Death Row Inmates Are Sculpting Their Own Memorials

By Sami Emory — Aug 19 2015

Abu Ali Abdur Rahman, GDongalay Berry, Ron Cauthern, Gary Cone, John Freeland, Harold Wayne Nichols, Derrick Quintero, and Declicho Besh (“Ironhawk”), Model for a Monument to the Executed and to Those Who Died Awaiting Execution (for Legislative Plaza in Nashville), 2015, Clay; all images courtesy apexart.

In a haunting artistic act, death row inmates have designed and constructed their own memorials for Life After Death and Elsewhere. Opening September 9th at apexart, the show features work from 11 male prisoners at the Riverbed Maximum Security Institution in Nashville. Lacking the predictability of the proverbial headstone, obelisk, or mausoleum, the works instead are largely symbolic, abstract, and at times reticent—from a coffin-sized sneaker, modeled after the inmate’s uniform and positioned at a
Akil Jahi, Proposal for a Monument, 2015, Pigment print.

The show was organized by Robin Paris and Tom Williams, both art professors in Nashville, who have been working with men on death row in various avenues since 2013. This latest endeavor, the first of their projects to be exhibited outside of Tennessee, was prompted by the state's recent revival of its death penalty policy. “After executing only six people in 55 years, the State of Tennessee's current administration has scheduled more than 10 prisoners to die in the near future,” the professors explain on apexart. “Recent litigation about the drug cocktail used in lethal injections has slowed down this campaign, but many of these men are facing imminent death. In light of these foreboding developments, they hope these memorials will demonstrate that they are more than merely convicts condemned to execution.”

The state's move to reinstate executions is therefore highly prominent in the memorials' imagery. As the project progressed, Paris and Williams' also noted a distinctive political commentary in the developing pieces: for those who chose to stick with the professors' primary proposal, it translates into memorials dripping with loaded allusions, such as Ron Cauthen's New Monument for Nashville.
Ron Cauthern, *New Monument for Nashville, 2015, Acrylic and ink on photograph.*

Not all participants followed Paris and Williams’ prompt so literally, however. Some found themselves unwilling or incapable of such introspective sculptures and tended instead towards objective topics, like prison reform and carceral conditions. Others, like Abu Ali Abdur’Rahman’s complex *Landscape* tableau (below), are disarmingly hopeful, employing otherworldly elements and religious evocations representative of that which is beyond—above the despair of inmates facing such a fate.
Abu Ali Abdur’Rahman, Landscape, 2015, Mixed media

In reflecting on the project after it’s completion and to address the inevitable controversy of the exhibition, Paris and Williams added, "None of this should diminish our feelings for murder victims and their loved ones [...] Capital punishment, nonetheless, creates a perverse incentive for silence. Speaking openly about their cases could jeopardize attempts to overturn their death sentences, and this makes public contrition difficult, if not impossible. The works in this show are also subject to these constraints. The men have written bios to accompany their contributions, however, and some of them have addressed their feelings about their crimes. We hope these gestures can start a conversation about the humanity of people on death row and their prospects for justice or atonement."
Derrick Quintero, If My Journey Were a Book Title, 2012, Mixed media (detail).

Life After Death and Elsewhere will be on show at apexart from September 9 to October 24. Read more about the exhibition here.

http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/death-row-inmates-are-sculpting-their-own-memorials