

When the Personal is Political in this Place we call Art

Unit 2 collaboration: 14 artists and 11 prisoners
on Death Row

Barbara Fontana Yontz, St. Thomas Aquinas College 2013

It is a shift from

“I speak the truth.”

“The truth speaks itself through me.”

Jacques Lacan

We wanted the men to be able to tell their own stories in their own voices.

Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, Nashville, Tennessee



“...billed as one of the state's most high-tech facilities. RMSI, which is made up of 20 different buildings with approximately 320,000 square feet of operating space, sits on 132 acres located off Cockrill Bend Boulevard.



Riverbend's designated capacity is 714 offenders. Of that number, 480 are classified as high risk. In addition to housing the majority of the state's male death row inmates, Riverbend is also home to approximately 600 maximum and medium security inmates.

reachcoalition.wordpress.com/about/

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REACH Coalition

Live from Death Row in Nashville, Tennessee

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About



REACH is an organization for reciprocal education led by insiders on Tennessee's death row. Reciprocal education is based on the idea that everyone has something to teach and to learn; by sharing our experience and ideas with others, we grow as individuals and as a community.

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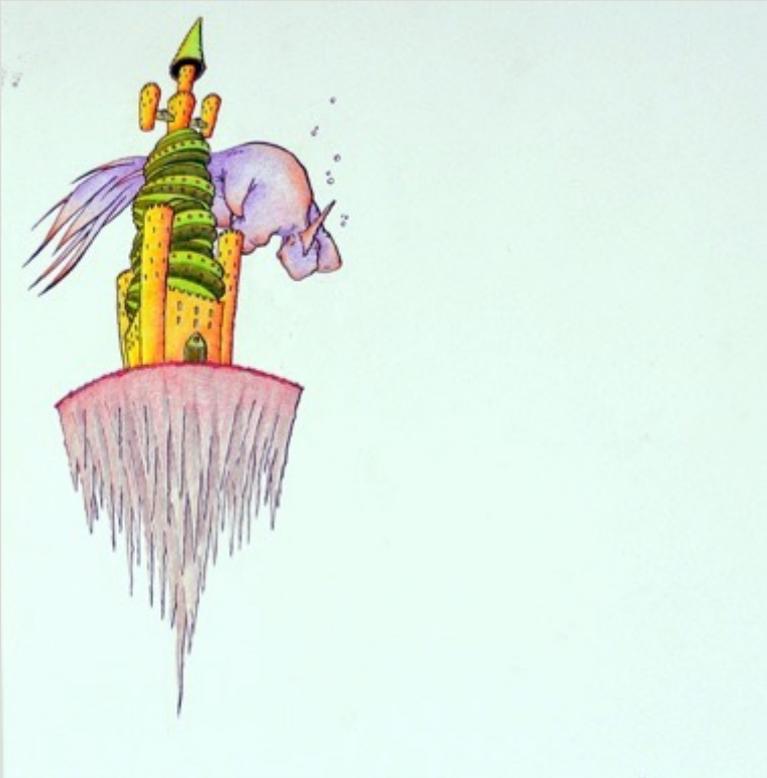
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Many of the men in our original class were part of an already existing group they called, the REACH Coalition. Their focus was on reciprocal education.



Our group was composed of students and educators from Watkins College of Art, Nashville.

Two different projects:1. Collaborative Artworks



Holly Carden (art student) week 1. She drew this fantasy image of a unicorn disconnected from the earth.



HWN (insider) tentatively responded the second week drawing these leaf-like flowers using the same colors.

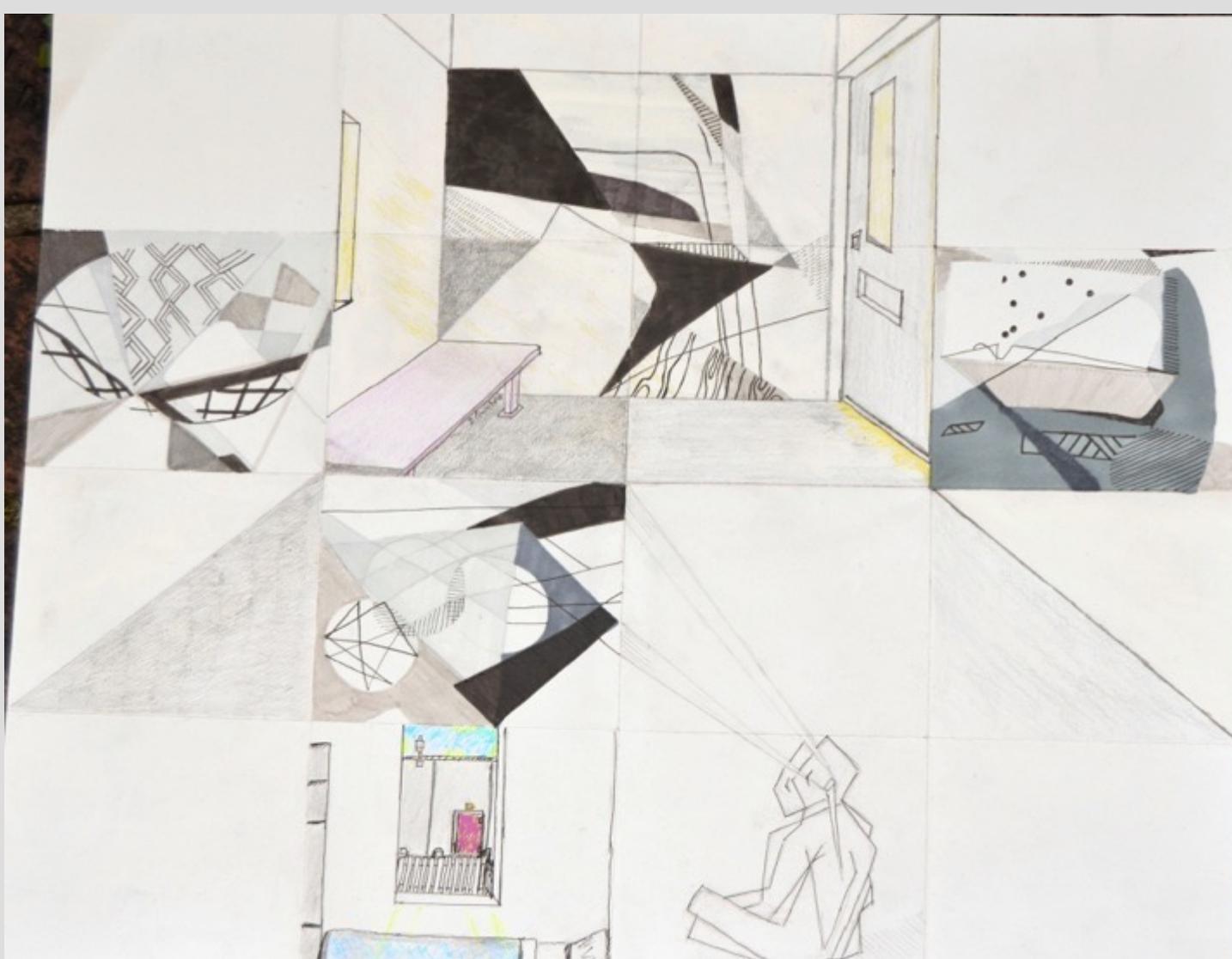


Holly(week 3) added the turtle, and leaves to match his.
Then, Wayne apologized for taking more time, two weeks later he added the butterfly and the wire looking forms, week 5 Holly add the grass.



Ann Catherine Carter (art student) began with a gridded drawing. She had abstract black and white forms spread around the page and folded the paper in a particular way.

DQ drew his cell in the squares between maintaining her already established grid.



Between them, they created an abstract image that speaks of his experience. Confined, fragmented, lonely but not without hope and at the same time of her interest in abstract shapes as metaphor.

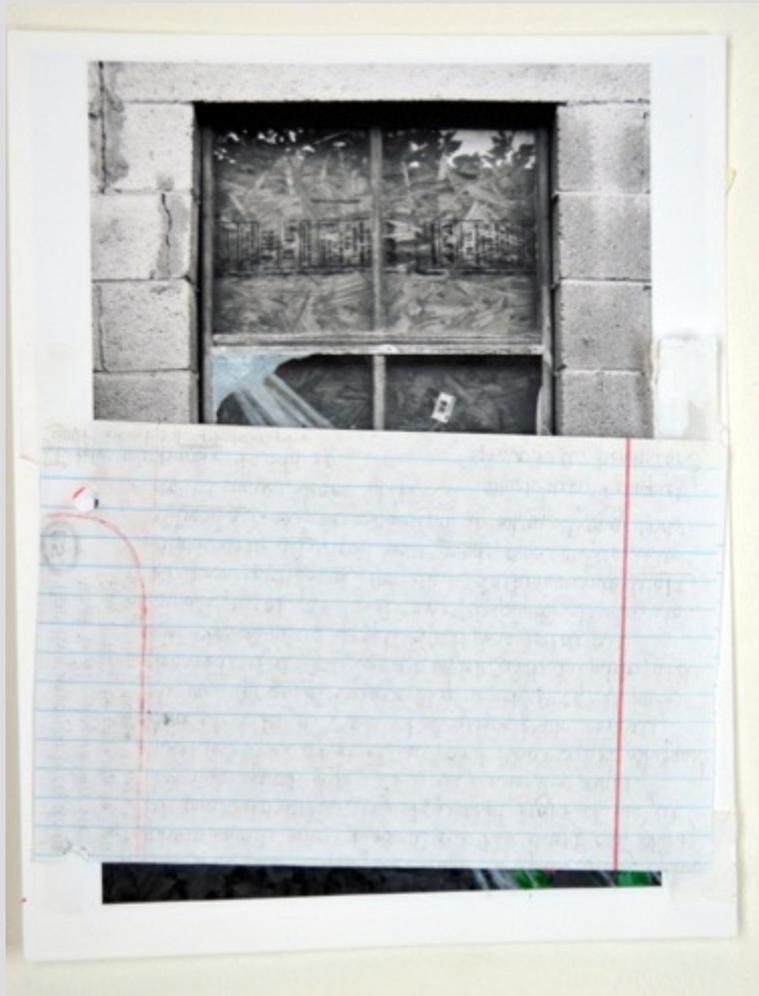
So that's what goes on outside
The lines. Such a pleasant water slide and
swim to the industrial insulation complex which
appears sinister. I do not do art but
I could write your thought process as you
did this work. But you could too. :)

Gary Lowe



Could you see
this as the umbilical
coil of the life sending
you down eventually
to Solyent Green?
Walk right on in.

Neither GC (insider) nor Alanna Styer (art student) were comfortable with drawing. Using collage, writing and some doodling, they created this piece.



A number of students were Photo majors. This collaboration between K A and Upreyl Mitchell, began with Uprel's photo of a boarded window. Kennath added the ray of light and flowers. Kennath added a note.





My collaboration with RC began with this piece of leather. Week 1 Ron drew a mountain scene on a piece of discarded leather.

I glued the leather piece to a piece of illustration board and added color to integrate it to the background. I added night sky with moon.

He wrote on the back, "I hope you like my waterfall".

The water then became an important connection through the drawing.

I also drew a simple contour line drawing of my back yard. (no photo of this stage.)

Ron then responded by adding this intense color in my drawing, the black border to connect it to the top, the vertical bands and some hidden animals in response to a face I had hidden in the trees.

He put the moon reflecting in the water.



Since we had used up all our paper, the next week I added this to the bottom of the other drawing.

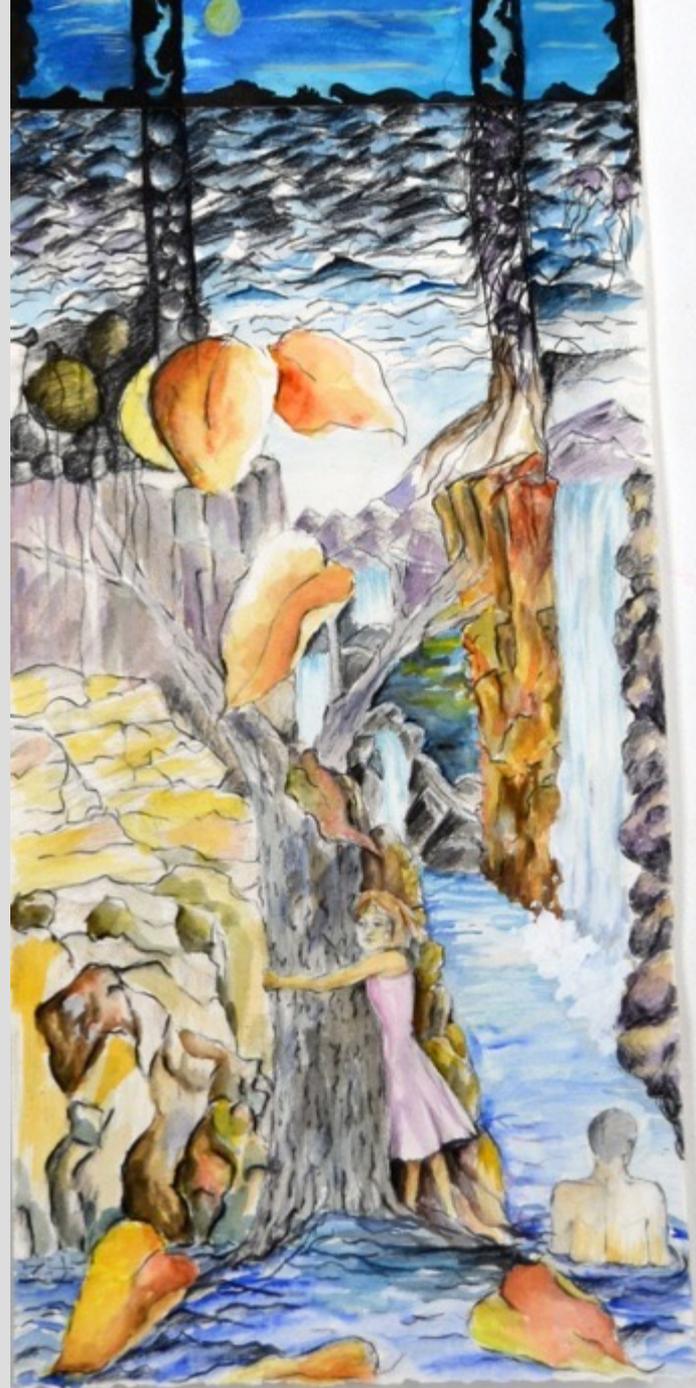
My part is the water at the top, and leaves falling down.

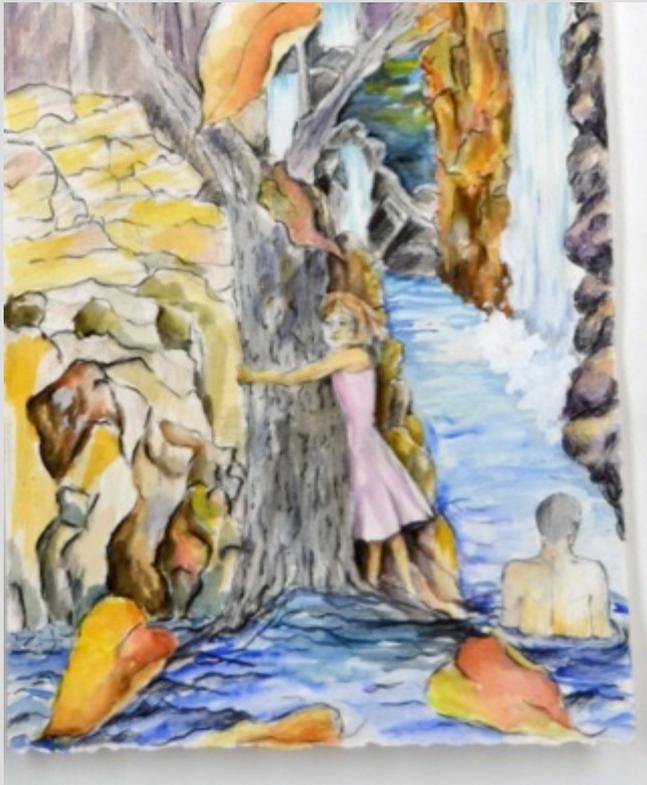
Ron then added the color pencil drawing of mountains, waterfall, tree and girl.

He added a note to the back saying it was me with my favorite tree.



When I got his drawing I added more leaves, painted the scene more richly and put a man in the river.





When I gave this back to Ron, he said it was finished but he added a little more color.

The piece showed in the gallery as a vertical, 41" x 16". The waterfall drips down with water becoming the integrating element.





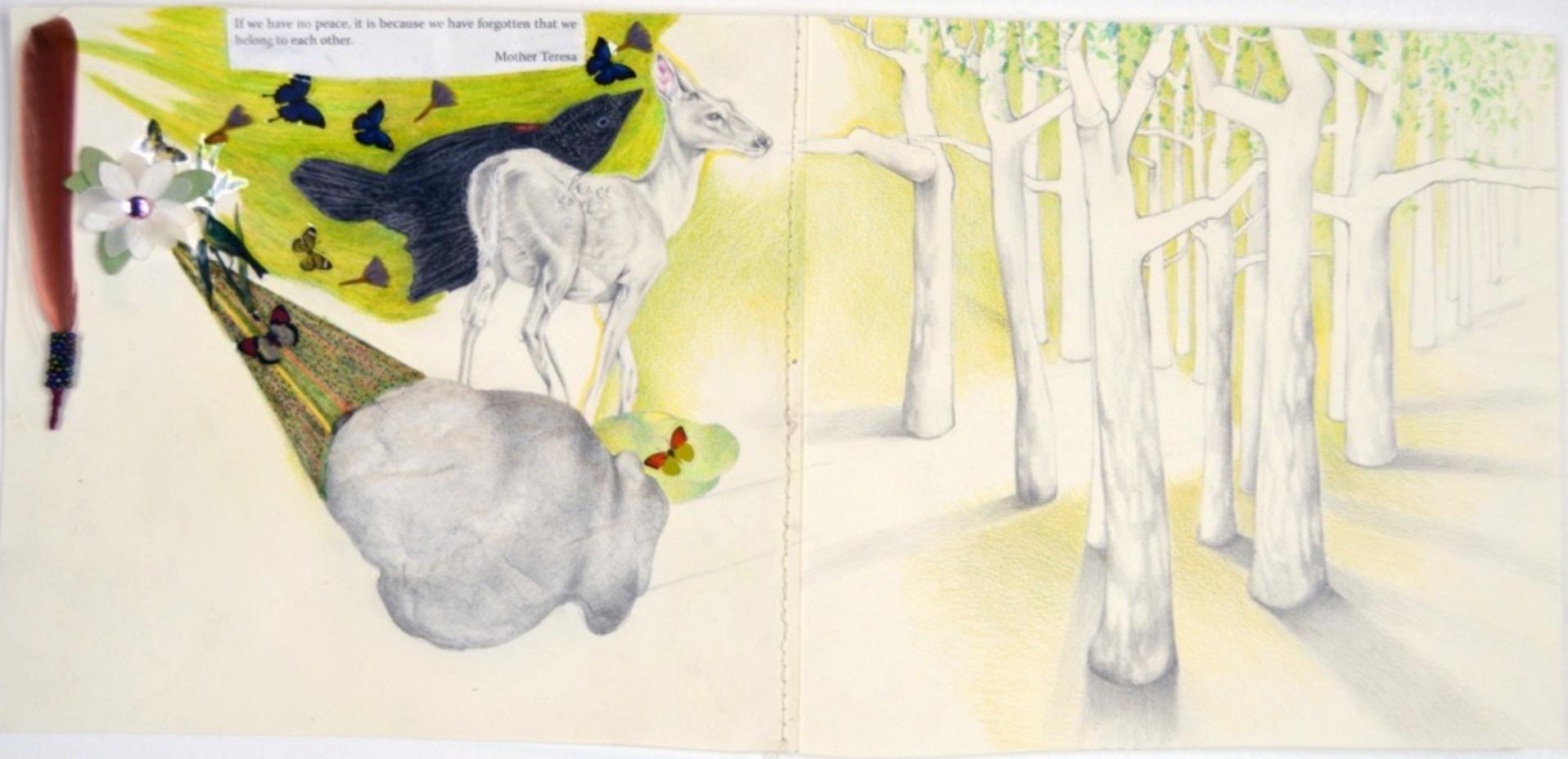
This piece began as a simple piece of mylar that Kristi Hargrove had manipulated so that it looked like a cloud relief.

I gave it to Abu AAR week 2 because his collaborative drawing did not come back. He then added the color pencil cone shape and a flower sticker.

Week 3 Kristi added the deer, Abu's favorite animal, and a little green patch of ground.



Week 4 Abu responded with a real feather, more stickers, the drawing of the bird and a quote from Mother Teresa.



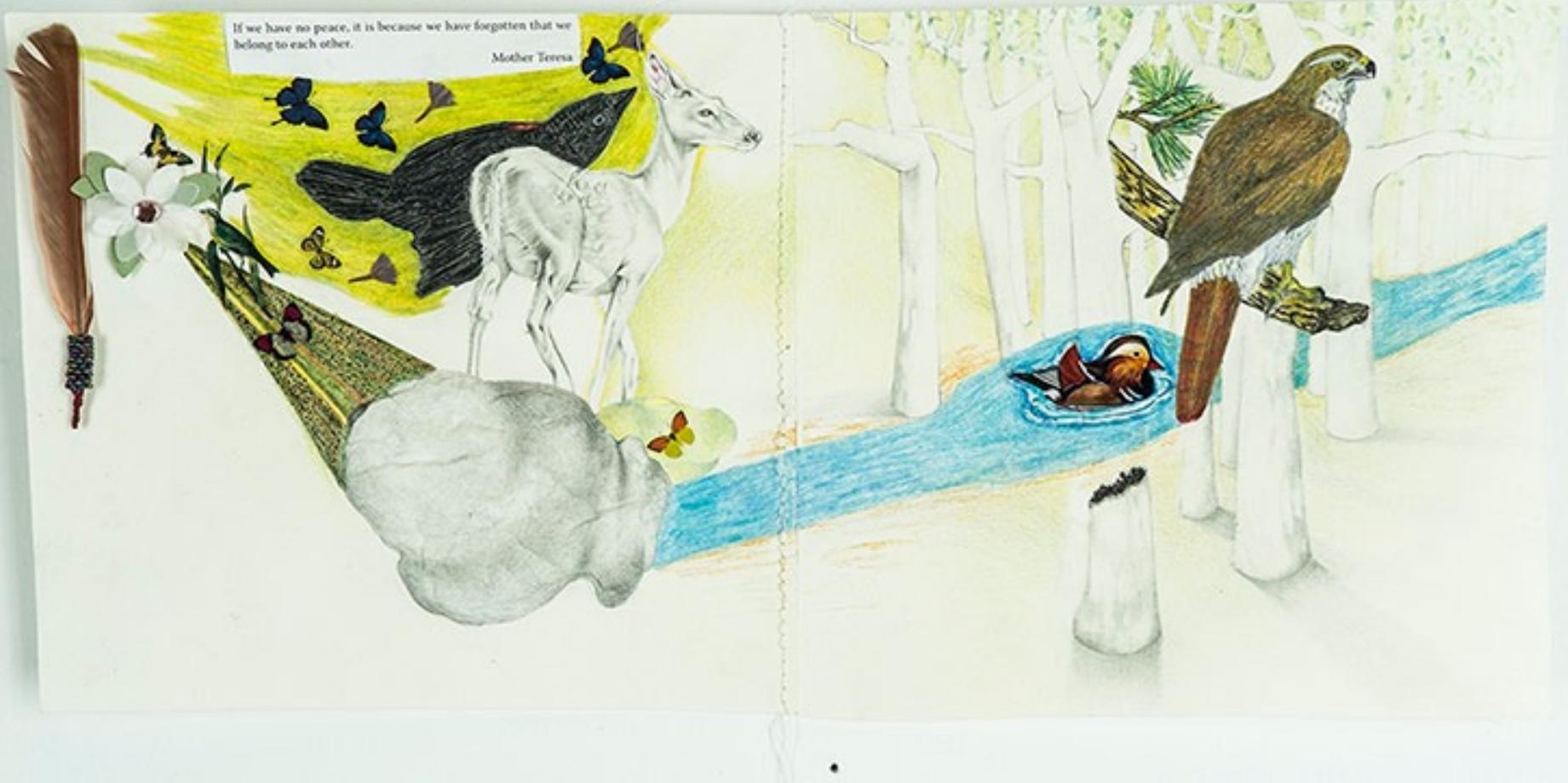
If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.

Mother Teresa

Abu Ali was surprised when Kristi responded by adding to the paper and drawing a forest with glowing light.

If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.

Mother Teresa



The final week, Abu Ali broke one of the trees to add a river and duck sticker. He also added a carefully rendered eagle (another of his favorite animals) to the trees.



The other type of collaboration was the Surrogate Projects.

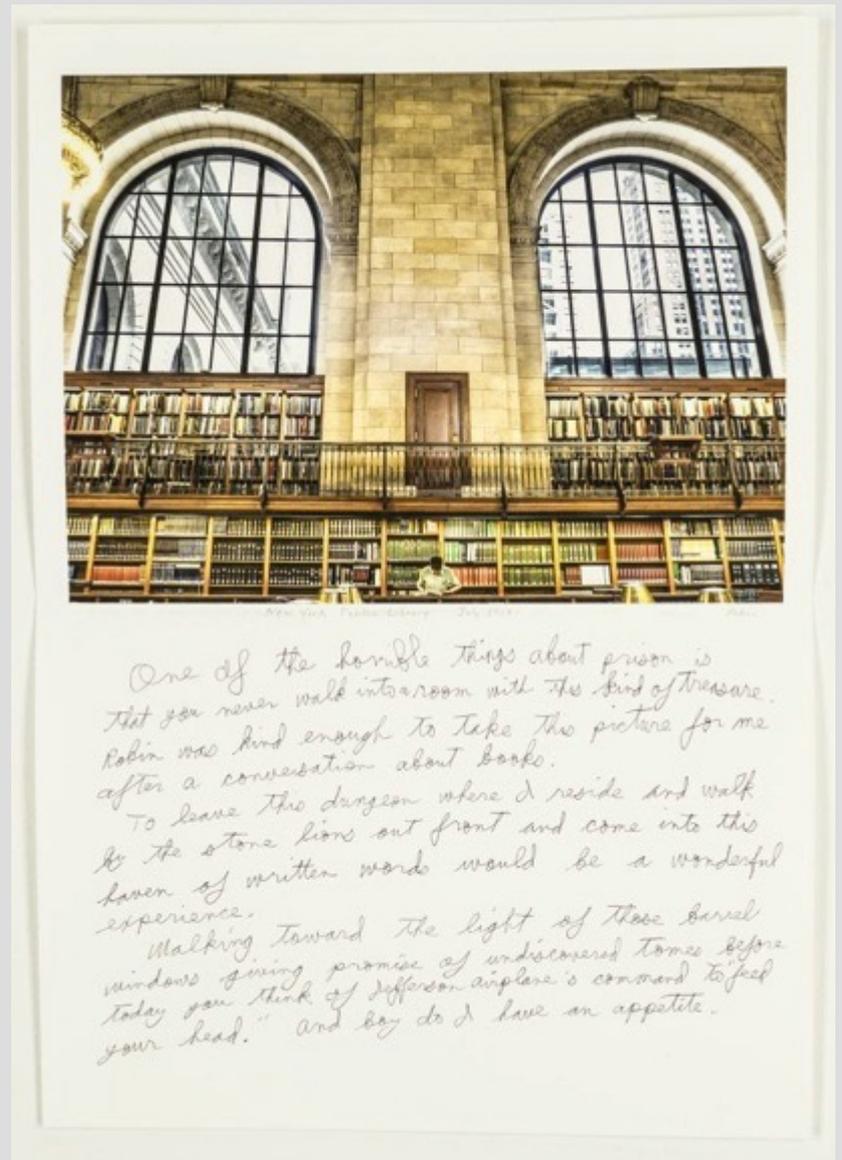
For these, the men asked us to do things on the outside that they would like to do if they could.

One was to Research the cost of incarceration compared to education.
Holly Carden and Josh Ungurait, Surrogate for D D: Death Row Fact Sheet



Look at the night sky (Wayne).

I haven't seen the night sky in 25 years.



See all books in the New York Public Library (Gary_Unit 2 librarian)



Eat a breakfast of eggs, bacon, home fries, pancakes, tomatoes, orange juice, coffee, biscuits and gravy (Wayne).



Go to Cheekwood Botanical Gardens and take pictures of James Terrell's sculpture and the Japanese Garden (Gary).



All the collaborations were exhibited at Coop Gallery, The Arcade, Downtown Nashville.





Exhibition at Coop Gallery, The Arcade,
Downtown Nashville.

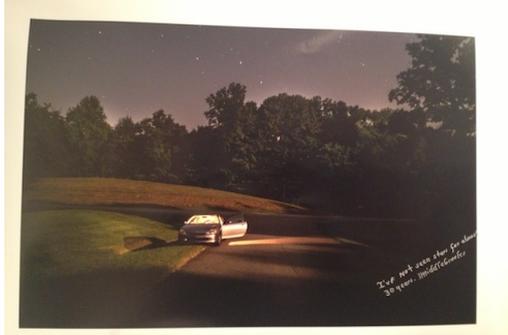
HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Dreaming on Death Row

by [Alicia Eler](#) on September 16, 2013



Robin Paris and Tom Williams with writing by Gary Cone, Harold Wayne Nichols, Donald Middlebrooks, "Surrogate Project for Harold Wayne Nichols: The Night Sky Series" (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

NASHVILLE — Tennessee is the buckle of the Bible belt, situated below the state of Kentucky and just north of Alabama. The temptation of fried pies, which I was told grandma made (not my Jewish grandma, however), Elvis statues as tourist attractions, and as many churches as sex shops lined the horizon of my visit to this Southern state. The second night of my stay, I stopped by a show called *Unit 2 (Part 1)* at [Coop Gallery](#) in downtown Nashville. Organized by Watkins College of Art professors Robin Paris and Tom Williams, this exhibition is comprised of collaborations between students and 11 prisoners on death row in the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, in northwest Nashville.

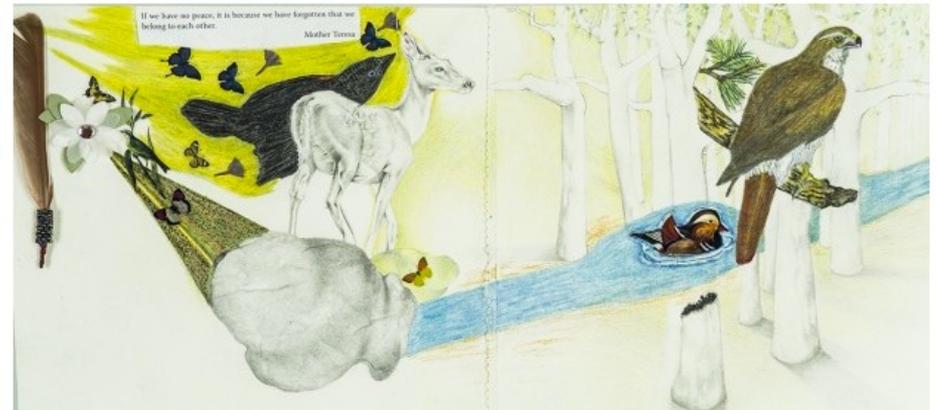
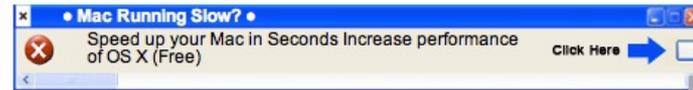
The project sought to form connections between people on the outside — outsiders, as the prisoners call them — and insiders, the men inside who are scheduled for execution. The work in this exhibition, which includes drawings, paintings, collages, and photographs, presents a heart-wrenchingly honest portrait of our prison system, the people who are in it, and the opportunity for human connection regardless of the grim reality. The idea for this show came from the prisoners.

Unit 2 (part 1) presents two types of artworks: the first is an "add on," which almost reminded me of the Surrealist exquisite corpse game in which the previous drawing is covered up and the next person draws on, thus adding to the work without knowing what was made before. The "add on" of this exhibition felt more like a continued visual exchange, or an ongoing conversation through drawing and text. These works felt more like ongoing thought processes than finished projects, which added a rawness to the show overall that, as a viewer, was hard to handle at times. The conversation about the prison system in America is an ongoing one, and these visual collaborations are just the tip of the iceberg.

Presos en el corredor de la muerte y... artistas

By [Mejorar el intercambio de información](#) in September 30th 2013 [No Comment »](#)

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Obra realizada a medias por el interno condenado a muerte Abu Ali Abdur'Rahman y la artista Kristi Hargrove (Abu Ali Abdur'Rahman and Kristi Hargrove)

El arte de los prisioneros que esperan la muerte

Flor Gragera de León Madrid | 30 SEP 2013 - 00:00 CET



Студенты вышки

Зачем учить живописи приговоренных к смерти

Культура / 25 сентября 2013, 09:01

С января 2012 года студенты и преподаватели двух расположенных в городе Нэшвилл, Теннесси, вузов — Университета Вандербилта и Художественного колледжа Уоткинса — проводят для заключенных второго блока местной тюрьмы особого режима «Ривербенд» уроки живописи, литературы и философии. «Второй блок» — отделение смертников; многие из содержащихся здесь преступников ожидают исполнения приговора десятилетиями. Все участники программы перед началом занятий получили анкету-опросник, состоявшую всего из двух пунктов: «Худшее, что с вами случилось в жизни» и «Худшее, что вы в жизни совершили».

«Проект появился по инициативе тюремного капеллана Дженни Александер, которая давно хотела, чтобы осужденные учились по университетским программам», — рассказывает преподаватель фотографии в Колледже Уоткинса Робин Пэрри. Довольно скоро вокруг капеллана и ее единомышленников сложилась группа гуманитариев-активистов, объединенных стремлением психологически поддержать приговоренных к высшей мере, а заодно привлечь внимание общества к проблеме смертной казни.

Осенью этого года в галерее «Соор» в Нэшвилле открылась выставка работ, созданных заключенными при помощи художников-профессионалов и студентов. «Русская планета» публикует избранные произведения с комментариями их авторов.

