Art by Death Row Inmates Addresses 'Life after Death'

By Jennifer Morrow  Oct 11, 2015

Art offers the unique opportunity to create something entirely new, often literally starting from a blank canvas. Artistic production is also a fairly forgiving process; the failure of early works in a particular time does not necessarily lead to the subsequent failure of later works in a different time. If it did, the names Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet would mean very little to us today.

The 'Life After Death and Elsewhere' exhibit organized by Robin Paris and Tom Williams in New York City, on display from Sept. 10 to Oct. 24 explores the artistic responses of inmates at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, from the time they arrived to their impending executions.

Visual art is especially unique because it allows a separation between artist and artwork that is much harder to achieve in other mediums, such as performance art or film, where the performer or actors directly confront the audience. For a great deal of art, including ancient art in the Americas and Africa, the artist's identity is unknown (or even considered important). This anonymity and dissociation between artist and artwork may be particularly appealing to people who fail to meet social norms and expectations.

While the inmates included in this exhibit have histories that are impossible to forget, it is easy to dissociate these histories from the artwork. The works range from pencil on paper drawings to mixed media sculptures and videos. Although each inmate addresses the same fate, the works are remarkably diverse ranging from political protests against the death penalty to personal narratives on how they coped with challenging prison conditions.

One of the most striking pieces in the exhibit is a large-scale model airplane created by Ron Cauthern out of cardboard, red and lime green sinuous lines meander naturally across the jet-black surface of the plane, evoking the image of Cauthern's blood that, at last for now, flows freely through his veins. Cauthern adorns the top of his plane with bright red and orange flames that appear to reach longingly for the cockpit, however, no pilot is visible.

These flames evoke a sense of fear in the viewer, and I know I certainly would not want to board this airplane. Similarly, Cauthern is not 'on board' with his upcoming execution. He further emphasizes this with the ominous white skull that he places underneath the plane's propeller. Cauthern makes it even clearer, stating in a brief letter that 'It's simple, nothing good can be born out of a life for a life, except more victims.'

'Cathedral' seems overtly political when viewed in the context of the exhibit and accompanied by Cauthern's letter. However, without these clues, the artwork could have been created by anyone. The flame and line patterns on the plane's surface recall Hot Wheels toy cars, pointing to the design for a children's toy. With the menacing skull on the front, the work could also easily be a decoration for Atlanta's own Vortex restaurant. If displayed in a more traditional art gallery, the viewer would have no way of knowing Cauthern's criminal history from the artwork. Rather than highlighting the flaws of the artists they display, traditional art galleries elevate them. The description of a Gauguin painting will likely discuss his travels to Tahiti but exclude his fiery temper.