

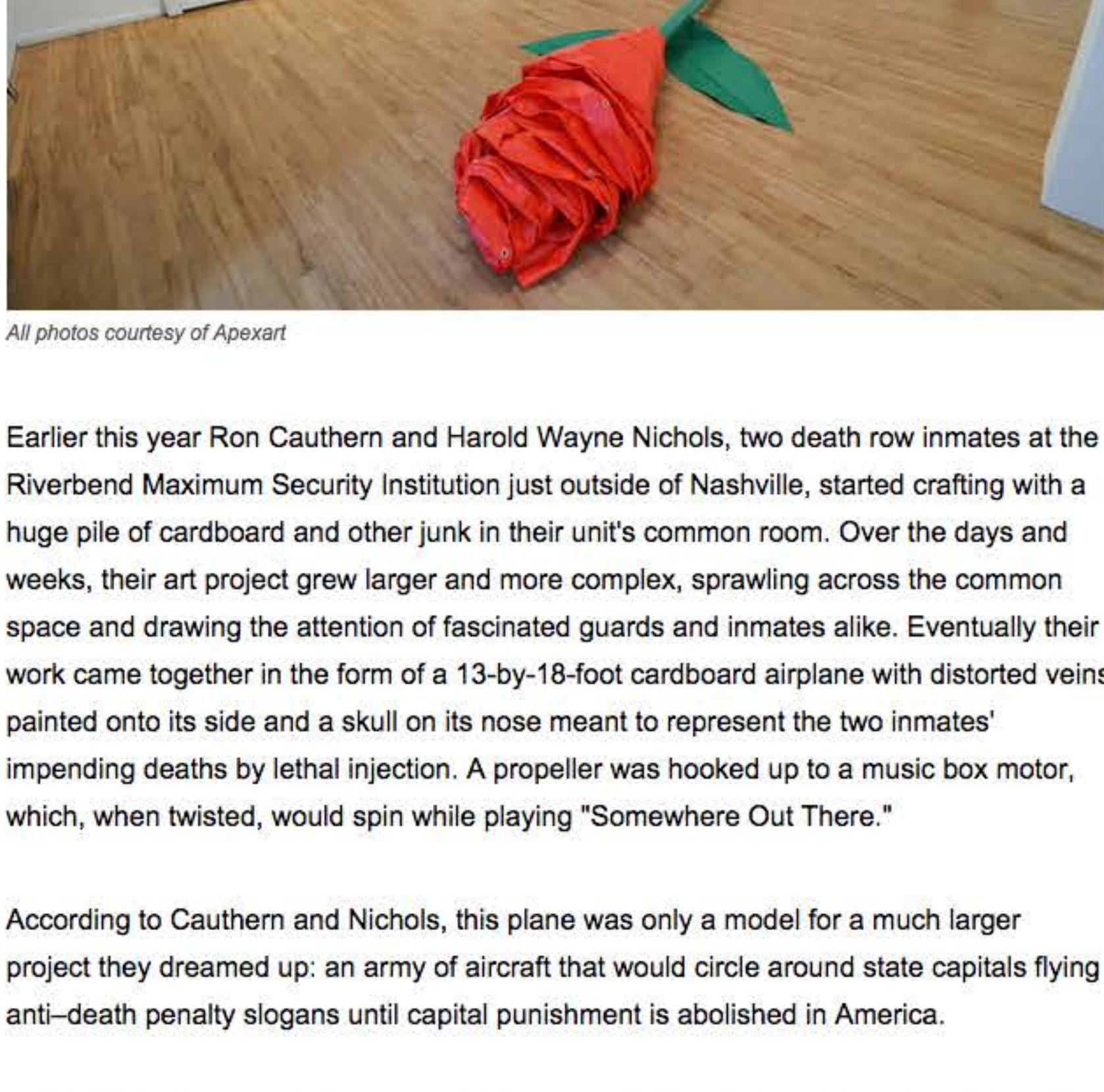


Art Before Death: The Powerful Work of Death Row Inmates

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by Mark Hay



All photos courtesy of Apexart

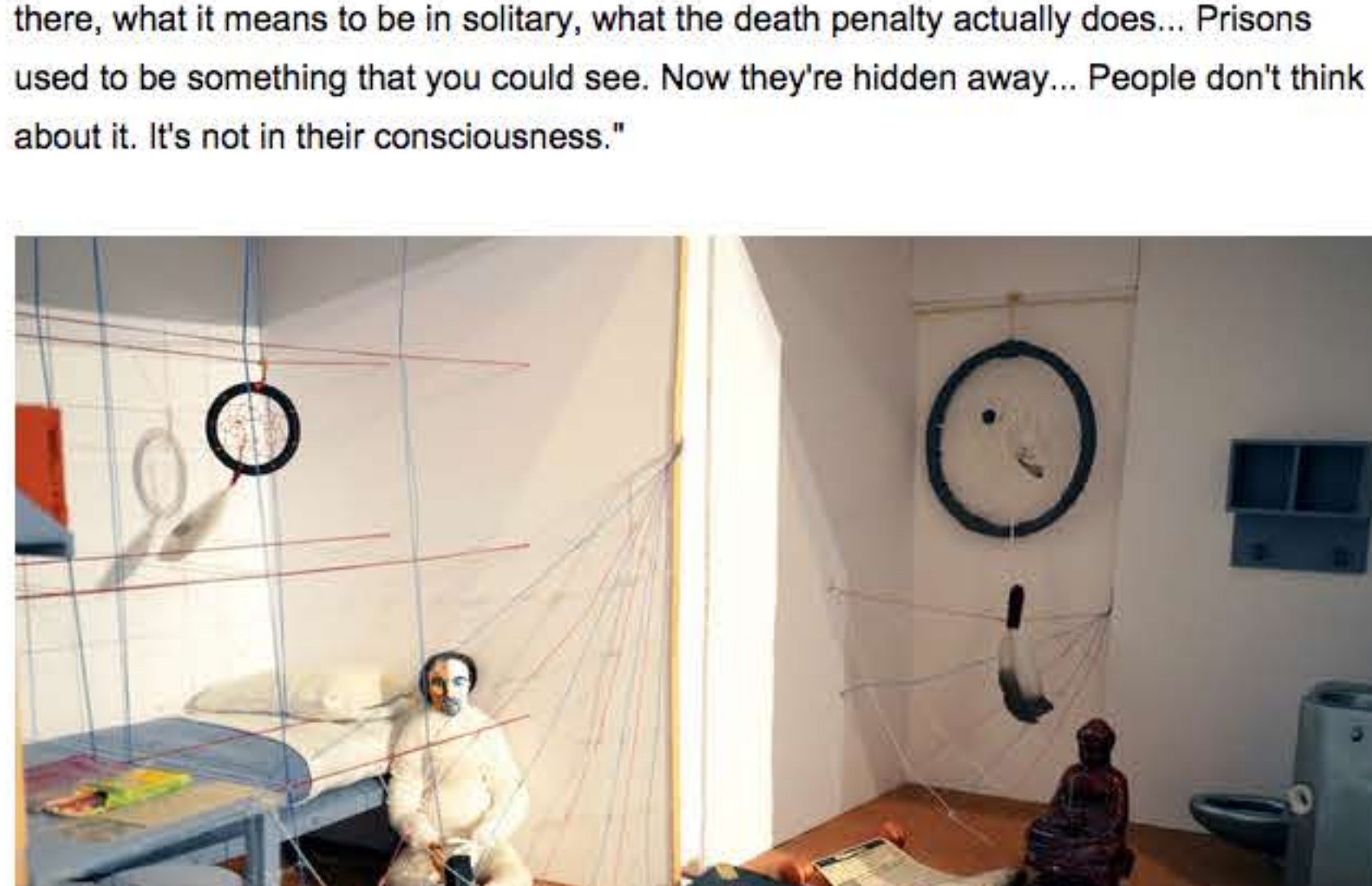
Earlier this year Ron Cauthern and Harold Wayne Nichols, two death row inmates at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution just outside of Nashville, started crafting with a huge pile of cardboard and other junk in their unit's common room. Over the days and weeks, their art project grew larger and more complex, sprawling across the common space and drawing the attention of fascinated guards and inmates alike. Eventually their work came together in the form of a 13-by-18-foot cardboard airplane with distorted veins painted onto its side and a skull on its nose meant to represent the two inmates' impending deaths by lethal injection. A propeller was hooked up to a music box motor, which, when twisted, would spin while playing "Somewhere Out There."

According to Cauthern and Nichols, this plane was only a model for a much larger project they dreamed up: an army of aircraft that would circle around state capitals flying anti-death penalty slogans until capital punishment is abolished in America.

Cauthern and Nichols will never see that dream come true. But earlier this month they did see their model plane, by then signed by almost every death row prisoner in Tennessee, broken down to its constituent parts, shipped north, and reassembled in **Apexart**, a nonprofit gallery in Manhattan established in 1994 to display the art of independent curators and creators.

Cauthern and Nichols's work (labeled in the gallery as *Airplane*) is part of *Life after Death and Elsewhere*, an exhibition of art by Tennessee death-row inmates which runs at Apexart through October 24. Organized by Robin Paris and Tom Williams, both professors at Nashville's Watkins College of Art, Design & Film, the show features over 30 works by a dozen condemned men, most of them murderers, including Abu Ali Abdur'Rahman, G'dongalay Berry, Declicho "Ironhawk" Besh, Gary Cone, Kenneth Artez Henderson, Billy Irick, Akil Jahi, Donald Middlebrooks, Derrick Quintero, and Dennis Suttles. The art runs the gamut from high-concept sculptures to self-portraits to poetry and a binder of personal writings and correspondences available at the gallery's front desk. But they're united by a challenging sense of morbidity and political critique that's unique even for prison arts projects.

Most prison arts programs and the gallery shows attached to them serve a **rehabilitative** role. They're skills education or therapy, often for people the organizers hope will reenter society as functional individuals. But most death row inmates in the Riverbend arts program have no hope of returning to society—especially since Tennessee, which **executed six people** between 2000 and 2009, is now fighting a hold placed on **four more executions** originally slated for 2015. Paris and Williams didn't just ask these condemned men to express themselves via art. Building on the condemned men's collective fate, they asked the inmates to design their own memorials while still alive, a mission made all the more macabre by the fact that one inmate, Ironhawk, died of a heart attack while building his project: a tree with symbolic feathers for leaves which the curators completed as an actual memorial for Ironhawk.



The memorial for Ironhawk

The roots of *Life after Death and Elsewhere* go back to the fall of 2013, when Paris and Williams first visited Riverbend at the behest of Lisa Guenther, a professor of philosophy specializing in issues of mass incarceration and capital punishment at Vanderbilt University who ran a program for inmates at the facility. Neither of the artists had any previous experience in a prison setting, but they agreed to take over an arts project while another educator went on sabbatical that summer. As they started to introduce the inmates to conceptual art, they began to learn about the men and the system they inhabited and found themselves deeply engaged.

"They had been in there a while," Paris told VICE at the current show's debut. "They'd had time to think. They'd read. They'd practiced skills. They were some realized people."

Over the next two years, working in compliance with prison regulations and with the support of the unit's guards, they developed a half-dozen shows in Tennessee that allowed the inmates to share their life stories and beliefs on incarceration and the death penalty beyond the walls of their cells.

"A side effect [of our work] has been that [the inmates] come out of a deep, deep darkness," Paris told VICE. "But that's not necessarily what we're going for. What we want more so than anything is to understand what it means to be a prisoner, how people get there, what it means to be in solitary, what the death penalty actually does... Prisons used to be something that you could see. Now they're hidden away... People don't think about it. It's not in their consciousness."



Derrick Quintero, *If My Journey Were a Book Title*

Eventually, Williams came up with the concept of focusing in on self-memorialization.

"I don't know where [the idea] came from," Williams told VICE. "It's [an urge] I had early on—to capture that experience of living death that they endure. They [have] to think about death in a way that most people don't. Death for them is very concrete."

Memorials, Williams decided, were the appropriate gut punch to challenge the public's notions of the death penalty. After sitting on the concept for a while, he decided to apply for Apexart's Unsolicited Proposal program, which awards funds to artists and curators hoping to bring challenging, innovative projects to New York. Williams won an exhibition spot—and the inmates were onboard.

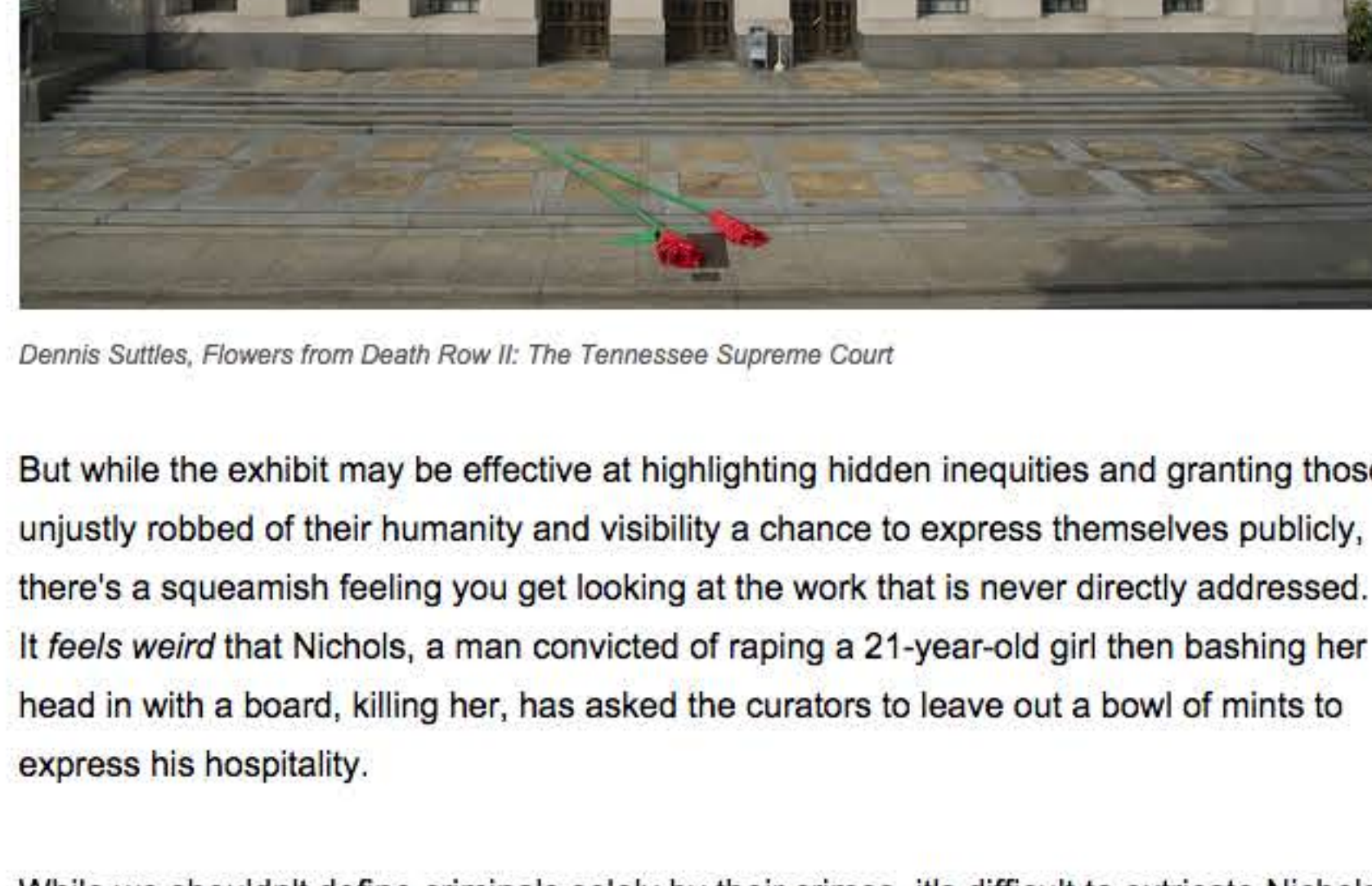


Harold Wayne Nichols, *A World Without Prisons*

"[Cone] and [Nichols] were very into the idea," said Williams. "Others were resistant because it seemed to be acquiescent to their sentences, or to their fate," which many are still fighting.

"Some of them were kind of superstitious," Paris added. "They thought, 'If I do this, that's what's going to happen...!' Then we said, 'Well, a memorial can be something other than about your death. It can be something you want to be known for, no matter what your position is.' A lot of them went with that."

The results of this broad definition of memorialization run the gamut from the monumental to the ephemeral. In the video installation *Telling Our Story*, Quintero and two outside activists read stories from the inmates and talk about their lives over shots of nature and the prison parking lot. Berry's painting shows the shadow of death stalking him. Jahi's model of a prison parking lot. Berry's glistening shows the shadow of death stalking him. Jahi's model of a spongy surface in years when he was being transferred to another facility. Cone's *Gary Cone: I Am A Reader of Books* is a spiraling tower of novels he's read; he had to leave the tower unfinished after suffering an infection that spread to his spine and left him a paraplegic in an isolated facility where he is now denied access to most books and visitors, much less arts programs like this.



Ron Cauthern, *New Monument for Nashville*

Middlebrook admitted to murdering a 14-year-old boy, whom he beat, stabbed, raped with a stick, slashed across the chest in an X pattern, and urinated upon before leaving him under a mattress in a dry creek bed. That's a story I had to go searching for; it wasn't presented openly in the show. When you look at the paintings by Middlebrook on display, however, they do a great job of humanizing him. They recount a childhood of abuse—forced heroin addiction and prostitution—and his willful conviction of childhood crimes to escape into juvenile detention. Middlebrook's paintings talk about his wish to express remorse to the family of his victim, and how that impulse towards contrition is strangled by a capital punishment system that urges silence, lest an inmate jeopardize his or her appeals cases. Talking to Paris and Williams, it's clear they've cultivated a great deal of sympathy for this artist, who opened up to them as he never did to the courts about the background leading to his crime.

At times, the social critique focus of the exhibition detracts from other hard, dark issues the show could have grappled with—like how justice could truly be served in a case like Middlebrook's.

What *Life After Death and Elsewhere* highlights is, as Paris puts it, the strangeness and confusion of the American prison industry and capital punishment system. Apexart is **using panel discussions** on prison reform and inmate story sessions to highlight these themes, with the hope of sparking difficult but vital conversations.

Dennis Suttles, *Flowers from Death Row II: The Tennessee Supreme Court*

But while the exhibit may be effective at highlighting hidden inequities and granting those unjustly robbed of their humanity and visibility a chance to express themselves publicly, there's a squeamish feeling you get looking at the work that is never directly addressed. It *feels weird* that Nichols, a man convicted of raping a 21-year-old girl then bashing her head in with a board, killing her, has asked the curators to leave out a bowl of mints to express his hospitality.

While we shouldn't define criminals solely by their crimes, it's difficult to extricate Nichols' work from that element of his whole being. I wish I had been challenged to reconcile these two wildly disparate aspects of Nichols—his humanity and his inhuman crime—more directly. That tension feels like the unfinished apotheosis of this project: What does it mean to be a human being, capable of both horrendous murder and great cruelty and significant paths? *Life After Death and Elsewhere* could have been even more powerful if it had placed all the facts, both redemptive and disturbing, on the same stage.

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TOPICS: death row, art, prison, Mark Hay, crime, TriBeCa, Tennessee, criminal justice, justice, murder, death, rape