Death Row Inmates Imagine Their Own Memorials
by Jillian Steinhauser on October 15, 2015

Installation view, 'Life After Death and Elsewhere' at apexart (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

From a certain angle, the premise seems almost cruel: invite prisoners on death row to design their own memorials — ways for them to be remembered after they’ve been executed. This means asking them to confront not just their own mortality, but the state’s hand in ensuring it; to imagine not only the reality of their deaths, but a time beyond it.

Yet, if Life After Death and Elsewhere suggests anything, it’s that this process may offer a release. These men are already thinking about death, after all — two paintings that feature the grim reaper assure us of that. Now at least they have somewhere to channel their thoughts.

The project comes from Tennessee, where Watkins College of Art professors Robin Paris and Tom Williams have been working for two years with inmates awaiting execution at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville. Their collaborations with the men began as a class, in which students would work with the prisoners on artistic exchanges. Those exchanges became a pair of exhibitions, in turn leading to the one at apexart, which both first to take up the idea of memorials and the first outside of Tennessee.

Akil Jahl, "Model for a Monument" (2015), mixed media, 27.5 x 20 x 30 in

Do murderers deserve our empathy? This is the question hovering over the show, as well as some of the coverage of it thus far. It’s a tricky one, but ultimately just a trick, because, as I’ve written before, “murderer,” in the context of the US justice system, is something of an arbitrary term. Technically, it refers to someone who has been convicted of murder; however in the Kafkaesque reality of our world, being convicted of murder does not necessarily mean you have actually murdered someone.
In the case of Abu Ali Abdur’Rahman, for instance, his guilt is not at all clear, whereas Donald Middlebrooks has confessed to his crime. Both men have work on view at apexart, where there’s no information readily available about their crimes or the discrepancy between them.

This is, I think, a strength of the show, which is unabashedly political — the point here is to call attention to the death penalty and spark a conversation about what it means for the government to execute people. You don’t do that by debating the particulars of certain cases, in part because if you were to do so, you’d end up even more morally muddled. Middlebrooks’s crime sounds to have been gruesome: he tortured and murdered a 14-year-old. But does knowing that he was severely abused as a child — his family sold him into prostitution and injected him with heroin — or that he was on drugs when he committed his crime, or that he feels extreme remorse, soften your judgment?

More compelling is Abdur’Rahman’s contribution, a diorama of skeletons, eggs, animal figures, feathers, grass, nests, and more. The piece represents Abdur’Rahman’s conceived pathway to the afterlife and is accompanied by an audio component, in which a woman who serves as his spiritual advisor reads a text he’s written explaining the significance of each figure and item that appears in the diorama. Abdur’Rahman’s theology draws on so many religious traditions — among them Buddhism, Christianity, and Native American spirituality — that its mashup quality could become laughable, but his belief in and the cohesion of what he’s created gives the work a powerful magnetism. And its importance as a form of sustenance for him is clear: “The wave does not need to die to become water,” the narrator intones. “She is already water.”

For others, the memorial becomes more of a reflection. Derrick Quintero’s primary contribution is also a diorama; it shows his prison cell, cracked open to make space for a hypothetical road to freedom. The back of the sculpture includes a small wedge that maps “the road from my past,” demonstrating how Quintero went from a 10-year sentence for robbery in Kentucky to Tennessee’s death row, via four escapes from prison (he committed his murders while escaping). The green and blue of the niche’s landscape look especially bright compared to the muted tones of Quintero’s cell on the other side, and his makeshift coils of barbed wire poignantly echo the painted tufts of white clouds above.

Still others work in the show serve as actual memorials, both for the dead and the living. Declicho Besh, aka Ironhawk, was working on a model for his contribution, a terra-cotta tree with beaded feathers in place of leaves, when he died of a heart attack. The group, along with artist Sophia Stevenson, carried out the piece based on his design: a tree so swirly and energetic that it almost seems human. Gary Cone, on the other hand, is still alive, but after an infection in his back went untreated in prison, it spread to his spine and left him paraplegic. Cone, who served as the librarian for the death row unit at Riverbend for many years, had envisioned a tower of books as his memorial; the curators built it, and its spiral form evokes a strand of DNA, suggesting that in prison, even on death row, books can give life. (Cone now lives in a special-needs facility with no access to visitors or educational programs, and little access to books, according to the exhibition materials.)
Unsurprisingly, some of the memorials deal overtly with the politics of the death penalty, most notably the contributions of Ron Cauthern and Harold Wayne Nichols. Nichols’s pieces include a compellingly abstract drawing titled “A World Without Prisons,” showing an arena built from former prison stones where “communities might practice restorative justice rather than retribution,” says the checklist. Cauthern is responsible — with the help of Nichols — for one of the most conspicuous works on view: the ominous, oversize airplane with a cracked skull face that hangs from the ceiling.

But it’s another of his pieces that I find more thought-provoking: a photograph of the Tennessee State Capitol on which Cauthern has painted a self-portrait in prison uniform over the statue that currently stands there. The 1908 sculpture honors Senator Edward Carmack, “a prohibitionist, race-baiting, hothead newspaper editor,” in the words of the Nashville City Paper, and with his quiet alterations to the photo, Cauthern calls attention to just how arbitrary the business of memorials really is. It may seem ludicrous to propose public remembrances of convicted murders, but is it really so far-fetched in a country whose roads, circles, and lawns are littered with celebrations of the leaders of a secessionist confederacy whose raison d’être was slavery? And what happens if we trace that line from the Confederacy to death row, considering along the way how much our country’s laws, justice system, and incarceration policies have been molded by racism and economic discrimination?

Life After Death and Elsewhere is powerful because it reminds us that, while they might be murders, these are still people whom the state has deemed fit to kill. It’s important because it poses questions about the American present that many of us would rather not ask.
Ron Castner (with assistance from Harold Wayne Nichols), "Airplane" (2015), mixed media, dims variable

Derrick Quintero, "If My Journey Were a Book Title" (2012), mixed media, left box: 17 x 16.75 x 12 in; right box: 17.5 x 16.25 x 11.5 in (closed), 24.5 x 16.25 x 11.5 in (open) (click to enlarge)
Life After Death and Elsewhere continues at apexart (291 Church Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) through October 24.