to this style of drip and splatter technique.

CR: We are standing in front of *Gothica*, *Birth*, and *Touch*. They are stunning pieces of work.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: I think so, too . . . (laughs)

CR: Describe these works.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: These are on masonite, multi-panel assemblage.

CR: I'm awestruck, and I can't help but think of Pollock.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: I'll take that as a compliment (laughs).

CR: I mean, I think of him because of the drip and splatter technique, yet this is fresh and entirely you.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Yes, you can see from where I have drawn my inspiration, but I continue to use geometric forms to show the dilemma between boundaries and desire to voice expression, the struggle for space. These works also represent a form of sculpture.

CR: Why abstract? You're a very talented artist; you could have used any form of expression.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Well, we don't always pick the road we walk, it sort of picks us. I look at abstract art as a beginning toward the feeling for the old pictorial formula. One must understand that colour has a life of its own, that the infinite combinations of colour have a poetry and language much more expressive than the old methods.

CR: Mention the artists who have influenced you the most.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: My parents, Pollock, Rothko, Picasso, Jasper Johns; and The Old Masters: Rubens, David; and of course today's greats: Richard Prince, Damien Hirst, Christopher Wool. They have all played and continue to play a role in my development.

CR: Are you still learning and evolving?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Life, love and art without a progression of interrelated phenomena would be simply boring. I have the capacity to evolve further and so I work towards that.

CR: You don't want to be known as a prison artist, and for that matter, you don't want to discuss prison. Why?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: It's very simple. I want recognition and the respect of my contemporaries. Where I live is irrelevant to my work. I don't want to be a circus act. I want to be known as a first class creator of fine art.

CR: Does prison affect you at all?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: It protects me from the tyranny of connectiveness.

CR: How so?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: (laughs) No internet, cell phones etc . . . All truly profound art requires that its creator abandon himself to certain powers which he invokes but cannot all together control. Without interruptions, I can accomplish this state of mind.

CR: When viewers contemplate your art, what do you want them to think or take away with them?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: I know that I don't want to tell anyone what to think and I don't create art and then hope it will be understood. As Picasso maintained for his own work, viewers will understand or not according to their capacity. However, I do hope my images provoke a lasting emotional response.

CR: Where do you want to be in 20 years?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Artistically or personally?

CR: Both

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Free.

CR: Thank you, William

WILLIAM NOGUERA: My pleasure.

William's spirit already soars free through art. May he one day realize his dream of physical freedom.

All artwork© William Noguera