

## Apex Art Curatorial Program

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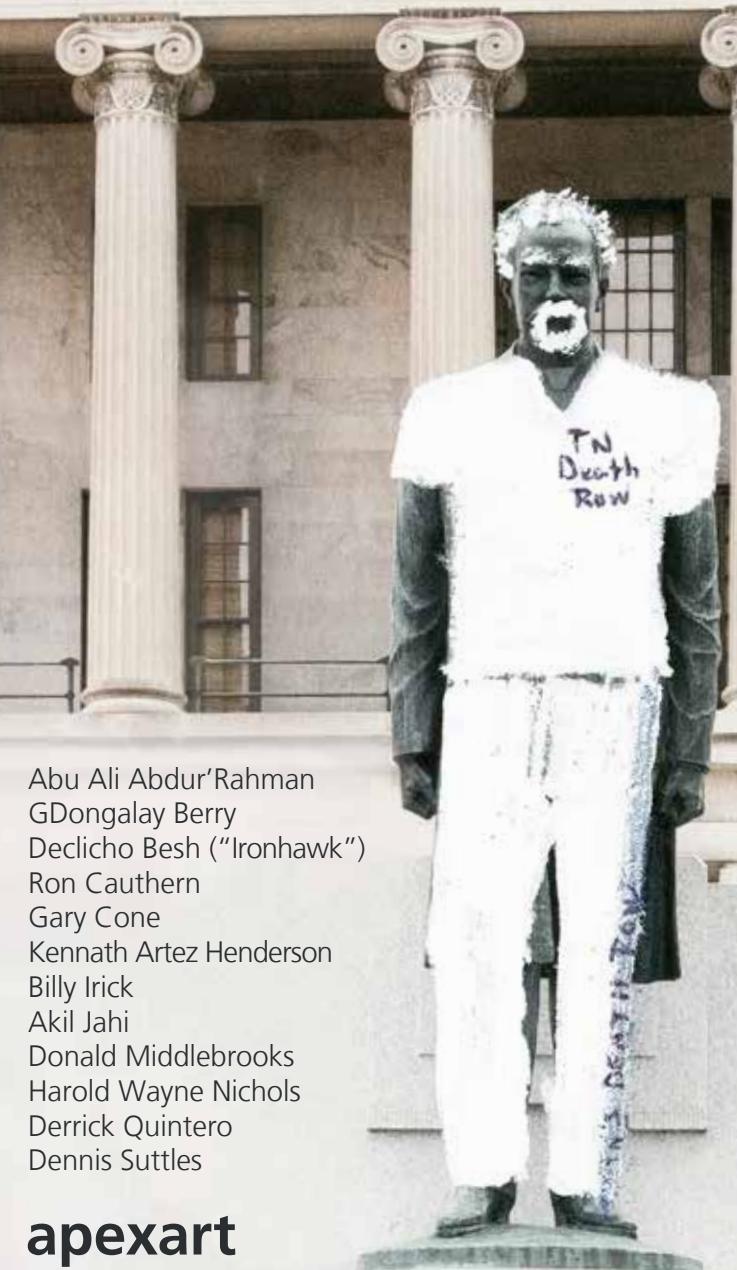
cover image: **Ron Cauthern**, *New Monument for Nashville (in the Place of a Statue of Edward W. Carmack)*, 2015, Acrylic and ink on photograph, 11 x 16 in (detail)

# apexart

## *Life After Death and Elsewhere*

Organized by  
Robin Paris and Tom Williams

September 10 - October 24, 2015



Abu Ali Abdur'Rahman  
GDongalay Berry  
Declicho Besh ("Ironhawk")  
Ron Cauthern  
Gary Cone  
Kenneth Artez Henderson  
Billy Irick  
Akil Jahi  
Donald Middlebrooks  
Harold Wayne Nichols  
Derrick Quintero  
Dennis Suttles



Gary Cone, assembled works and writings in a book designed by Britt Stadig, 2015,  
11 1/2 x 9 1/4 in (closed)

### **Life After Death and Elsewhere**

This exhibition features memorials to the living. The men who designed them are facing execution at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tennessee. By designing their own memorials, they ask you to consider the experiences of those who live on death row and to imagine a world that might commemorate them despite their convictions.

This exhibit opens at a perilous moment. 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. 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.

Every memorial promotes an agenda. The statues that stand guard in our parks and by our capitols often celebrate a cast of characters distinguished mostly for being more merciless than their peers. Today, Tennessee continues to memorialize the likes of Confederate General and Klansman Nathan Bedford Forrest and segregationist Senator Edward W. Carmack, and these monuments tell a powerful story about apartheid and racial terror.

The memorials in this show also promote agendas, but they present counterpoints to a history overwhelmingly told from the standpoint of its victors. They offer pleas for social

recognition, yet they also offer challenges to a society that maintains the largest prison population in the world and, like countries such as China and Iran, continues to send its citizens into execution chambers to die.

No one in this exhibition has proposed an obelisk, a triumphal arch, or a bronze colossus. These monuments are primarily conceptual. Many of them are ephemeral. Some are reflections on personal experiences while others advocate for political change. Often these proposals are unfeasible, but the power of a proposal is its ability to project imaginative alternatives onto existing political and social realities. Many of these proposals are utopian. They imagine a world in which convicts might one day be reconciled with those beyond prison walls. As participating artist Dennis Suttles wrote in an eloquent letter that accompanies his proposal, "While the world may look at someone in prison as trash, only to be thrown away, there is still a lot we could offer society if people would just take a moment to look."

Some artists have chosen to participate in the show, but declined to design memorials at all. Instead their works portray their stalwart refusals to accept execution as their fate. For example, **GDongalay Berry** has submitted a painting that addresses the shadow of death that follows him and a poem that describes his rejection of memorialization. In similar stances of refusal, **Derrick Quintero** submitted a diorama that chronicles his struggles for justice in the face of imprisonment, and **Billy Irick** has submitted a painting that depicts a landscape he now dreams of visiting.



Derrick Quintero, *If My Journey Were a Book Title*, 2012, Mixed media,  
41 1/2 x 16 1/2 x 20 1/2 in (detail)

One of the more overtly political projects in the show is a large-scale model airplane (measuring 13 x 18 feet) created by **Ron Cauthern** (with the assistance of **Harold Wayne Nichols**). This cardboard construction is an elaborate design for a gesture of political opposition to capital punishment. Rather than proposing an enduring tribute to his life in metal or stone, Cauthern asks that airplanes bearing banners with anti-death penalty slogans circle state capitols throughout the United States until executions are stopped. This work not only proposes a memorial for the artist but also critiques the circumstances under which so many of these men have died.



Dennis Suttles, 13 Roses, 2015, Acrylic paint on wood, bread, and glue, each rose approx. 12 in. tall

the young. His proposal points to the absence of resources and opportunities in the disadvantaged areas most affected by mass incarceration today.

Nichols' own proposal includes a design for a large amphitheater made from the stones of demolished prisons. He imagines this building as a space where communities could practice restorative justice instead of punishment. Such a design represents an alternative to a prison system that simply warehouses a population of nearly 3 million people.

Some of the artwork in the exhibit addresses the conditions that deliver people to prison in the first place. As an aspect of his contribution, **Kennath Artez Henderson** has conceived a community center that might, if realized, offer alternatives to prisons for

**Dennis Suttles'** proposal for sculptures of roses acknowledges individuals already in prison. He frequently models small-scale flowers onto dowel rods from scraps of bread and glue before coating them with brightly colored acrylic paint. In his proposal, he imagines that they might be realized on a large scale (with stems at least 20 feet long) using scrap materials that would otherwise be discarded or destroyed. They would be placed in public spaces as a reminder of the beauty of those things – and those people – that society throws away.

In a more personal contribution, **Akil Jahi** has created a large cardboard shoe modeled after those included in his prison uniform. He proposes that it be realized on a larger scale and placed in verdant fields as a way of imaginatively overcoming his confinement. After years in the artificial and antiseptic spaces of prison, many of these men long for the opportunity to soil their shoes by walking on grass. As one prisoner remarked, "I hated lawn work more than anything when I was free, but now I deeply long just to touch grass."

Rather than addressing the deprivations of prison life, **Gary Cone** has focused on his efforts to escape them through books. As he notes in a long narrative that accompanies his design, "My actions throughout my adult life have led me to prison and reading has been my way to exit." For his contribution, he designed a spiraling column made from books that have consoled him during his years of confinement, including works by authors such as Anne Carson, William Faulkner, and Herman Melville. This column not only describes his reading habits, but it offers a map of his efforts to escape the tedium and isolation of life on death row. It is accompanied by a book that includes his writings about reading alongside images of libraries he cannot visit and the paintings he makes on cracker boxes and scraps of cardboard.

**Donald Middlebrooks** has submitted works that recount his attempts to escape the violence he suffered as a child. In one of his contributions, he offered his handprint as 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.

In one of the more conceptually ambitious projects, **Abu Ali Abdur'Rahman** has created an elaborate tableau that is the most spiritual project in the exhibition. Relying on Christianity, Native American spirituality, and other religious traditions, he represents a complex map of the watery landscape that stands between death and the next world. His memorial suggests that there is hope beyond prison and even beyond death.



Akil Jahi, Proposal for a Monument, 2015, Pigment print, 12 x 18 in

Another memorial stands as a somber testament to this hope. **Declicho Besh** (known as "Ironhawk" or "Chief") was working diligently on the model for his monument when he suffered a heart attack and died (a situation undoubtedly promoted by his limited access to health care). Sadly, his contribution to the exhibit serves as an actual memorial. Inspired by his Apache heritage, he designed a terra-cotta tree with feathers instead of leaves. Each of these ornately beaded feathers was to represent an aspect of his character and identity, but he completed only a small number of them before he passed (and most of these were lost). We have carried out his design to the best of our ability and marked his unfinished contributions with white feathers. While we are all grateful that he was spared the indignity of execution, we deeply regret his passing. He was a resolute and thoughtful presence, and he will be missed.

We have titled this show *Life After Death and Elsewhere* to call attention to both the living death that these men all endure and the hope they sustain despite the judgments against them. **Ironhawk's** death lends this title new significance. We hope this show will honor his memory as it testifies to the humanity and dignity of everyone who continues to live under the threat of execution.

*Postscript:* Both this exhibition and the text above were developed in collaboration with the artists in prison. For the text, we produced a rough draft, which included this postscript, based on our conversations with the men, and work-shopped it during our weekly Thursday-night meetings.

*Life After Death and Elsewhere* is the latest in a series of shows we have organized with the men on death row since the fall of 2013 and the first to occur outside of Tennessee. We became involved in this project after Lisa Guenther, a philosophy professor at Vanderbilt University and the facilitator of a prison philosophy program, organized an exhibition of their works and later invited us to visit them at Riverbend. Our collaborations with the prisoners began as a summer course based on ideas of "reciprocal education," but we quickly began organizing shows in an effort to extend that educational mission to the broader public.

Collaborating with prisoners on death row raises complex questions about both their wrongdoings and the nature of the legal system in the United States. The men in this show have all been convicted – justly or unjustly – of very serious crimes. As a consequence, they will be killed by institutions that claim to represent the U.S. public. We believe that it is important to pay attention to what they have to say.

In doing so, we should consider both the seriousness of their crimes and the inequities of the justice system in the U.S. The number of prisoners released because of false convictions has skyrocketed in recent years. These numbers include individuals who were once on death row in Tennessee. But even for the guilty, the death penalty is applied unevenly according to the goals of local prosecutors, the race of the defendants, and their access to resources for hiring a competent defense.

None of this should diminish our feelings for murder victims and their loved ones. The crimes that precipitated these convictions can never be undone. Any gestures of remorse or restitution on the part of the guilty will never measure up to the losses they have inflicted on others. 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.