Life After Death and Elsewhere
Organized by Robin Paris and Tom Williams
September 10 - October 24, 2015

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.

Abu Ali Abdur’Rahman
GDongalay Berry
Declicho Besh (“Ironhawk”)
Ron Cauthern
Gary Cone
Kennath Artez Henderson
Billy Irick
Akil Jahi
Donald Middlebrooks
Harold Wayne Nichols
Derek Quintero
Dennis Suttles

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.
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 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 been convicted – justly or unjustly – of very serious crimes. As a consequence, they will be killed by institutions that claim to be concerned about public safety. 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 Guerinther, a philosophy professor at Vanderbilt University and the facilitator of a prison philosophy program, organized an exhibit of their works and later invited us to visit them at Riverbend. Our collaborations with the prisoners began in the 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.