



Art Exhibit Asks Death Row Inmates To Memorialize Their Own Lives

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Cassidy Dawn Graves / September 21, 2015

It's typical for people to define individuals who have committed crimes resulting in death sentences by their crimes rather than their humanity. There is no doubt these actions massively impacted the lives of their victims and should not be ignored. It is also true that a death sentence impacts the life of the sentenced, but rarely is that life seen as particularly valuable.

This is what makes *Life After Death And Elsewhere* so unique. Opened September 9, *Life After Death and Elsewhere* is an exhibit at apexart gallery in TriBeCa which features the work of 11 death row inmates from Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tennessee. Billed as "memorials to the living," this exhibit asked these men to design their own physical memorials. The result is a hodgepodge of pieces that hold a quiet power and question what exactly a memorial can be. The inmates quite literally take their own life into their own hands in the exhibit.

Why Tennessee? In the last 55 years, the state had only executed six people. Recently, there have been ten executions scheduled for "the near future," making the end of these men's lives a tangible reality, many who have been on death row for over 20 years.

A statement on the gallery's website acknowledges that Tennessee still has memorials to Confederates, Klansmen, and segregationists, often in traditional forms. By granting these men the freedom to conceptualize their memorials the way they see them, *Life After Death And Elsewhere* works to deviate from historical norms of remembrance while still daring to commemorate the lives of those who have done wrong.

This exhibit is not the first of its kind. Organizers Robin Paris and Tom Williams have arranged shows with these inmates several times in the past, but this is the first time one has been done outside of Tennessee.

As one might expect from relatively untrained artists, the works run the gamut in quality. Mediums are mostly simple: collages, paintings, drawings, photographs, dioramas and written work. The vast majority of piece were crafted the by inmates themselves while some had assistance, including an eye-catching piece designed by Dennis Suttles. It features small sculptures of roses he constructed out of wood, bread, glue, and acrylic paint, a handwritten proposal for larger versions of these roses to be "built out of scrap material which would otherwise have been sent to a landfill or destroyed" and for them to be "placed in parks or town squares around the country" with an objective of "represent[ing] all the lives of people in prison." A massive red rose made of old tubing and a bunched-up tarp takes up most of the gallery floor, and photographs showing similar roses placed in large public spaces hang close by.

"While this world may look at someone in prison as trash, only to be thrown away," Suttles's proposal says, "there is still a lot we could offer to society if people would just take a moment to look."

Absent are any pretentious placards claiming deeper meanings or artist bios stating past accomplishments. Here, any familiar markers of a typical art gallery are tucked away in modest stations at the front desk. This largely allows the pieces of art to speak for themselves. The choice is poignant considering that these men have been shut away and unable to speak for themselves for decades. Here in this small TriBeCa room, these people exist once again in society, expressing themselves and proclaiming their lives in whatever way they feel most inclined to. These works do not exist to arouse our sympathies and make us feel that we are doing something admirable by briefly seeing criminals as humans. They exist to allow these silenced men to artistically express their visions of life and death and the world however they feel best.

To the average onlooker who does not pay much mind to the pamphlets, this could just be just any old art. To the average artist, being seen as any old art might not be so special. But when you've been waiting in line to die for decades, to be defined for a moment by your creations rather than the deeds that condemned you seems pretty alright.

Life After Death And Elsewhere is on view until October 24 at apexart, 291 Church Street.