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CULTURAL AFFAIRS

# The Most Important Art You'll See This Season

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Already the press releases and the headlines are beginning: "Here is what you'll see at Art Chicago." "Here is what will be available for sale at Frieze."

Yippee.

This story is not about that. Nor is it about the works you'll find there. You know the ones – by Castellani-Richter-Buonolumi-Warhol-Picasso-Fontana-Basquiat-and-Koons.

Instead, this is about the art you won't see, by artists you will never meet, whose voices can be heard no other way.

I wrote about "Life After Death And Elsewhere" here already, before having seen the exhibition. Now I have, and I urge everyone who is able to, to see it, too. Because what you will find here is a wide range of work, some significantly better than others, but all of them produced with an understanding of what art is, and the hope of what art can mean. No – not just the hope; it is the embedment, in many ways, of what art *does* mean. For the men whose work is on view here – all of them on death row at the Riverbend Maximum Security prison in Nashville – these pieces have brought insight, value and meaning to their lives. And they do the same for those fortunate enough to see them.



Abu Ali Abdur'Rahman, map between death and the next world

The brainchild of curators Robin Paris and Tom Williams, "Life After Death And Elsewhere" presents the prisoners' ideas for monuments, either to themselves, as memorials, or to the statements they want to leave behind – usually concerning the matter of capital punishment. Hence Gary Cone, a voracious reader, has designed a tower made of books ("My actions throughout my adult life have led me to prison," he says in a statement accompanying the work, "and reading has been my exit") while for "New Monument For Nashville," Ron Cauthern overpainted a portrait of Senator Edward Carmack standing outside the State



Ron Cauthern, "New Monument For Nashville," 2015

Capital, dressing him in the uniform of a death row prisoner. And Donald Middlebrooks writes of the blue vase he bought for his mother and filled with wildflowers, certain that the gift would make her, finally, love him. And he writes, too, of how she found the vase and threw it out the kitchen door, smashing it into shards amidst what remained of the wildflowers he so eagerly, so lovingly, had gathered.)

There are discussions to be had over whether these works constitute "outsider art" or whether they are simply art therapy. I would, in most cases, go with the former; many of the artists represented in this exhibition have shown considerable talent. But such discussions are perhaps unimportant in this context. It's not as if they are going to become international art stars, either way. And that (unlike with most exhibitions) is decidedly not even the point — which is yet another reason that this is a show worth seeing.

Either way, projects such as this one should, I would have thought, be commonplace among death row inmates; but they are not. Instead, many inmates are subjected to unimaginable conditions: Gary Cone, for instance, was denied antibiotics for a small infection in its early stages. The infection eventually traveled into his spine: he is now a paraplegic, house in a "special needs" facility where, Williams and Paris note, "he has very little access to books." And another member of the group who attempted suicide was severely punished, the curators say: evidently, as an inmate on death row, you are not allowed to take your own life, and hence rob the executioner of his chance to do it for you. One loses, as it were, power not only over one's own life, but one's own death, as well.

Hence while Paris and Williams would love to see programs such as their expand nationally, the prospects, at least for now, look bleak. Notes Williams, "One of the issues with death row is that prison arts programs are combined with the prospect of rehabilitation; but on death row, there is no rehabilitation."



Gary Cone, "Books Have Been My Exit"

In addition, Tennessee has relatively lax rules (such as they go) for death row inmates; for the firsts year, Williams says, they are restricted to their cells for 23 hours a day, and only permitted to spend one hour in a contained, outdoor spaces in shackles. But "after 18 months," he explains, "you can have an extra 30 minutes and no shackles, and after that, you can spend hours outside your cell." But other states are less human, such as North Carolina, where prisoners are allowed only one ten-minute phone call per month.

In other words, in order for these prisoners ever to acquire any form of human dignity – in some cases, for the first time in their lives — they have to be granted, at the very least, the recognition they are human. For many on death row, this is something they will never know. But for the prisoners at Riverbend, by producing these art works, they affirm just who human they really are.

**NOTE: The curators have written the following notice to accompany the exhibition:**

*The men in this show have all been convicted – justly or unjustly – of very serious crimes. As a consequence, they will be killed by institutions that claim to represent the U.S. public. We believe that it is important to pay attention to what they have to say.*

*In doing so, we should consider both the seriousness of their crimes and the inequities of the justice system in the U.S. The number of prisoners released because of false convictions has skyrocketed in recent years. These numbers include individuals who were once on death row in Tennessee [...]*

*None of this should diminish our feelings for murder victims and their loved ones. The crimes that precipitated these convictions can never be undone. Any gestures of remorse or restitution on the part of the guilty will never measure up to the losses they have inflicted on others [...] We hope these gestures can start a conversation about the humanity of people on death row, and their prospects for justice or atonement.*

"Life After Death and Elsewhere" runs until October 24 at apex art, 291 Church Street NYC