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CULTURAL AFFAIRS

# Art On Death Row: Inmates Create Memorials To Their Own Deaths

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Dennis Suttles, "Thirteen Roses," 2015

Some artists are present at the openings of their exhibitions.

But these artists won't be: they are locked up in their cells, awaiting execution on Tennessee's death row.

"Life After Death and Elsewhere," which opens September 10 at apexart, spotlights these prisoners' designs for their own memorials – from monuments to photographs. Others, according to a press release for the exhibition, will present "works that address their refusal to memorialize themselves." All are incarcerated at the Riverbed Maximum Security facility in Nashville, where they face the death penalty.

The brainchild of Robin Paris and Tom Williams, Nashville-based art professors who have been working with death row inmates for several years, "Life After Death And Elsewhere" comes at a critical time in the history of the death penalty in America, as Tennessee – a state which has executed six people since 1960 – now plans more than 10 executions in the near future. Some of the artists whose work is included in this show are among those scheduled — victims of the kind of state-sponsored, deliberate, murder we would condemn if it took place anywhere else but here.

The artists in the exhibition include Derrick Quintero, who has been held on death row since 1991; Billy Irick, whose scheduled execution in 2014 was stayed as a result of legal challenges to the state's capital punishment protocol; and Abu-Ali Abdur Rahman, sentenced in 1987, whose sentence has been stayed several times in the face of challenges to his original conviction. Many of these prisoners have been diagnosed as mentally ill; some, like Abdur Rahman and Donald Middlebrooks, are the victims of horrific childhood physical and sexual abuse.

# apexart

The works are varied, and range from conceptual pieces, like that by Ron Cauthern (with the assistance of Harold Wayne Nichols), which, according to [the exhibition brochure](#), "asks that airplanes bearing banners with anti-death penalty slogans circle state capitols throughout the United



States until executions are stopped," to sculptures such as Gary Cone's column of books by Faulkner, Melville and others, which the brochure describes as "a map of his efforts to escape the tedium and isolation of life on death row"; Donald Middlebrooks' handprint, "a memorial to a crime he committed in his youth where he intentionally left his fingerprints in the hope that the police would arrest him and rescue him from his mother's abuse"; and Ron Cauthern's "New Monument For Nashville," a haunting proposal for a monument against capital punishment.



Ron Cauthern, "New Monument For Nashville," 2015

Together, they comprise a statement about humanity at its most isolated, its most inhumane, spoken through the art that makes us all most deeply united, and most human.

*The exhibition at [apexart](#), 291 Church Street, New York, runs from September 10 – October 24, 2015. Opening reception, September 9, 6-8pm*

<http://blogs.artinfo.com/culturalaffairs/2015/09/03/art-on-death-row/>