The Most Important Art You’ll See This Season

SEPTEMBER 15, 2015

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.”

I suppose.

This story is not about that. Nor is it about the works you’ll find there. You know the artists — by Celal, by Oiticica, by Vona — you know them.

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

I wrote about “Life After Death and Elsewhere” here already, before having seen the conversation. How it is that we can hit the dead so hard, 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 hopes of what art can mean. No — not just the hope, it is the embodiment, 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.

The branchful of curators Robin Paris and Tom Williams, “Life After Death and Elsewhere” presents the power to take life — that other thing, their memorials, or is to the statements they want to leave behind — usually concerning the master of capital punishment. Hence Gary Cren, a notorious reader, has designed a tower made of books that access throughout my adult life I have led me to prison,” he says in a statement accompanying the work, “and reading has been my evil” while for “New Monument for Nashville,” Ron Crenahan overprinted a portrait of Senator Edward Carmack standing outside the State Capitol, dressing him in the uniform of a death row prisoner. And Donald Middlebrooks writes of the blue wash 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, smudging 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 “outside art” or whether they are simply art therapy. I would, in most cases, go with the former; many of the artists represented in this exhibit have been — they have to be — granted. But such discussions are perhaps unimportant in this context. It’s not as if we 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 unmentionable conditions: Gary Cren, 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, with 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 have 24 hour house, as a contained, outdoor occupation. sighted in the prison. 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 need to be able to express the execution of his chance to do it for you. On loose, as it were, power over not only over 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 at first, 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.”

In addition, Tennesse has relatively lax rules (such as they do) for death row inmates; for the first year, Williams says, they are restricted to their cells for 23 hours a day, and only permitted to have a contained, outdoor occupation.有限责任公司 businesses are 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.

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