

Education for Socially Engaged Art

Chapter 3

Is William Martinez Not Our Brother?

Introduction

Helguera Chapter 3-- you all read the chapter. I'm making notes of things I think are important. See Helguera for understanding.

Situations— how to identify a variety of particular social scenarios and navigate the realm of shifting expectations and perceptions in a given community.

What kind of situations is SEA concerned with?

Situations that result in a social exchange— interpersonal situations.

Social Exchange Theory— individual relations based on a sort of social economy.

While we are vastly complex, many of our social situations conform to identifiable patterns.

These patterns are helpful in understanding forces that shape conflicts and potentialities in every social encounter:

1. Corresponding versus conflicting interests
 - a. Common goals
2. Exchange problems
 - a. either party initiates the project by offering something desirable for both.
3. Information conditions
 - a. conflict will often result if parties have different ideas
 - b. different motivations
 - c. information not shared
 - d. actions not welcomed

A common problem is most communities don't understand conceptual art, what conceptual artists do or the demands on our profession.

Social Work vs. Social Practice

While Social Work and SEA can look similar, they differ widely in their goals.

Social work is a value-based profession based on a tradition of beliefs and systems that aim for the betterment of humanity and support ideals such as social justice, human dignity and the strengthening of human relationships.

Artists— in contrast may have the same values but make work that ironizes, problematizes and even enhances tension in order to provoke reflection.

Art-making may demand self-reflexivity and criticality.

Helguera believes a stronger argument may be that SEA has a double function that social work lacks.

When we make socially engaged artwork, we are not just offering a service to a community; we are proposing our action as a symbolic statement in the context of our cultural history (and art history) and entering into a larger artistic debate.

SEA artists – have an explicit purpose to serve a community.

And at the same time, find a symbolic action to reflect the issue.

And enter into a larger artistic debate.

A community + the art world.

Must establish a history of the community with art or social issues.

Practices based on the postmodern perspective that is the perception of the facts, not the facts themselves that matter.

Awareness by artist or social workers of the public's perception of them and the situation should inform their approach.

Trust

Management of situation

Dialogue

Let's take a look at some of the Art Programs working in Prisons today.

The Prison Creative Arts Project is one of the most long-running and comprehensive art program operating in prisons in the US. You have or will read several articles about this project so you should have a good understanding at this point.

The program works with various populations related to prisons (both inside and outside) in writing, dance, theater, visual art, poetry and music.

Every year they host one of the largest prisoner art exhibitions in the world.

Since 1990, incarcerated youth and adults, urban and rural youth, University of Michigan students, faculty, and community members worked with 24 prisons, six juvenile facilities and seven high schools.

The Prison Creative Arts Project

They created 506 plays, art in over 100 workshops, 179 creative writing workshops and 87 in-house anthologies. Dance workshops.

And arts in high schools.

They curated 15 annual exhibitions by Michigan prisoners.

And curated 11 exhibitions by incarcerated youth.

In 2009 published “On Words: Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing”—featuring 294 writers from 44 prisoners.

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/pcap/>

Prison Creative Arts Project:

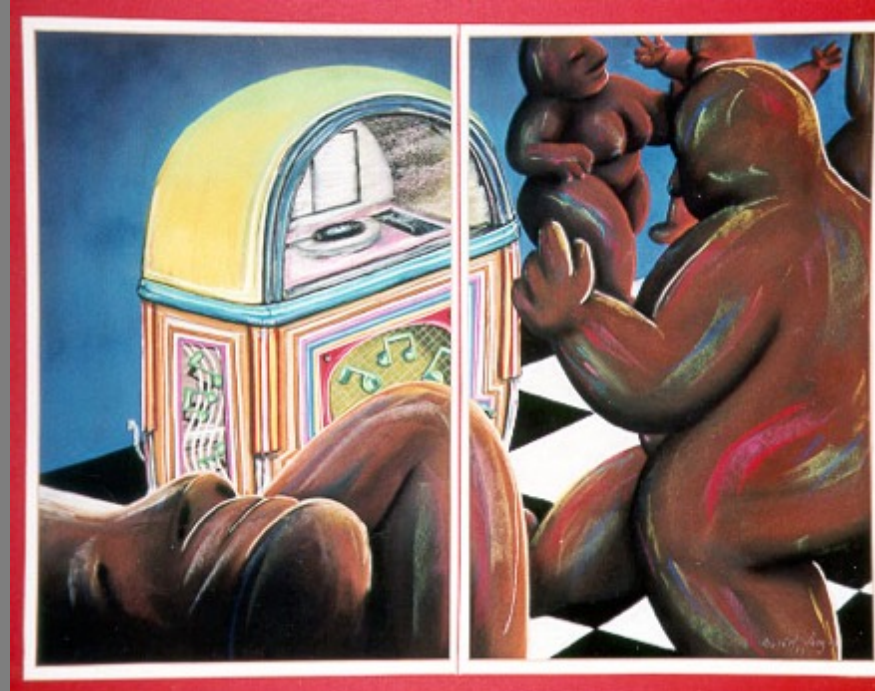
This is one you all have/or will research. Here are some voices of the artists.

Statement from the Artist: Billy Brown

I started in the art class over four and half years ago, hear at ICF. I got to meet art teacher Herschell Turner. Working with him was three prisoners. Mr. Turner talked with me and asked me what would I like to learn. At that time, I said I wanted to work with pastels, so I got started in pastels and loved working with them, and I did some good work. But one day Mr. Turner was telling the class we had to come up with our own thing. I prayed about it and one day I got some colored pencils and black paper, and I came up with Billy Art. And to know that my art is like by others really makes me want to work to make it better



Martin Vargas At age 18, I came to prison to serve a "parolable" life sentence. Scared, angry and defiant, I was easily swallowed up by the negativity saturating prisons. Now I am 46. Although the parole board voted unanimously to proceed to public hearing on my case in both 1992 and 1993, no action has been taken. So like many other middle-aged "lifers" who become eligible for parole after serving 10 calendar years, I am now a prisoner of the current board's policy that "life means life." It is frustrating to know that nothing I have done to become a mature, responsible adult, and nothing I accomplish from now on, will affect this parole board's willingness to release me. In spite of this, I know there are millions of people in worse prisons than I'm in and I try to be a productive, contributing member of society even though I must do it from here. My artwork is a great help in making this connection. Art is a tremendous gift! It brings peace and freedom where none is meant to be and has substantially raised my level of dignity and self worth. It's a big reason why my past is no longer a part of my present and I no longer have a need to prove myself



Another Art program in Prison-- Unit 2 Art Program at Riverbend Prison

An ongoing art project with men living in Unit 2
(Death Row) at Riverbend Maximum Security
Institution, Nashville

The men in our group have earned the right to attend classes. Riverbend has an honor system where men can earn privileges, like taking classes, for good behavior. The men had also already self-organized into a group known as the REACH COALITION. Their intent in Reach is to engage in Reciprocal Education. Sharing things they all know and learning from others.

Visit the site--

<http://reachcoalition.wordpress.com/about/>

An interest in Social Justice in general and the prison industrial complex in particular led to this project with Death Row Prisoners at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tennessee.

It highlights how creativity, when supported through education, can incite compassion & social change.

The project began as two projects between artists and prisoners on Death Row. Since Summer 2013, our collaboration has continued with the men creating collaborative works and individual ones.

We have had 8-9 exhibitions with 1 more planned in February. These exhibits bring visibility to issues related to prisons and Death Row, while humanizing the men to those who attend the shows.

This project began with a simple idea; four artist educators together with a group of student artists would collaborate with a group of 11 prisoner artists to create artworks for the period of the summer. But it didn't stop there...



“...billed as one of the state's most high-tech facilities.”

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.

The project was designed as SEA to educate the students from Watkins College of Art about the prison industrial complex in general and death row in particular, as the men we worked with were all living on Death Row.

On the other side, we hoped to provide the men with enough instruction in art skills, history and theory, to yield work that was personal and poetic.

Two collaborative projects emerged from discussions:

1. Surrogate Project
2. Collaborative Drawing Project

We regularly held Art classes in drawing, painting and creative process. Other visiting artists Did printmaking, cartooning and writing exercises.



Both projects grew from numerous discussions within our group of educators and the men living in Unit 2, at Riverbend.

The decision was to engage in these two projects:

1. **Surrogate Project** – this project, based on a model used by artist Emily Jacir, involved the men arriving at a list of activities they wanted to do but couldn't because they were confined. They then gave us the list which we divided among the group to do and document.
2. **Collaborative Drawing Project**– This project was based on a game the Surrealists played called 'Exquisite Corpse.' In this game one person would begin a drawing, then cover their part and pass it to another. In our iteration, someone on the inside or on the outside would begin a drawing (or photo) then someone on the inside would add something. We passed the pieces back for weeks.
3. This project continued with students from STAC.

1. Surrogate

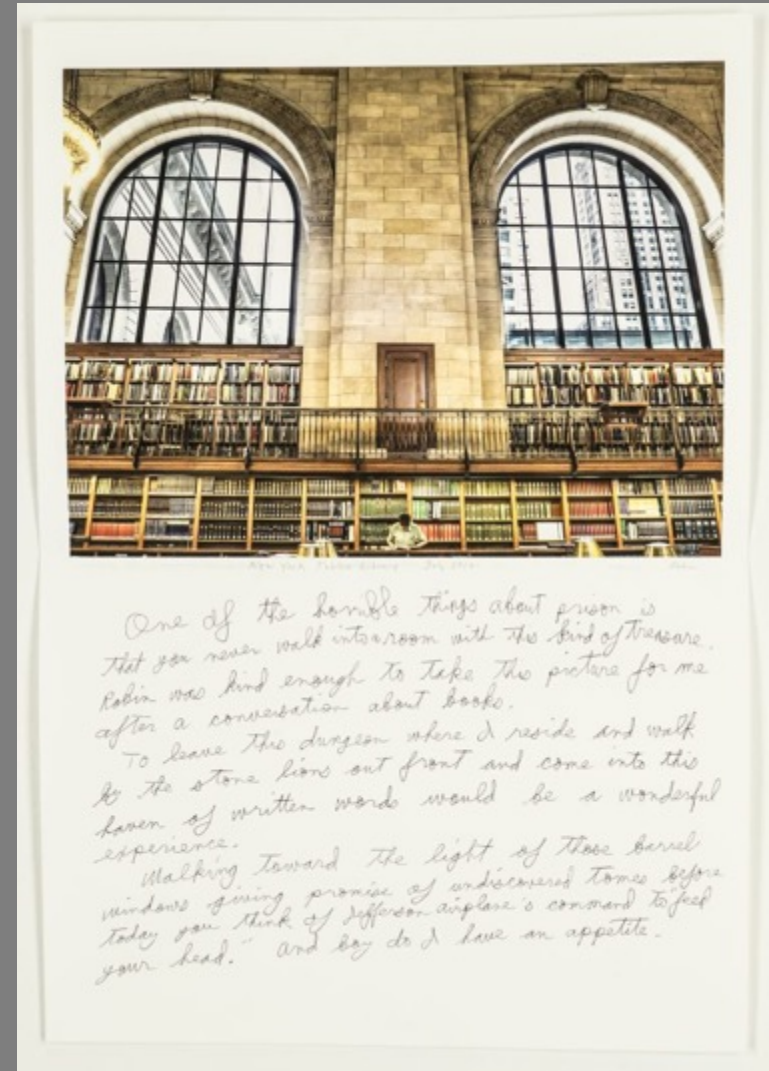


One of the men, David, asked someone to research the cost of incarceration compared to education. He is very concerned with the cradle to prison issue in low income neighborhoods.

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



Wayne asked someone to look at the night sky. Robin took this picture and Wayne wrote on it. "I haven't seen the night sky in 25 years."



Gary asked us to go to a library and enjoy the books.

This is a picture of the NY Public Library, which Gary wrote on.



Wayne asked someone to eat a breakfast of eggs, bacon, home fries, pancakes, tomatoes, orange juice, coffee, biscuits and gravy. Many of us got together and cooked the meal. We took pictures for him.

Other surrogates we did were:

--Buy some hamburgers and give them to homeless people. Akil

--Drive to a particular bridge over the Mississippi river that is in a book one of the prisoners had read. Donald

--To go to Cheekwood Botanical gardens In Nashville and visit a particular sculpture. Gary

In each surrogate we documented the event either in photos or writing. The men were often close to tears when they realized we were willing to do these events.

The other original project was:
2. Collaborative Drawing



Holly Carden began with this drawing week 1.

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



Wayne 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.

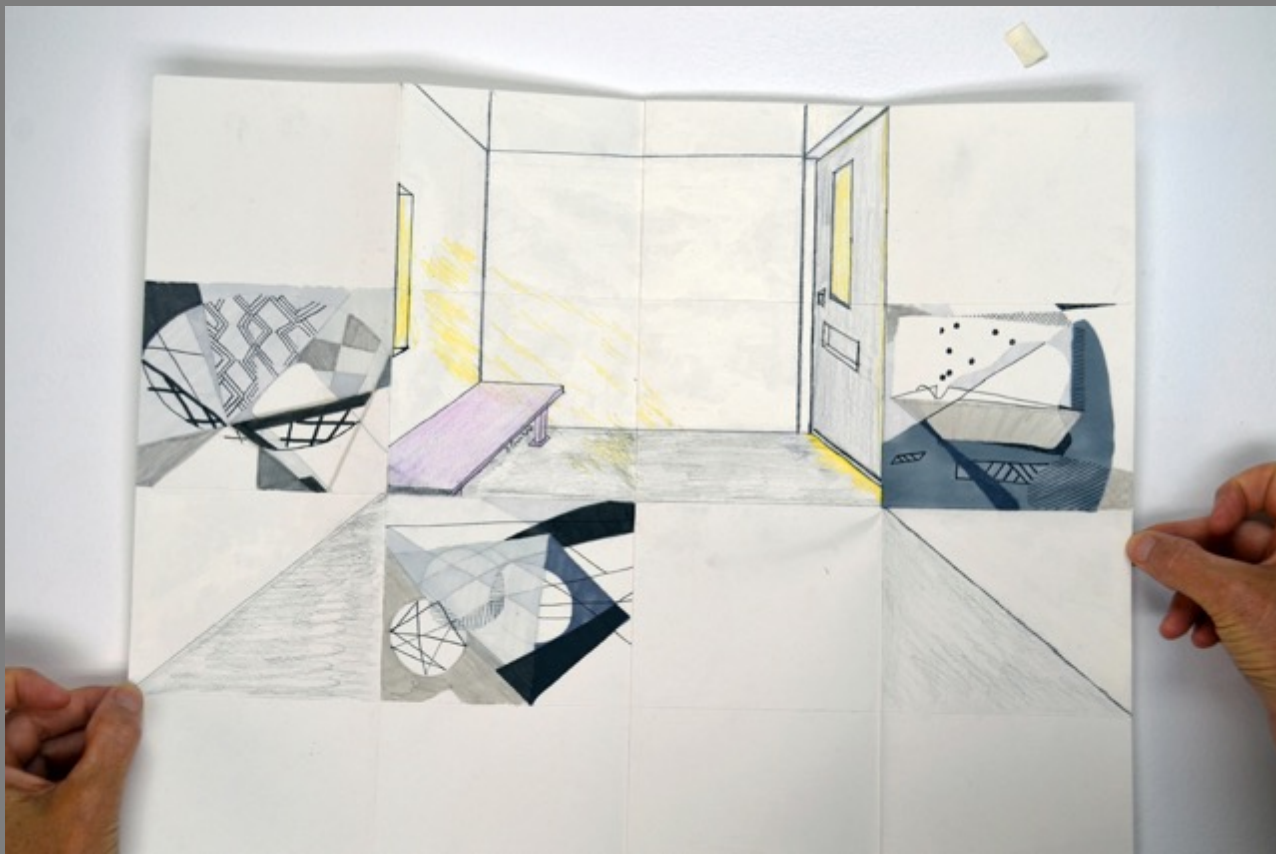
This drawing went back and forth several weeks. In the end it looked like this.



Ann Catherine began with a gridded drawing.

She had abstract black and white forms spread around the page

Derek drew his cell in the squares between.



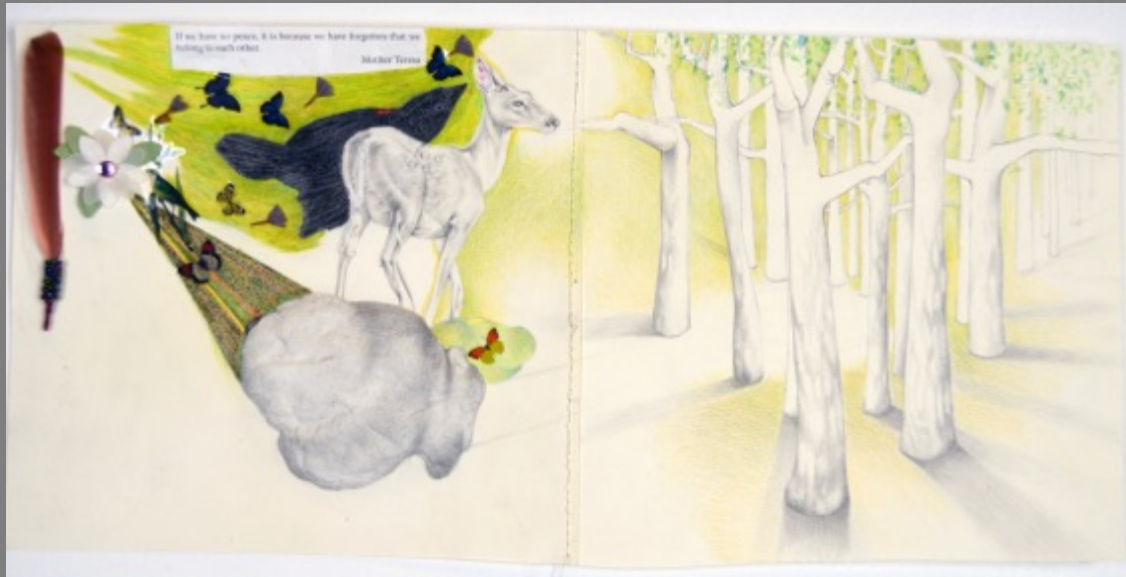


Between them, they created an abstract image that speaks of his experience. Confined, fragmented, alone. The red door at the bottom is the door to the execution chamber. He can see it out his window.



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





Once they had used all the space, Kristi added another side. They continued to this finished piece. Kristi Hargrove and Abu Ali (week 5 & 6).



Collaborative Drawing: STAC Art + Prison Project

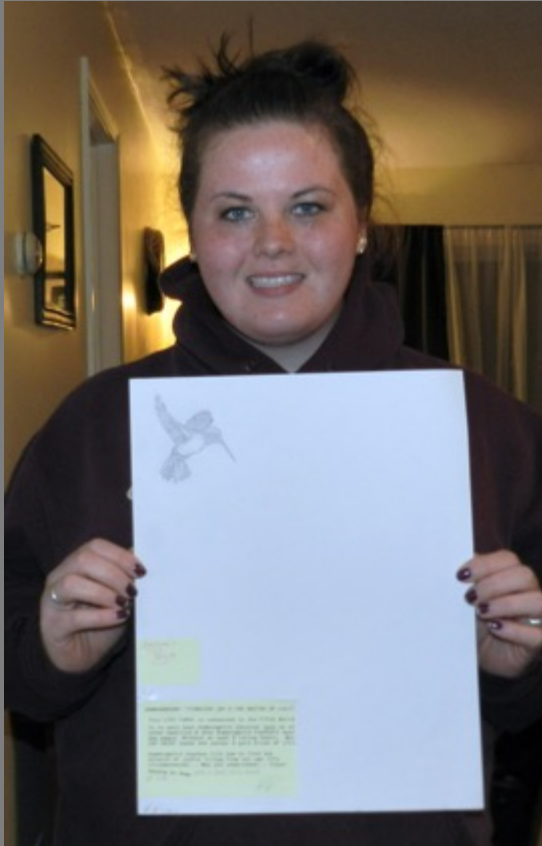
Two ways this project expands to Social Justice Education at STAC

1. Introduction in classroom discussion
2. STAC Collaborative Drawing Project

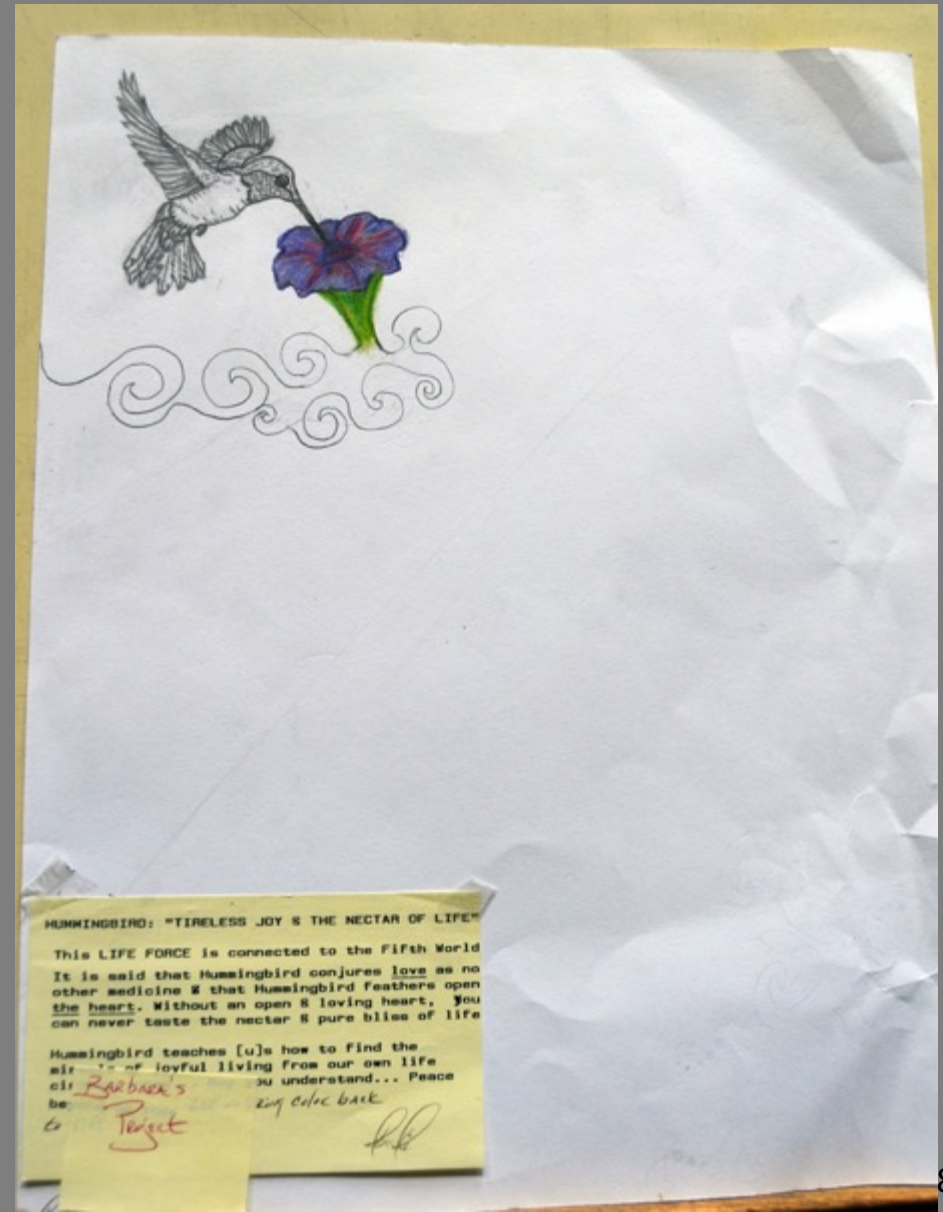


Students chose drawings to collaborate with.

Collaborative Drawing: STAC Art + Prison Project



Kristen and Abu Ali.



Collaborative Drawing: STAC Art + Prison Project

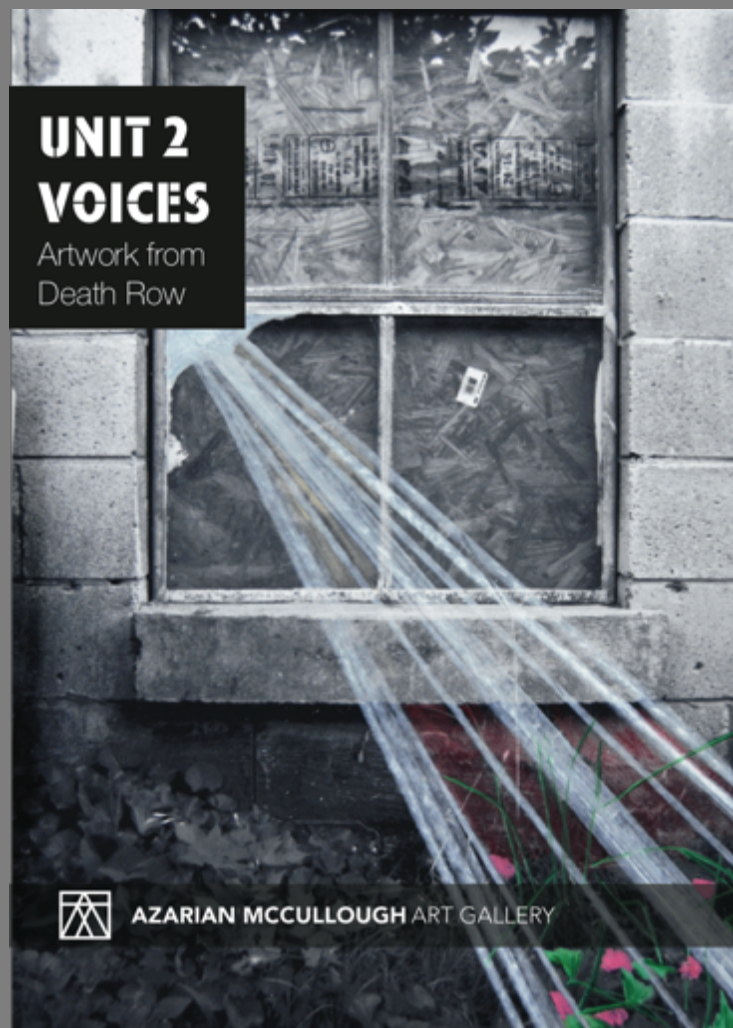




We also curated several art exhibits. The first exhibit was at Coop Gallery, in The Arcade, Downtown Nashville.

Members of our team wore T shirts that said, “ask me about Unit 2.” The Death Row Unit.





We had numerous exhibits in Tennessee and New York

Unit 2 Voices: artwork from death row

In 2016 I curated 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



The project address a kind of unreality that exists in culture when many voices are excluded from participation and creation. Here, in the gallery, they spoke through their artwork.



Another clear initiative is to raise awareness of issues surrounding incarceration and the death penalty by bringing the voices of prisoners into the community.



Art and Advocacy Open Discussion, AMAG at STAC.



Life After Death and Elsewhere--Apexart

In 2017, the men in Unit 2 had an exhibit at Apexart Gallery in Chelsea, NYC. They wrote a proposal for an exhibition of their work related to living on Death Row.

We also had several public lectures about Sentencing, the Criminal Justice System and Education in Prison.

The projects and exhibits provide a forum for prisoner's voices to be heard, while our sustained connections serve as a reminder of shared humanity.

Life After Death and Elsewhere-- Apexart

These men are all convicted of serious crimes. Since most have lived on death row for the greatest part of their adult lives, they have changed and have much to share.

The Apexart project can be viewed at:

<https://apexart.org/exhibitions/paris-williams.php>

Images from the exhibition at STAC can be viewed here:

<https://www.facebook.com/AMAGSTAC/photos/pcb.1055132141171757/1055132034505101/?type=3&theater>

