A Matter of Liberation: Artwork from Prison Renaissance

Frances DeVuono

‘A Matter of Liberation: Artwork from Prison Renaissance’, Thacher Gallery, University of San Francisco, 17 August – 6 November 2020, and ongoing online

Over the past year or so, there have been a small but noticeable number of exhibitions in the United States that have showcased original artwork by current and formerly incarcerated women and men. This is not wholly unexpected. While the recent Black Lives Matter protests addressed systematic police violence against people of colour, that same bias is ingrained in the country’s chain of legal and penal systems, leading to a burgeoning prison abolition movement.\(^1\) For those unfamiliar with the embedded racism in those systems, not only does the US have the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world, African American and Latinx men and women are much more likely to be arrested and sentenced than the white population and they are disproportionately represented in the prison population.\(^2\)

The most prominent of these exhibitions was ‘Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration’, which opened in September 2020 at New York’s MoMA PS1. Its curator, art historian Nicole R Fleetwood, uses the term ‘carceral aesthetics’ to describe both the material and the psychological constraints in making art while imprisoned. Around the same time, on the opposite side of the country, the Thacher Gallery at the University of San Francisco opened ‘A Matter of Liberation: Artwork from Prison Renaissance’ as an online exhibition on August 17, 2020.

The San Francisco exhibition is a much smaller endeavour, and its organisation sets it apart from the New York one because it is curated by a former inmate at California’s

---

\(^1\) Michelle Alexander’s book, *The New Jim Crow*, gives a detailed history of the growth in US policing and prisons after the end of the Reconstruction era following the American Civil War. It is essential reading for anyone concerned about both the nature of the US prison complex and its disproportionate representations of Black and Latinx populations. Covering the nineteenth century loitering laws, to the more recent 1994 ‘three strikes and you’re out’ law, which demanded twenty-five year to life sentences for anyone convicted of three felonies, Alexander uses the word ‘caste’ to describe the specific bias within the US against people of colour. The book explains the need for the burgeoning prison abolition movement, a movement that is recognised by such mainstream organisations as the ACLU’s Smart Justice campaign as well as by longstanding activists such as Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, among others. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* [2010], The New Press, New York, 2020.

\(^2\) African Americans make up a mere 13.4 percent of the country’s population, yet constitute 38.6 percent of the prison population. Latinos who comprise only 16.7 percent of the population are represented by 30.2 percent of the incarcerated population; see US Federal Bureau of Statistics, updated 2 January 2021
https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_race.jsp
infamous San Quentin prison, Antwan ‘Banks’ Williams. Titled ‘A Matter of Liberation: Artwork from Prison Renaissance’ the exhibition implicitly tackles issues of individual agency inherent to carceral aesthetics. In an interview, Williams explains that Prison Renaissance refers to a group of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists deliberately created to exist outside of any official Department of Corrections programming. Williams says it was designed to be ‘… its own entity … a grassroots organization of artists inside and outside’.3

While the autonomy of Prison Renaissance may make this exhibition’s work and approach different from any others, ‘A Matter of Liberation’ was also, of necessity, experienced differently. Due to the closures of public spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic, the exhibition was online only. This allowed for an intimate format and ample opportunity to place each piece and person within the context of their own words. The exhibition site has links to work, statements and video interviews with the six artists, five men and one woman, all of whom have been interned in California state prisons, and one who is still incarcerated in San Quentin as he waits for his case to go to appeal.

Fittingly, the gallery site opens with Statute of Liberty, a painting by Williams himself. Loosely rendered like a drawing but in acrylic paint, we see a woman with her right arm raised and her mouth opened wide in protest. She holds a placard that states ‘Liberty and Justice for All’, but the last word ‘all’ is crossed out in gold leaf with the word ‘who’ and a question mark put in its place. For this series, Williams states that his work was motivated by history, and he tackles one of its ugliest chapters in another painting, 14 Years. Using largely black and white acrylic with hints of orange, Williams depicts a figure drawn from photographs. This time it is mug shots of George Stinny, Jr, an African American child who was falsely accused of murder and executed in 1944 at the age of fourteen, only to have that conviction overturned post-humously many years later in 2014. The central image consists of the standard profile and front view, but the frontal visage reveals Stinny for what he actually was: a boy. His head is tilted slightly downward, looking as vulnerable as the child he was. Williams adds gold leaf to 14 Years as well, this time reserving it for Stinny’s prison number, 260.

3 Telephone interview with the author, 11 September 2020
Like Williams, Jason Perry also addresses racism in his paintings but without anchoring it to a single event. In *My Chained Response* he deliberately leaves its central figure faceless. In an accompanying aural statement Perry lists the names of the many African Americans murdered in recent times by the police and publicised in the media. He states that the man in *My Chained Response* is ‘the person that we didn’t know who was lynched … that we didn’t find’. As a visual antidote, he also includes a diptych of a male and female entitled *Perfection*, where two figures appear against a backdrop that looks like a night sky. This time they are flying free.

![Perfection](image1.png)

It is a jump to then look at Eddie Herena’s photographic portraits. Taken when Herena was inside prison, these images are close-up and saturated in colour. As an artist, Herena’s skilled range of focus demands we see exactly what he wants, yet he is disarmingly modest about his abilities. On the website, he explains that photography ‘just fell into [my] lap’ when he was asked to work for a prison newspaper. Herena says he wants the men in *Rahsaan, Dejon and Chiu* to be seen as people not numbers, and he accomplishes that aim not only with technical control, but by a tangible affection for his subjects. The prison setting recedes when looking at this suite of photographs; it is simply a frank and warm homage to male friendship.

![Dejon](image2.png)
Like Herena, Orlando Smith’s work focuses on the everyday. His *Next Grueling Report: The Lost City of White Male Privilege* may be the most accessible work for many on the site – because Smith is a graphic novelist, and one with a mission. A social critic in traditions ranging from Honoré Daumier to José Guadalupe Posada to Joe Sacco, Smith’s work is visually beautiful and complex. Impeccably drawn figures are rendered in pencil lines set in frames full of unlikely perspectives. He augments his work with areas of colour matched by his direct, yet coolly journalistic commentary, and the results are unsettling and powerful. For this exhibition, he addresses the current, and scandalous, crisis of the coronavirus within San Quentin, where, at the time of this writing, there was a Covid-19 infection rate of more than two-thirds of the inmate population.\(^4\) One frame is an aerial view of a man looking upward as his ‘cellie’ lies on a bunk; the caption reads ‘Six feet apart in 9⅔ x 4½ [foot] cell is mathematically impossible’. Smith, who is still inside San Quentin, is able to report on the effects of the pandemic there firsthand. It is a sobering reminder to the outside world that the injustices within US society are compounded more than a hundred-fold within its justice system.

Emile DeWeaver, writer and activist, is represented by a video documentation of his poem *White Lies Matter*. Performed at San Quentin before DeWeaver’s sentence was commuted, his recitation has the cadences of old-fashioned oratory. The poem links current police violence against Black bodies to history, tying those deaths to the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old falsely accused of offending a white woman (an accusation she retracted many years later in an interview). But DeWeaver also raises a peculiar contradiction of the US justice system when his poem asks, ‘have you yet imagined the settlement the families of these dead will get from Cleveland?’ That line refers to the fact that although police involved in extrajudicial murders usually face immunity and often remain in their jobs, increasingly the families of these victims have turned to the civil courts for redress. And with their irrefutable evidence, they are winning.\(^5\)

But in addition to explicating the patent abuse within the US’s police and prison systems, there is something else this exhibition does. It asks viewers to adjust the way we usually look at art. This becomes most apparent with Sara J Kruzan’s very personal paintings. *Crying Locker* is

\(^4\) Whistleblowers have pointed to massive mismanagement of the pandemic within the California prison system. Early in the spring of 2020, in order to relieve crowding in another prison, over two hundred prisoners who had not been tested were sent to San Quentin. The results are that as of July 2020 over two-thirds of the prison population is now infected with Covid-19; see Rong-Gong Lin II and Kim Christensen, ‘San Quentin’s Coronavirus Outbreak shows why “herd immunity” could mean disaster’, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 August 2020 [https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-08-11/san-quentin-coronavirus-herd-immunity-covid-19], last accessed 10 October 2020.

\(^5\) For example, the city of Cleveland, referred to in the poem, spent over $13 million ‘settling’ the deaths of Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Dan Flicker and others killed or grievously injured within a two year period. In the face of the real evidence, civil courts are deeming these deaths unlawful and this contradiction of justice between police review boards, their unions and actual legal findings are one of many reasons the ‘defund the police’ movement was such a rallying cry during the protests in the spring and summer of 2020; see Eric Heisig, ‘The high cost of police misconduct: Cleveland agreed to $13.2 million in settlements over two years’, *Cleveland.com*, 23 February 2017, updated 19 May 2019 [https://www.cleveland.com/court-justice/2017/02/the_high_cost_of_police_miscon.html], last accessed 27 November 2020.
an abstracted, mixed media painting where an impasto green material covers the lid of a deadpan, black, grey and white eye that looks directly at the viewer. Other pieces are even more pointed. One untitled work features a headless female torso rendered in red, crimson and black against white. The figure is surrounded by what appears to be torn remnants of Kruzan’s legal pleading. Nested within the chaos of marks and these torn papers is a heart made of glittery materials, with a tiny butterfly embedded within it. It is a powerful piece – angry, wary, and beautiful.

From the on-site biography, we learn that Kruzan was a straight-A student, that she began writing at the age of ten, that by age eleven she was groomed for sex trafficking, and in 1995 she was put on trial for killing the same trafficker that had groomed her. Because his record of abuse was not allowed as evidence in her trial, Kruzan was sentenced, at age seventeen, to life imprisonment at the Central California Women’s Facility. As a result of media attention and years of fighting the verdict, she was finally granted clemency in 2013 after spending more than eighteen years of her young life in prison. She is now an activist who speaks on sex trafficking, and as disturbing as her story is, the interview with her on the website asks more of us than sympathy. Like Herena, Kruzan explains, ‘the way that I came to my art was being incarcerated’. Later, she adds: ‘...for me, it's kind of like with each stroke somehow I'm empowering myself and taking back that moment and neutralizing it and then planting another seed’.

This idea of making art as way of finding agency is also echoed in Jason Perry’s interview, when he describes his painting process: ‘in a way I was taking back my power… they took something from me so now I’m going to take it back…’. Emile DeWeaver repeats the sentiment, when he says: ‘my art…was a function of survival… when you are powerless most of the time for most of your life, it becomes important to find healthy ways to exercise power’.

---

6 See Sara J Kruzan’s video interview ‘In Her Own Words’ https://www.usfca.edu/thacher-gallery/a-matter-of-liberation/sara-j-kruzan
7 See Jason Perry’s video interview transcript, ‘Perfection’ https://www.usfca.edu/sites/default/files/library/thacher_gallery/jason_perry_perfection_transcript_vf_gs0813.txt
8 See Emile DeWeaver’s video interview ‘In His Own Words’ https://www.usfca.edu/thacher-gallery/a-matter-of-liberation/emile-deweaver
There is much to unpack in this relatively small exhibition. The work is diverse in media, content and approach, but in listening to the artists’ video interviews, I could not help but mull over this view of art-making as being empowering for its maker. It is an idea that is too often ignored in the world of contemporary art. The notion that the process of making art is, in itself, individually empowering does not get the intellectual traction it should. It is true that with social practice or relational aesthetics, we have come a long way in questioning the primacy of the art market alone. Artists such as Rick Lowe and his Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas, begun in 1993, or the architects of Assemble, who won the artworld’s coveted Turner Prize in 2015 for refurbishing council flats in Liverpool, indicate that art-making as being integral to community building is ascendant. And this form of social practice is certainly a partial corrective to the artworld’s dependence on extreme capitalism because it addresses the way art needs to be part of all communities, even those with little everyday access to it. But what one is reminded of in viewing ‘A Matter of Liberation: Artwork From Prison Renaissance’ may be more subtle. Turning our attention to the individuals within this community – or any community – and the need to make art, may be just as important. Quite simply, what if we recognised art’s ability to empower its makers as a means to thereby empower and mend the communities in which they – and all of us – reside?

Frances DeVuono is an art writer, artist and former Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado Denver. She was a Contributing Editor for Artweek, and her reviews and articles have appeared in magazines such as Art in America, Arts, Art Papers, Sculpture Magazine and New Art Examiner, among others. She currently lives in Berkeley, California.