

## Prisoners Make Therapeutic Art Monuments Addressing The Death Penalty

"These men have a lot to say about their experiences both inside and outside of prison."

Maddie Crum  
Books and Culture Writer, The Huffington Post



Posted: 09/10/2015 08:56 AM EDT



RON CAUTHERN

A stack of books spirals in a helix around a black bar, reaching skyward. Elegant in its simplicity, it's titled, "Reading Has Been My Way to Exit." Its creator, Gary Cone, built it for an exhibition showcasing artworks made by death row inmates at a maximum security prison in Nashville, Tennessee.

"Life After Death and Beyond" displays a series of monuments or memorials addressing the death penalty directly or abstractly. Its organizers, Robin Paris and Tom Williams, have put on four previous exhibits highlighting the works of prison inmates, but this is their first to confront the topic head on. This particular showcase comes at a time when, according to a statement from the organizers, the state of Tennessee has scheduled the deaths of ten prisoners -- after executing fewer than ten in the past 55 years.

"These men have a lot to say about their experiences both inside and outside of prison, and their works show that they are much more than prisoners condemned to die," Robins told The Huffington Post. "We think it's important to get their voices into the world."



DON CAUTHERN

In conjunction with organizing these exhibits, he and Paris teach an arts program, focusing on artistic concepts as opposed to technical instruction. He ventures to guess that the act of creation is therapeutic for the inmates he works with, but asserts that the social value of projecting their voices is equally vital to his mission.

"Most of them would rather not make something that's about themselves," Robins said. "Nearly all of them would like to make a connection with the world outside using the modest resources at their disposal."

This desire to connect with the outside world is a theme Williams sees resonating from most of his students' work. This, he says, is due to the solitary nature of life on death row in Tennessee.

"Many of them haven't walked on the grass or seen the stars in over 20 years," Williams says. "Their lives take shape before a backdrop of concrete walls, razor wire, and chain link fences. As a consequence, they develop ways of escaping the realities that surround them. Some of them read. Some of them make art. Some of them turn to religion."

So, while Cone's spiral of literary tomes illustrates his desired escape, others create homages to their budding religious lives. One of the exhibit's pieces, a model built by Derrick Quintero, depicts a prison cell adorned with a dreamcatcher, scroll and Buddhist sculpture.

**"When a person is under the sentence of death, it is the perfect opportunity to slowly build a life from scratch. Art is a perfect example of creating something new and developing your own existence from that piece of art."**

Still others reject the concept of personal monuments altogether, instead opting to sketch designs for community centers, such as a prison yard recreation center or a sculpture of a prison uniform shoe, free in an open field.

Akil Jahi, the creator of the proposed shoe sculpture, wrote in a letter to The Huffington Post, "So many years have gone by without our very soles touching the grass." He views artistic creation as an act of therapy, writing, "It has become a way to express my deepest emotions without feeling sad or happy. I really enjoy bringing joy to another person's heart."

Ron Cauthern, another participant in the exhibit, chose to confront his objections to the death penalty directly, by crafting a model airplane covered in drawings of sinewy veins. A music box is affixed to the outside of the plane, meant to represent the gentle perception of capital punishment by the general public. In his artist statement, he wrote, "It's simple, nothing can be born out of a life for a life."

In a letter explaining his personal connection with building sculptures, Cauthern wrote, "When a person is under the sentence of death, it is the perfect opportunity to slowly build a life from scratch. Art is a perfect example of creating something new and developing your own existence from that piece of art."