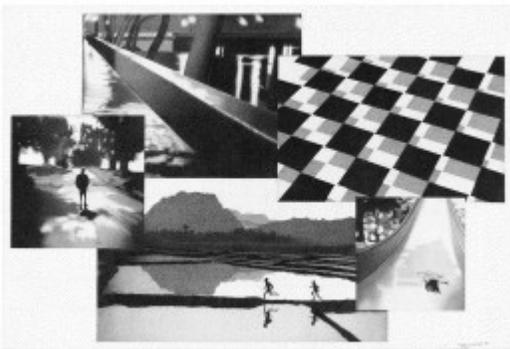




Walter Pavlo, Contributor

I write about white-collar crime.

## The Mastery of The Escape Artist



"Far From Heaven" by William A. Noguera

On a cold day this past January, Melissa (full name withheld) loaded original artwork into her vehicle to start her trip to a storage unit she has rented. The artist, who has entrusted her with his works, relies on her sole support to accomplish everything necessary to continue to promote the noted artist's latest works. Melissa receives each piece then begins the meticulous process of cataloging, photographing, copyrighting and repackaging the art in an archival quality print sleeve for preservation. The digitized images are painstakingly uploaded to the [website](#) she has created to showcase the original pieces that have been accumulated over the four years she has advocated for this one of a kind artist and personal friend.

In fact, the artist, [William A. Noguera](#), has entrusted her with nearly every facet of his life as he labors over the canvas of original works in a craft he has developed over 30 years, most notably *pen and ink stippling*. It is a time consuming art medium where meticulous points of a pen are laid upon the canvas to form a picture .... one point, of many, working together with millions of others .... a man-made assembly of pixels.

Melissa has made a personal commitment to protecting the legal rights and interests of the works created at the hand of Noguera. In order to further build trust, Melissa makes frequent visits to see Noguera, whether or not there are any pieces of art to retrieve. His studio is one of a kind and an [on-line gallery](#) has been launched to extend the reach of those who can appreciate his works, while still searching for the right type of physical gallery to display the striking works. What makes William Noguera's situation so unique is that he is an inmate whose studio is located in a prison cell on Death Row at San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA. Of his works Melissa says, "William is a creative genius. It's in his nature. I'm awestruck by his signature black and white pieces – that's what draws most people in. To see the precise configurations and structure of the stippling translates to me."

In December 1983, at the age of 19, Noguera was arrested and shortly after received the death penalty in 1987 for a crime he committed in April 1983. For 30 years, Noguera has started his day in a 4' x 7.5' x 9' cell by doing 1,000 pushups, 1,000 situps, meditation and performing limited martial arts moves before sitting down to create his art. It is a code, a discipline, he has lived by for decades to create art in a place of anger, darkness and despair. "For 14 to 16 hours every day, I work on my art which has become an obsession to be great," Noguera told me in a recent phone interview, "I have abandoned "self" to unleash this power [art]."

"I want, like anyone else, to be understood," Noguera told me in his soft spoken voice. "While my art has been an escape from this place, my art also defines my escape from death, insanity and a means to overcome my own struggles. My art is a portrait of my life."

Anyone who casts their eyes on Noguera's art will be struck by its detail, quality and deep meaning. I'm no art aficionado, but I found myself revisiting Noguera's works and thinking about how beautiful they were, what they meant, and what they told me about the man who created it. I am sure those are the same things that those who viewed his early drawings – wardens, correctional officers and other prison staff – must have wondered. Moving his art from drawings on the walls of his cell, the untrained Noguera manifested his cell wall creations to canvas. Even the untrained art critics, that were the prison staff, all saw an early talent and viewed his works at the [San Quentin Prison Hobby Gift Store](#). The shop, where you will no longer find any Noguera art, is where inmates usually sell their humble and adept creations to a curious general public.

"I want my contemporaries to respect my work. I'm not like other inmates who paint or write for a few years, then give it up. I want to be recognized for the art alone." Having few contemporaries around him now (ever), Noguera has studied the lives and works of great artists who have influenced him. "Greats like Jackson Pollock would gather with other artists in New York's Cedar Tavern," he said, "and I can only go there in my imagination through reading accounts of others who were there." Those thoughts are but another means of escape but it also adds to the unique nature of Noguera's works.

When looking at Noguera's creations, one cannot help but think that these come from a person in isolation .... but amazingly, his art makes it difficult to imagine his surroundings. "Every piece I send out is incomplete in some way. The viewer of the art can eventually fill in the missing piece, in that way the person who views the art is just as important as the artist who created it," Noguera said. Over the years, others have noticed. The [San Francisco Chronicle](#) did a piece on Noguera in 2008 where gallery owner Ruth Braunstein of the Braunstein/Quay gallery said of the art as it relates to Noguera's situation, "... I think the work holds up in and of itself." Since then, Noguera took a 3-year hiatus from allowing his work to be shown at gallery exhibitions and is now contemplating when and where he will release his new works ... with Melissa's help. In addition to working on his art, Noguera has also used his time to write a memoir of his life.

The piece pictured in this blog entry is aptly entitled [\*Far From Heaven\*](#), a hyper-realistic ink stippling. A montage of five works in one depicts a man standing alone, a sliding board with a leaf, children running, a checkered design and an up-close view of a rail .... all working together in amazing detail. Of all of his art Noguera says, "It is a tale of my surroundings, things I see in my world everyday and the mathematical equations that make up those designs. It may be a design on the floor, or a corner I had not contemplated before, that inspires me."

In 1933, at the age of 21, artist Jackson Pollock fell into a deep depression over his father's death. During this state, he drank excessively and had an episode where he threatened the life of his brother's wife by wielding an ax. Thankfully, the episode ended without incident and Pollock went on to be discovered and supported by art philanthropist Peggy Guggenheim. History now celebrates Pollock's works of art, and not the darkest parts of his life, which ended in a drunk driving accident. For William A. Noguera, he pushes to create art that will also define his life. "For some artists, the tragedy of their lives is but a footnote," Noguera said of his own ambitions.

Are we seeing the birth of a master of our time? History will tell. As we wait, Melissa has her own take of William's art,

"William is a creative genius, it's in his nature. I'm awestruck by his signature black and white pieces – that's what draws most people in. To see the precise configuration and structure of the stippling translates to me. Although William is confined, he is extremely elevated and refined. It takes so much discipline to work on these pieces. I have ascended into understanding his color field paintings, abstraction expressionism, and neo-constructivist wall sculptures. These pieces speak of a man who boldly unleashes himself onto and into the medium. To me, there is a more sensorial burst, an ethereal impression; these pieces come from his soul."

For William Noguera, he realizes that there are few people who offer to give him the time and effort that Melissa has given to him over the years. My question was "Why would she undertake such a project?" Stay tuned, you'll want to know.