

Prison Education in a Time of Mass Incarceration

A process for empathy & education through art inside and outside the prison.



Barbara Fontana Yontz
Apexart 2015

Riverbend Maximum Security Institution Nashville, Tennessee



Billed as one of the state's most high-tech facilities, RMSI, sits on 132 acres located off Cockrill Bend Boulevard.

The overall mission of the prison is to house and manage high-risk male offenders to ensure the safety of the public, departmental employees and offenders while providing **rehabilitative programs.**

Our project exists as one of the ‘rehabilitative’ programs.

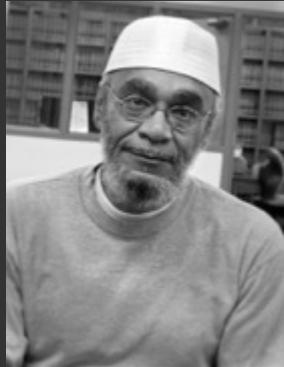


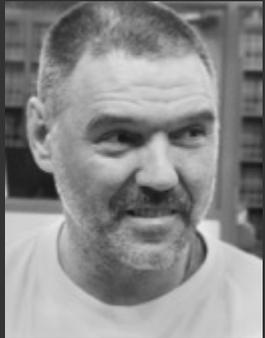
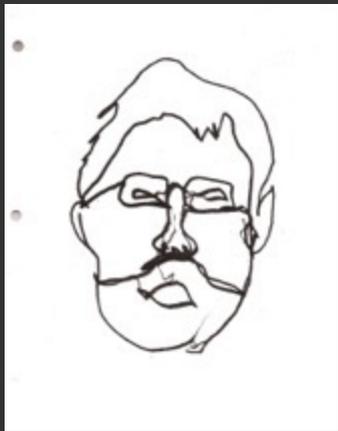
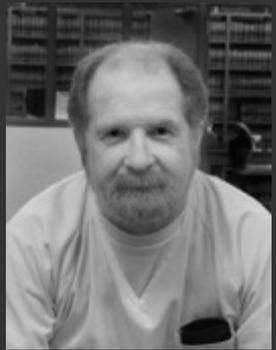
Photo is walking into the prison from intake.

Photo on right is the entrance to Unit2



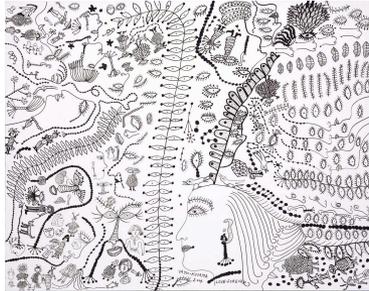
This project began with a simple idea; four artist educators together with a group of student artists would collaborate with a group of 11 prisoners to create artworks for the period of the summer.





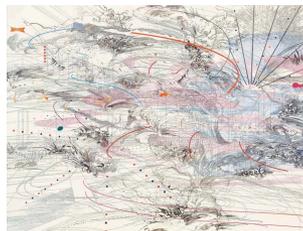
Art Skills instruction was college studio level.

Memory and Place-- Image and Space—Doodle



Lots of contemporary artists use recognizable images to get their ideas across. Many don't. The ones who use more abstract ways of expression sometimes are referred to as creating 'poetic' images. Ones that force the viewer to spend more time, think more, feel more and piece things together in ways that are more open ended. Here are some examples:

Yayoi Kusama



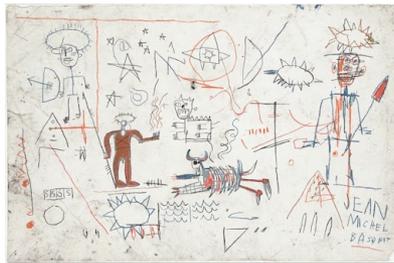
Julie Mehretu



Jackson Pollock



Matthew Richie



Jean-Michel Basquiat

Meanings of the Shadow

A **shadow** is an area where direct light from a light source cannot reach due to obstruction by an object. It occupies all of the space behind an opaque object with light in front of it.

Since the Renaissance (1400-1600ish) artists have used light and shadow to create the illusion of real form and also to create meaning.



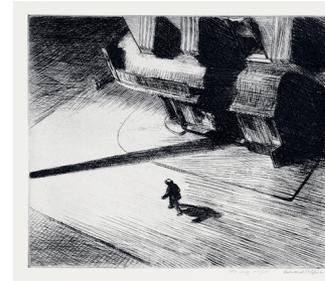
Rembrandt and other artists used shadow and light as metaphor with religious meaning.

Even in Plato's story, light is a metaphor for knowledge (the intellect) and the dark shadow is ignorance (or sense awareness).

Holy figures are always in the light.



In Psychology, both Freud and Jung spoke about the shadow side of our personalities.



So, how we think about the Shadow is complex.



A drawing by Edward Hopper and one by George Seurat.

Lessons were designed to provide the men with enough instruction in art skills, history and theory, to yield work that was personal and poetic.

Art history & theory instruction was college studio level.

Memory and Place-- Image and Space-- Yayoi Kusama

Japanese Artist who uses repetition to fill space with simple shapes and images.



Memory and Place-- Image and Space-- Jean-Michel Basquiat
(December 22, 1960 – August 12, 1988) was an American artist. He began as an obscure graffiti artist in New York City in the late 1970s and evolved into an acclaimed Neo-expressionist and Primitivist painter by the 1980s. Throughout his career Basquiat focused on "suggestive dichotomies," such as wealth versus poverty, integration versus segregation, and inner versus outer experience. Basquiat's art utilized a synergy of appropriation, poetry, drawing and painting, which married text and image, abstraction and figuration, and historical information mixed with contemporary critique.[3]

Utilizing social commentary as a "springboard to deeper truths about the individual", Basquiat's paintings also attacked power structures and systems of racism, while his poetics were acutely political and direct in their criticism of colonialism and support for class struggle.



Most all art lessons can be viewed at
www.riverbend.byontz.com

Based on the idea of reciprocal education, two collaborative projects emerged from the first discussions between insiders and outsiders:

1. Surrogate Projects &
2. Collaborative Drawing Projects

Surrogates consisted of a list of activities the men in Unit 2 identified as things they would like to do if they were able to be outside. The list was then distributed among those in our outside group and we enacted them. Most activities are documented in photographs.

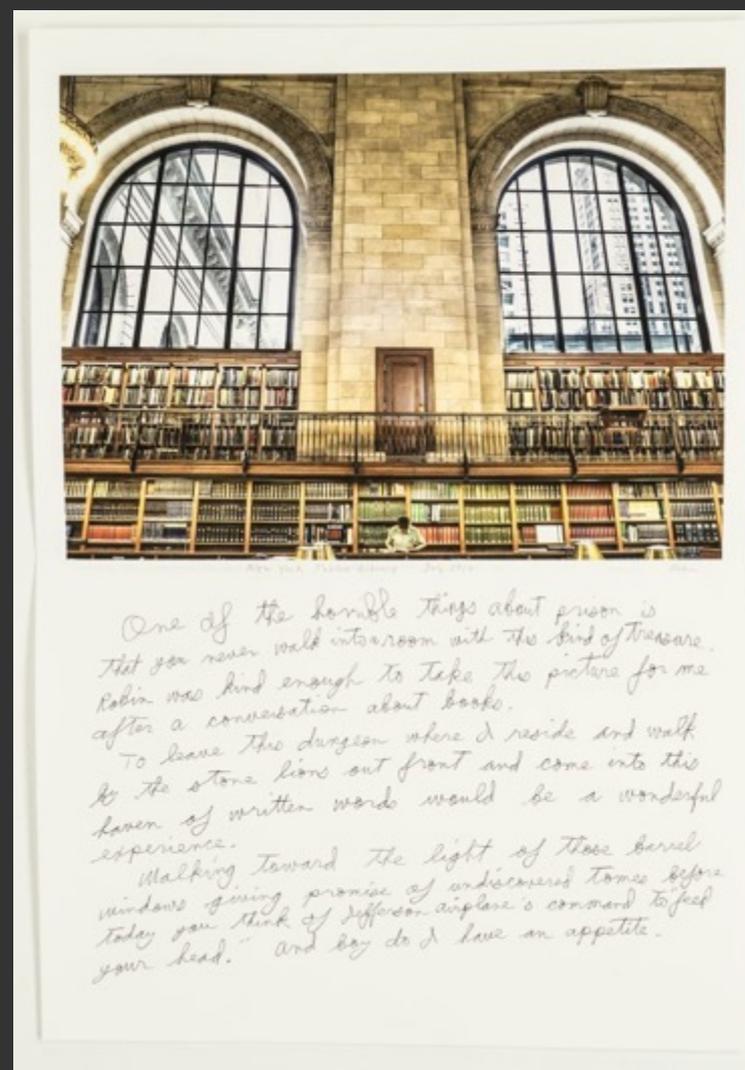
Request:
Research the cost of incarceration compared to education.

Holly Carden and Josh Ungurait
Surrogate project for David Duncan: Death Row Fact Sheet





*Look at the night sky.
I haven't seen the night sky in 25 years.*
Robin Paris for Harold Wayne Nichols



Go to a library and enjoy the books.
Robin Paris for Gary Cone (Unit 2 librarian)



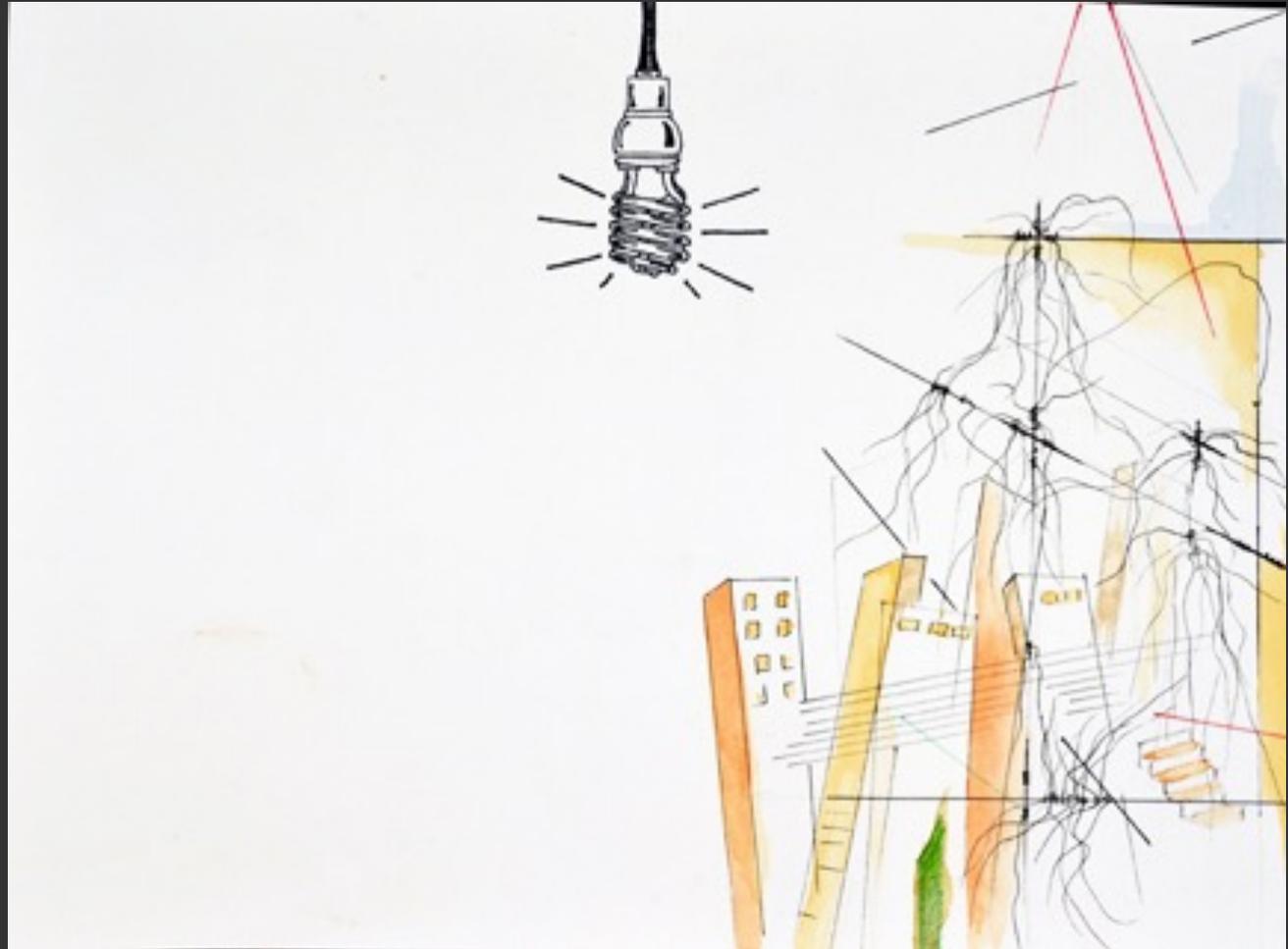
Eat a breakfast of eggs, bacon, home fries, pancakes, tomatoes, orange juice, coffee, biscuits and gravy
Various artists for Harold Wayne Nichols

The other project we did together was:
2. Collaborative Drawing



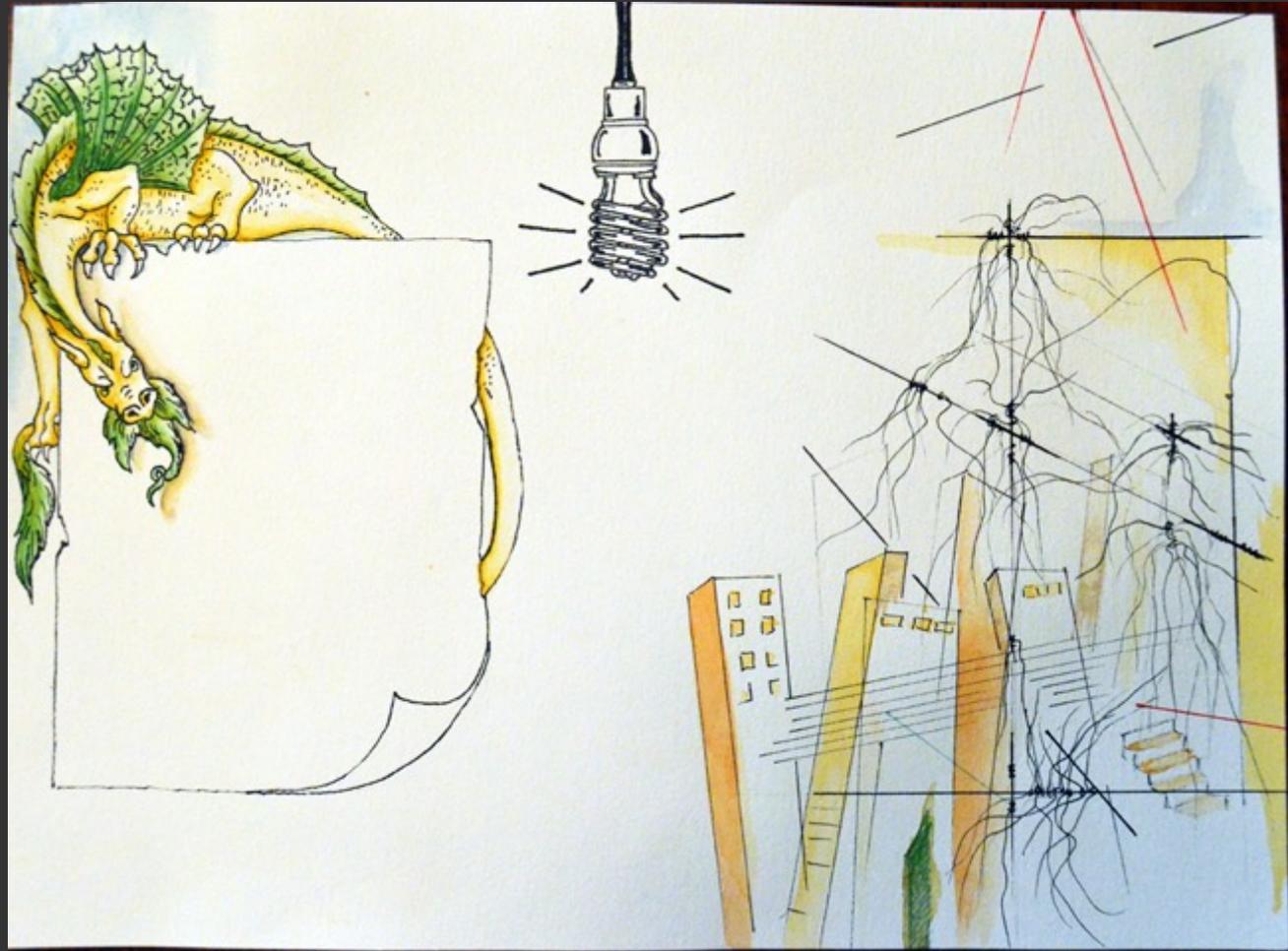
Harold Wayne Nichols presented me with this drawing.

The other project we did together was: 2. Collaborative Drawing



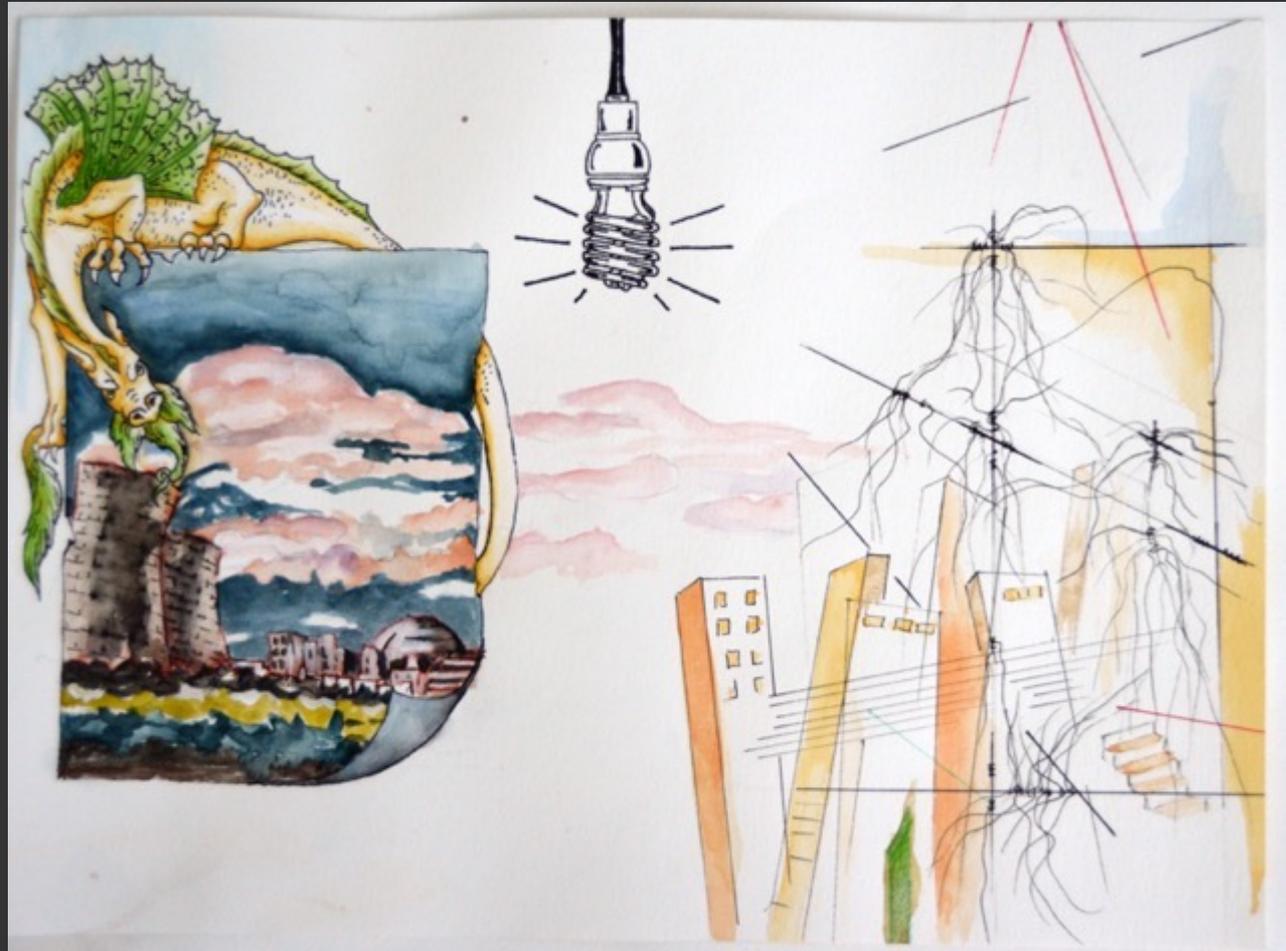
I added the buildings and lines radiating off his light bulb.

The other project we did together was: 2. Collaborative Drawing



Wayne added the dragon and page.

The other project we did together was: 2. Collaborative Drawing



I responded.



The finished drawing. Wayne wrote:

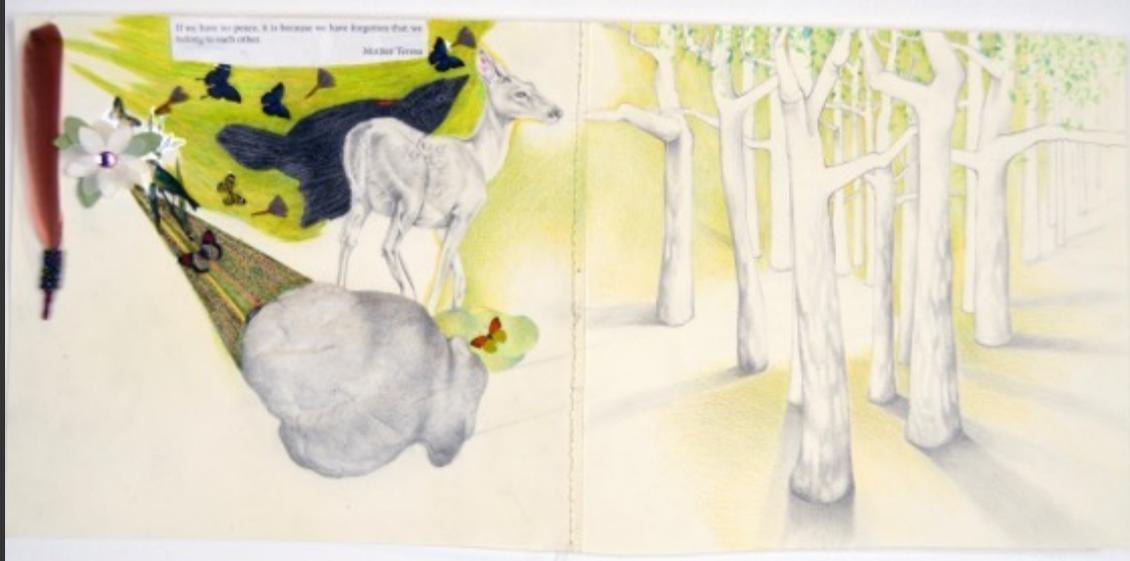
Even though Barbara and I never discussed what the other would or had done. I do not believe the piece could have turned out better if we had collaborated directly.

Barbara said to me after we had finished, "You never know where art will take you." I have to agree.



Kristi Hargrove and Abu Ali Abdur' Rahman (week 1, 2, 3 & 4).





Kristi Hargrove and Abu Ali (weeks 5 & 6).



Each week we brought the drawings in and out as each participant added something more.



Holly Garden week 1.



Harold Wayne Nichols tentatively responded.



Holly(week 3) added the turtle & Flowers 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.

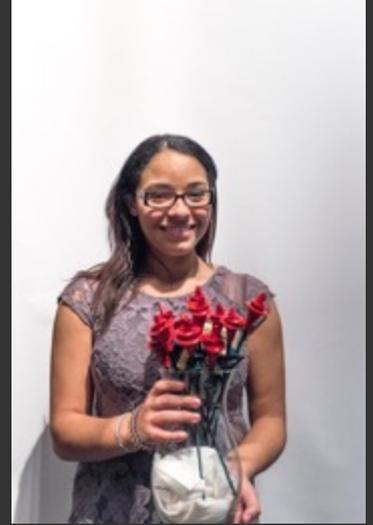


Upreyl Mitchell and Kennath Artez Henderson, *Untitled*, gelatin silver print with acrylic paint, 8 x 10 in.



The Exhibitions:
this one at
Coop Gallery,
The Arcade,
Downtown
Nashville.





The Gift Show: the men conceived this show after reading Lewis Hyde's, *The Gift*. They made objects to be given away.

Participants had their photos made with the gifts chosen.

Nostos Gallery: *The Gift: Unit 2 (part 3)* Nashville, Tn





You wouldn't know any future from these photos, that has come to be. I wonder if all photos of prisoners are of such fortune-telling.



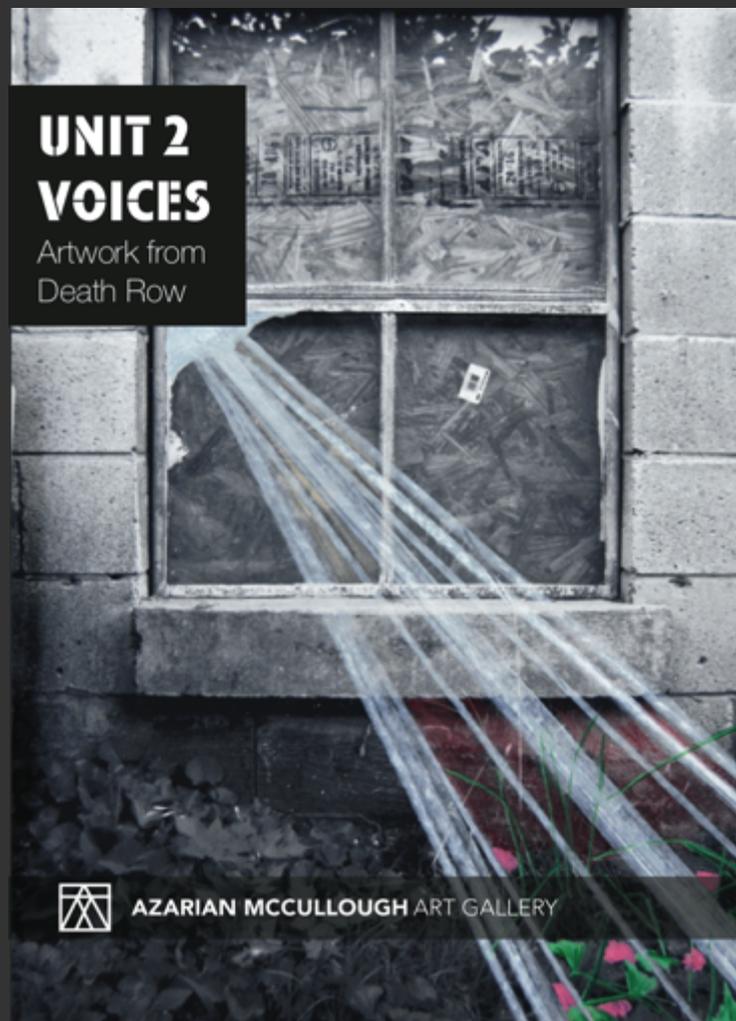
My Life is Outside: Everyday Photographs from Prison

Curated by Sharon Stewart, the show features a collection of photographs belonging to Tennessee prisoners.

WAG (Watkins Art Gallery):
Nashville, Tn



** I was eight-years-old on the enclosed family photo. 😊*



Unit 2 Voices: artwork from death row

A retrospective of three years of sustained work with the men in Unit 2. This show consists of examples from surrogates, collaborative drawings, gift project and individual works by the men.

Azarian McCullough Art Gallery, St. Thomas Aquinas College, Sparkill, NY

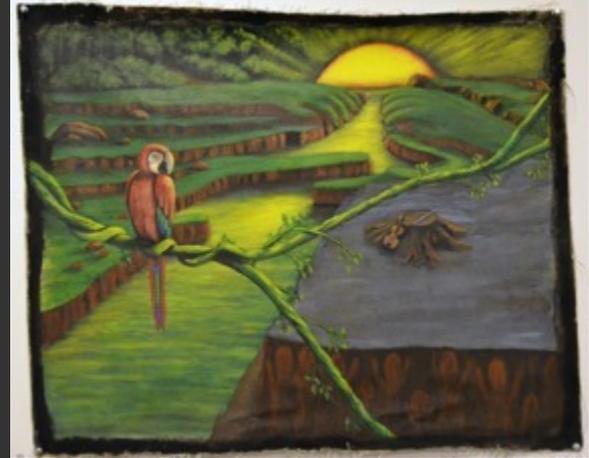
UNIT 2 VOICES

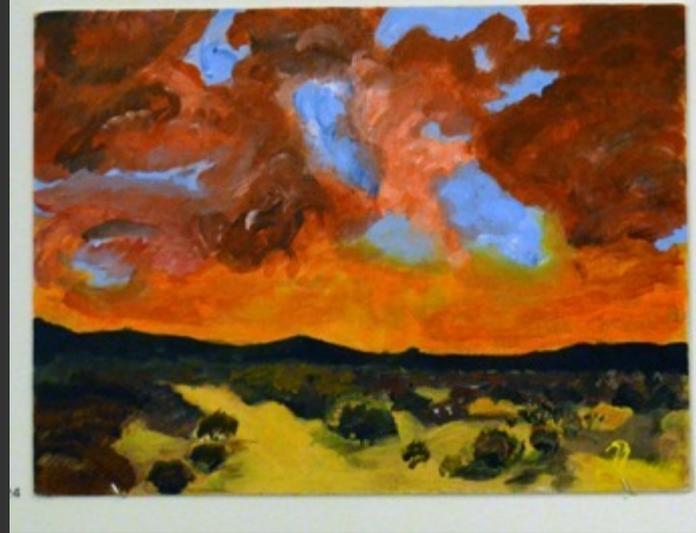
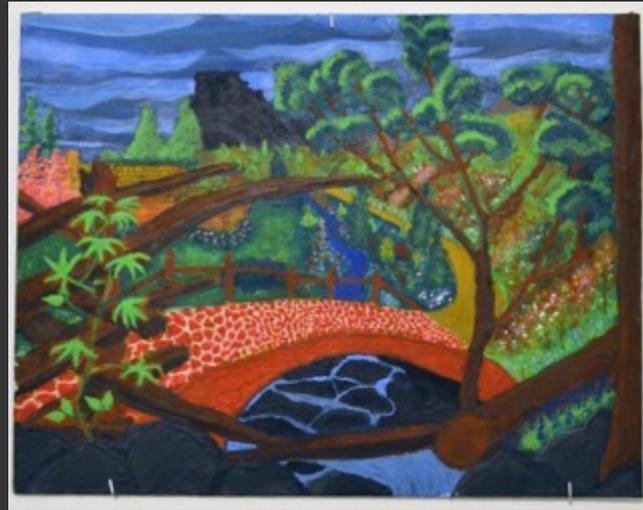
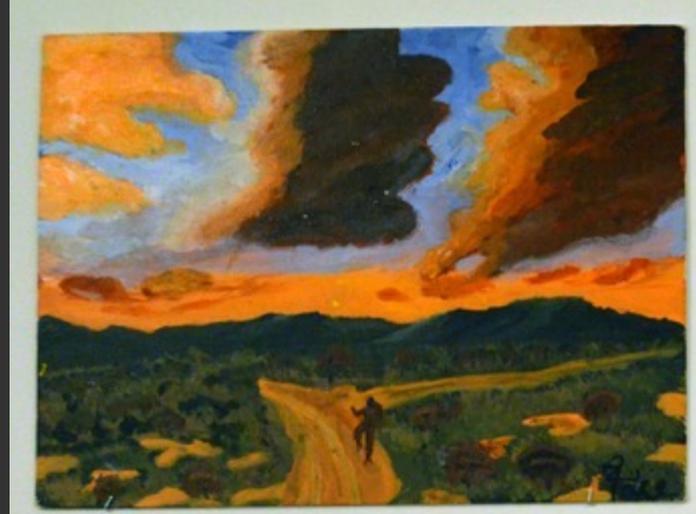
Artwork from Death Row

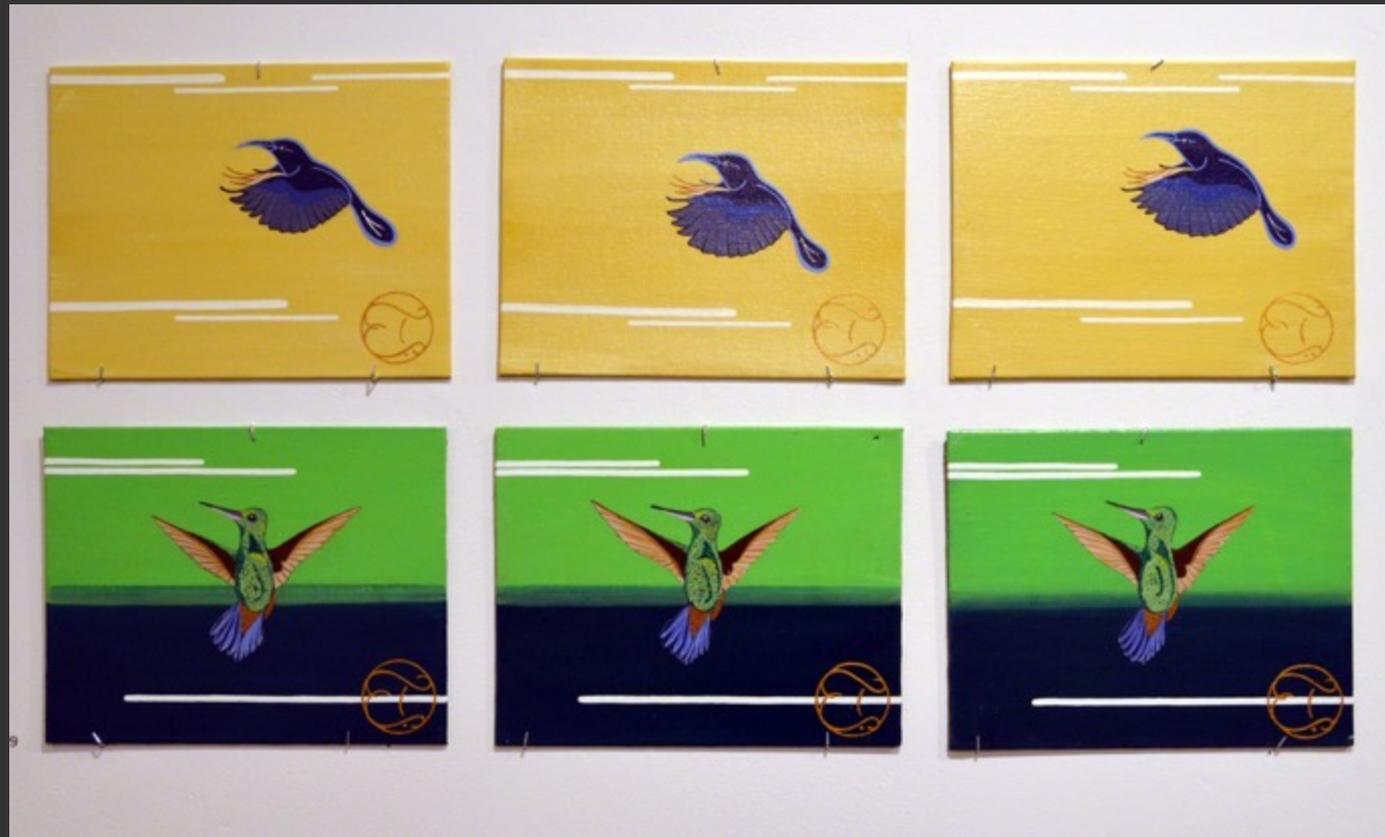


This show consisted of examples from surrogates, collaborative drawings, gift project and individual works by the men.













Art and Activism Open Discussion, AMAG at STAC.

