Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration: Life After Death and Elsewhere

Stepping into the crowded opening of Life After Death and Elsewhere, a show at the apexart gallery in lower Manhattan, visitors found themselves awkwardly avoiding a huge sculpture of a rose splayed out across the floor. As the night wore on, people devised ever more creative measures to avoid touching it, resorting to little hops (over the stem) or comically outstretched legs (over the leaves). No matter how many ways people contorted themselves, it was undeniable: This thing was in the way.

This placement is, of course, itself a metaphor for mass incarceration—a huge, glaring problem in the U.S. that we try our best to avoid, even as it makes us look silly. Life After Death and Elsewhere features work by 32 death row inmates from the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tennessee, the show’s organizers, Robin Paris and Tom Williams, coordinate the art workshop in the prison’s death row unit. These artists, all of whom are facing execution, have prompted us to confront questions about the death penalty and mass incarceration by designing their own memorials, a task that seems, at first glance, morbid and grotesque.

The huge rose was part of Flowers From Death Row by Dennis Suttles (built by Paris and Williams). Designed to sit on the steps of the Tennessee State Capitol and the Tennessee Supreme Court, these 18.5-foot flowers are modeled on the smaller-scale roses Suttles builds himself from bread, glue and dowels (the smaller versions are also on display). The flowers reflect themes common throughout much of this show, where images of nature, birds and flying abound.
One major exception to those themes is the work of Gary Cone, which emphasizes reading above all else. In his sculpture Reading Has Been My Way to Exit (also built by Paris and Williams; see feature photo above), his “most loved” books form a spiral staircase or a strand of DNA; a ladder reaches up to the gallery ceiling. Cone’s other piece, Gary Cone: I Am a Reader of Books, is itself a book. Designed by artist Britt Stadig, it features Cone’s writing alongside photographs by Paris. Flipping through its pages feels like stumbling across someone’s diary or finding flea market postcards that were inscribed long ago. Cone speaks to the viewer at points, even including an address where he can receive packages or letters. Other parts of the text, such as the handwritten list of his favorite books, feel more ephemeral.

How does historical or biographical context shape our understanding of art? Should we follow in the footsteps of literary theorist Roland Barthes, who argued for the death of the author? (Well, not literally the death, although that notion is certainly a curious one in relation to this show) Or as Harold Wayne Nichols, another artist featured in Life After Death and Elsewhere, asks, “Should art be about the artist or about the idea, either intended by the artist or garnered by the viewer?”

At first, I saw Cone’s flowers as a metaphor for how we avoid thinking about America’s prison population, but now those heavy flowers seem to weigh on the violence women face from men, as powerful, damaging symbols of submission and chivalry. Or maybe they were just a cliché, a red rose like a jejunum poem, nothingness twisted around a flimsy rod.

I don’t know, but I can’t avoid the question. None of us can. These are memorials men made for their own impending death. Whatever wrong they caused, whatever wrong the state does in executing them, their art speaks from inside the prison walls to the world outside. Now it’s our turn to listen.

Life After Death and Elsewhere is on view at apexart in Manhattan, through October 24.

I’ve heard it said that good art instills a desire for something other than art. A project by death row prisoners indeed prompts curiosity about their current lives, as well as the crimes that led them to prison. Cone provides one of the most striking biographical details in the exhibit: due to an infection that has left him a paraplegic, “he currently lives in a special needs facility” where he “has very little access to books.” This information is displayed prominently in the promotional materials for the show.

What isn’t displayed is that Cone bludgeoned an elderly couple to death. As for Sutlief, who wanted his roses to be created from materials that would otherwise be bound for landfill, he was convicted of stabbing his ex-girlfriend to death in front of her teenage daughter.