

To See Inside:
Art, Architecture, and
Incarceration

Gallery Packet

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To See Inside: Art, Architecture, and Incarceration

Sarah McKenzie

I have been making paintings for nearly three decades, and—from the beginning—my work has focused on architecture and the built landscape. I am interested in the way that architecture can serve as a lens for understanding our society and the cultural, economic, and political shifts that have shaped it over time. What we build tells us a lot about who we are—as a people, as Americans—and about what (and who) we value and prioritize, versus what (and who) we cast aside.

Nowhere is our architecture more revealing than in our institutional buildings—often massive structures, designed to communicate our collective ideals and mythologies. In 2014 I began painting art world institutions—the white-walled, minimalist spaces of major museums. Through that work, I began to wonder about other forms of institutional space. In particular, I was curious to know more about prison architecture, because those are spaces that are generally hidden away from mainstream society. We are not meant to see inside our correctional institutions, despite the fact that we incarcerate more people per capita than any other country in the world. Indeed, America’s prisons are inextricably, painfully bound up in our national identity, at odds with our claim to be the “Land of the Free.”

I began my research for this project in the spring of 2020, just as the Covid pandemic was forcing us all into lockdown.¹ Through this research, it quickly became clear to me that any work I might make about the carceral system would need to include the voices and experiences of the people most impacted by that architecture. As an outsider, I might gain permission to document prison spaces, but I could not speak directly to the way that these

¹ The final page of this gallery packet includes a list of suggested readings and podcasts that I consulted in the early months of this project.

structures impact the human psyche over time. For that perspective, my work would need to be in conversation with artists and others on the inside.

I was fortunate to be offered the opportunity to teach with the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) in early 2021, and my involvement with this organization has been humbling and life-changing. That first spring, while state facilities remained on lockdown, I was invited to design and co-teach a twelve-week, video-based drawing course that was broadcast throughout the Colorado Department of Corrections, engaging over 250 students across thirteen facilities. A whole team of people on the outside provided weekly written feedback to the students on their drawings, and I was assigned to correspond with eighteen men at the Fremont Correctional Facility near Cañon City. Several of the artists at Fremont (Anthony Cole, Luther Hampson, Joseph Taylor McGill, Billy Scott, Alejandro Ornelas, and Anonymous) agreed to share their evocative and highly-personal drawings of prison beds and doorways for this exhibition.

In April 2021, while teaching that video course, I learned that I had been selected for the Marion International Fellowship for the Visual and Performing Arts. This generous grant provided funds for my supplies and research materials, and it enabled me to travel to Philadelphia, San Francisco, and San Diego to photograph historic and active prisons outside Colorado. Several of those sites are pictured in this exhibition, along with facilities closer to home.

In the spring of 2022, with Covid lockdowns lifted, I was finally able to teach with DU PAI in person. For ten weeks, I drove every Thursday to Sterling Correctional Facility, the largest men's prison in Colorado, in the remote, northeast corner of the state. I was paired with a co-facilitator named Matthew LaBonte, an incarcerated man who is a gifted writer and teacher. Together, Matt and I led a visual arts and writing workshop called *Creating (in) Place*, which asked participants to reflect on the challenges and possibilities of pursuing a creative practice within the prison environment. Several artists in that class (Ryan Flint, JR Gilbertson, Victor

Gonzales, and Lynell Hill) contributed drawings to this exhibition, and the audio installation in this show, *Chorus of Chaos*, was created by Lynell Hill and Justin Moore as a final project for the course.

The two other painters featured in this show, Mario Rios and Hector Castillo, are incarcerated at Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility, east of Pueblo, Colorado. I have not had the chance to work with Mario or Hector directly, but I learned of their work through DU PAI, and—deeply impressed by what I had seen—extended an invitation to them to take part in this exhibition. I am honored that they both agreed, creating new paintings in response to the show’s architectural theme.

A first iteration of this exhibition traveled to the Marion Art Gallery at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Fredonia in the fall of 2022. I am so grateful to the Museum of Art Fort Collins for giving us the opportunity to bring this project home to Colorado and share this expanded version of *To See Inside*. Several artists have been added to the exhibition over the last year: Sean Marshall, whom I met through DU PAI soon after his release in 2023, and several women artists (Cayla Cushman, Shawna Hockaday, Monique Lynch, and Angelica Macias Williams) who took my drawing class at La Vista Correctional Facility in Pueblo last spring. I am indebted to all the artists for entrusting me with their incredible work and believing in the importance of this project.

This packet is intended as a written supplement to the visual artworks on display in this exhibition. In these pages, you will find an essay by Dr. Ashley Hamilton of the University of Denver, outlining the praxis of Artistic Justice; a number of poems and short writings by William Daniels, Raul Luevano, Justin Moore, Noir O’Dormin, and Mike Severson, all of whom contributed their insights and wisdom to the *Creating (in) Place* workshop at Sterling Correctional in 2022; and an essay by my former co-teacher, Matthew LaBonte, reflecting on Prison as Place and Prison as Space. Together, we invite you *To See Inside*.

Artistic Justice: Art as Culture Shifter

Dr. Ashley Hamilton

Prisons are places where histories of violence and trauma reign commonplace, and opportunities for connection and recognition of shared humanity within prison walls remain sparse. Despite this, many folks inside prison find ways of breaking down these barriers between themselves and other incarcerated individuals, and even with correctional staff. Art is one medium for such connection.

Artistic Justice (AJ) is a praxis that has evolved through the programming and study of the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) and its work across several artistic and academic mediums. The praxis was specifically claimed through a recognition of something transformative that occurred during the development of a DU PAI play, *IF LIGHT CLOSED ITS EYES*, between 2019 and 2022. A team of incarcerated men (George Chavez, Andrew Draper, Matthew LaBonte, Angel Lopez, Terry W. Mosley Jr. and Brett Phillips) worked with Dr. Ashley Hamilton to create an original play using an interview-based theater process. The team members' experiences of conducting over 100 interviews and collecting stories from in and around the criminal justice system inspired the group to push into the ideas and concepts they were learning from others and to share them more broadly.

In the summer of 2021, the interview team created their first Artistic Justice workshop (now called *Artistic Justice: The Foundation*) for incarcerated residents and correctional staff throughout the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC). That summer, the team traveled to 11 different CDOC facilities across the state and led the two-day, arts-based, educational workshop for over 300 incarcerated staff and residents. The experience and transformation that occurred during the workshop series crystallized the AJ praxis, and Artistic Justice became the philosophy upon which DU PAI's work rests.

In the last few years, the creators of Artistic Justice have lectured together on their work at New York University, University of Colorado, Denver University, and the Correctional Leaders Association. Artistic Justice is a new model for forging shared humanity in and around correctional settings (as well as other systems) through artistic practice. Artistic Justice strives to create individual and community connection and healing through personal narrative and storytelling. The practitioners involved in the project must hold a willingness to heal and transform individually and systemically, and they must believe that individual change and healing can lead to community and systemic healing. Additionally, this shared space and experience of the artistic process must be based in intentionally crafted spaces that support new possibilities and a willingness to travel through the liminal.

First Day

William Daniels

Come in, sit down, and watch this hour-long movie.

Don't ASK anything; especially about where you're moving.

Sign this, take this pen, and, no, you can't keep it.

In this prison you're subhuman, and that is no secret.

Grab your bags, grab your clothes, go lock down in your cell.

We strip you of "you," so welcome to your hell.

Now you can ask just one question, don't say anything else.

This is a prison, not a clinic; we do not offer help.

Oh, you're hungry? Too bad. Your sack lunch is coming soon.

Don't make any more stops, just head straight to your room.

Straight ahead, make a right, up the stairs, 302.

When your food does show up, we will bring it to you.

Sentences & Silences

Justin Moore

Numbed out tracking numbers . . . as they tumble through my head.

Rifling round, a reality rocked by commingling clocks, each with its own acerbic agenda.

Ticking this . . . tocking that . . . conversant in an inestimable language, URGENTLY chattering and chiding their tick-tock tongues, draining air from my lungs with unctuous insalubrity.

Time-in-time, slanderous and circular in its unending notion of censured seasons UNBROKEN, the seamless series of cackling clocks publishing and plowing through pages of so many colorless calendars.

The spiralic spell of solitude . . .

Clock faces erasing the dialogue of days, dismissive of memories or moments that **I'll never know**, as the arc of the minute hand marks like a mouth an insouciant sneer, sneaking and streaking across a vitriolic veneer, grinning and spinning revolutions through space, leering like a silent insult.

Counting confinements and illuminating limitations and eliminating destinations . . . time taking us nowhere.

Time's intermarriage of institution and identity . . . each **unlived** . . . **unloved**.

Counting down days . . . decades . . . every second of this sentence

suffocated

by its own insignificance.

Falling . . .

deeper into this SENTENCE . . .

deeper into the SILENCE . . .

Shower

Mike Severson

It is mostly too cold,
but occasionally too hot.

Thank goodness it's always lonely.

It's often too dirty for my personal liking,
but a cheap pair of shoes
and careful footing
keep me from touching.

The pressure is off
until I find my favorite.
Then I'm agreeable to its push.

The barrage of water
helps slough off the day.
I can't help but feel
what I can only compare
to a whole-body massage,
since I've never had one.

With the fresh smell
of perfumed glycerin
I do my best thinking,
but sometimes do no thinking at all.

When all is done,
and the timer has quit,
I reluctantly emerge
from my self-imposed seclusion.

Clean,
Clear,
and ready for bed.

Bunk Bed

Noir O'Dormin

A portal, a door
to infinity and more
a favorite place
in a life that's a mess

Upside down & inside out
what this life is now about

When I dream, I am really awake
and dream is the door to my escape
from a world turned black and white
that puts living on pause

Jack in the box
out on a mission
out to the freedom
inside this prison

Three nails keep me in the physical
a crown of thorns brings me the mystical

Only the spiritual is eternal and true in this life
to which my bunk bed in cell 309
leads me every night
as a friend and a guide
as a door, as a portal
an escape from the now
this threshold I cross
when sleep lays me down
where I find all my joys
and erase my frown.

Home Is Where the Heart Is

Raul Luevano

A place called home
Shared memories of the past
An essence that's meant to last
Yet every year goes by too fast

It's about time
To be cast away
To be cast into the gray
Into a place between white and black
Into the night
Where I can contemplate the things I lack

Just because I feel homeless
Doesn't mean that I am broken
For it is truth
That needs to be spoken
So on nights when I question
How I got so far from home
I remind myself
That it actually lives
In my mind, body, heart, and soul.

Note by the poet: Our assignment was to reflect on a place that holds significance for you. Initially I thought about my grandmother's home, which for me was significant due to all of the memories that were made there and because of the familiarity of it. That started a domino effect in my mind and made me ponder what "home" is for me. I realized that "home" is less of a tangible place, and more the knowing that- no matter the circumstances, good or bad- I am right where I need to be.

Disappeared in a Diaspora of Displaced Souls

Justin Moore

Place is a space that resides on the inside. **I reside on the inside.** And not **just** the inside of an institution. Both these living and layered locations, the internal as well as external, are replete with personal, reflective histories and memories and ever-moving moments of meaning for those of us that inhabit this “haunted palace of reform,” as it were.

Institution, Prison, House of a Hundred Windows, Home for the Criminally Gifted . . .

Punishment, deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, revenge---- whatever its imperative, its existence intends to effect power AGAINST. Not **to** and not **for**, but directly **against** those persons both living and working in here, and also, most interestingly, **against** the interests of the very ACCOUNTABILITY it purports to instill (at least as expressed through its definition as I understand it). The question that needs asking is: to what end(s) is all this power applied? And at what consequential cost TO ALL? Is **this** the method of JUSTICE we wish to employ as a central emphasis of our culture and its ever-evolving moral standards of decency? **Prison is the price I pay for my transgression, but . . . who’s cashing the check?**

Prison by design is the epitome of the most bang for the buck. Commodifying and capitalizing, warehousing and wholesaling human suffering. Built and designed with the explicit intent of VIEWING ALL WHILE TRULY SEEING NOT A ONE!

Hardly a place hospitable to service or self-evaluation or awakening to one’s greater purpose.

The idea of place in relation to a prison and the people and the teams of untenable traumas breeding in this place and expanding through this space strains the mind in the worst of ways, and stains the soul for the rest of its days.

A sentence of straight, flat, unforgiving, and unforgettable lines . . . Straight, flat lines do not letters make. No letters, no words . . . and without words, there isn’t much to be said. Could it be that that is the reason why the language of FORCE, communicated through the “might

makes right” mentality, rules the realm and the day alike? Leaving the cold, colorless concrete of the space to translate what the tongue cannot conjure.

THE VIOLENCE OF CAPTIVITY NEEDS NO INTERPRETER!

If we are honest with ourselves, and with that inherent humanity we all hold (which it is sometimes easier or more convenient to hide), we as a society build such callous institutions intentionally as places and spaces to inflict pain, belligerent and bellicose in their very nature, with a vitriolic view into the most vexing aspects of our shared human nature. A PLACE INTENDED TO ADMINISTER THE MOST UNHEALTHY DOSES OF SEPARATION, ISOLATION, AND INJURY IN THE SERVICE OF SOCIETY . . . A PLACE TO INSTILL A SURROGATE SET OF SYMPTOMS . . .

This vicious vortex, this envenomed environment where the intended purpose and the people impacted work against the interests of each other. Intentionally isolated people confined behind mile after mile of chain link that rests below row after row of razored wire ribbons rimming in the besieging boundary line, and—as is the recent trend of correctional facilities—electric fences designed to incapacitate, cook, and/or KILL. Barred windows offering little more than a sliver of sight to the greater world beyond, and layer after layer of locked and levered doors. Limited access to phones (families), mail (meaning), and human contact with loved ones through in-person visits. This place where, as Thoreau stated, **“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”**

WHAT KEEPS ALIVE THE HALF-IMAGINED MEMORY . . . ? What, indeed . . .

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Prison is PLACELESSNESS—rather than place. The geography of NOWHERE . . .

Prison as Place, Prison as Space

Matthew LaBonte

Prison is one of my favorite subjects. I never thought I'd say that, but it's true. Not the clichés about prison, however accurate they may be. I prefer to talk about *prison as possibility*. My true passion is change, and prison is a spectacular setting for this conversation. My view of our very complex criminal justice system doesn't cover every aspect of prison, but I hope that it can shed light into some of the corners where it's needed. Let's look at two ways to understand the carceral system: Prison as Place, and Prison as Space.

Prison as Place encompasses the physical realities of prison, its geography and structure. Prison as Place is concerned with impermeable barriers and clear lines of sight. It was only recently that I began to consider that there are people who design prisons—architects of security and human containment, armed with a palette of concrete, steel, and concertina wire.

I have a friend who, for the longest time, resisted the idea that architecture could be a form of art. (Incidentally, he also outright rejected Marcel Duchamp, the guy who placed a urinal on a pedestal and called it art.) For many years, my friend and I have debated what defines and qualifies as art. One of the ideas that we've been able to agree upon is: "Art is that which moves us." This definition finally led my friend to capitulate on the question of architecture as art. Consider the Sistine Chapel, the Taj Mahal, Grand Central Station, or Notre Dame; these buildings stir something inside of our souls and take on symbolic meaning. When we experience Prison as Place, the architecture shapes our impressions, and stirs up associations and emotions.

Anyone who has driven up to a prison knows what I'm talking about when I mention the sheer, oppressive feeling that one experiences upon seeing this physical structure. It conveys a sense of impending doom. Imagine living with that sense of doom for years or decades without

cease. The mind becomes as locked in place as the body is. We slowly erode and begin to conform to the environment. Some call this process institutionalization; some call it adapting. The environment works in many subtle ways to shape the individual.

Prison as Space (carceral space) stands in stark contrast to the utilitarian design of Prison as Place. Carceral space is a chaotic, swirling mass of clashing beliefs, ideologies, and expectations. A common subject of debate is the question, "What is prison for?" The two answers to this question that I encounter most often are: punishment and rehabilitation. Prison is a complex space indeed, where both of these objectives occasionally co-exist. These competing approaches reveal unspoken assumptions and communicate underlying messages:

Bad people are punished. Broken people are rehabilitated.

The message that I internalize as an incarcerated man is either, "I am a bad person," or "I am a broken person." I firmly believe that one of the essential outcomes of incarceration should be accountability. Whether working within a punishment model or a rehabilitation model, we need to seriously consider how a person can grow from a self-perception of being "bad" or "broken" to a state of genuine accountability. How might that objective shape both Prison as a Place and Prison as a Space?

I recently had a visit from two friends whom I consider family. (Love you, Wayne and Alice.) If you have loved ones inside, this may sound familiar to you. There are twenty to thirty tables in the visitation room, laid out in a grid pattern. The "offenders" sit on one side of each table, and visitors sit on the other. The tables are spaced within a few feet of each other, but communication between tables is forbidden. Cameras are mounted on the ceiling, and several correctional officers (COs) observe the room at all times. My friends came through on the weekend before Christmas, and the room was packed with people. I have been lucky enough to form some very deep bonds with other incarcerated people, and two of those guys had visits on this day as well. I want the people I care about to know one another. It is difficult to sit

in a room with people I love, yet be separate, distant, and unreachable. Even waving or saying a quick hello could result in a visit being cut short. On that weekend before the holiday, we could all feel the invisible barriers criss-crossing the room, all the forces working against true connection.

There are many complex relationships at work in the carceral space of the visitation room. One is the relationship between the watchers and the watched, which communicates, "You are untrustworthy." The watcher must cast suspicion on the watched, as dictated by their role in the room: "Thou shalt not trust." The watched, in turn, learn the depths of the word *untrustworthy*: "You are not worthy of trust." This message carries over into every aspect of our existence in prison. There is never a moment when we are not watched. Yet, in this visitation room, you can also see the incredible resilience of humanity on display: people who refuse to be denied relationship and connection; families determined to penetrate through these impossible barriers. Stuffed into one corner of the room are several vending machines. Only visitors can approach and make purchases from the machines, but I have heard stories of family members connecting with others there, exchanging reassurances of shared humanity. I applaud those loved ones who forge ahead, despite the environment that says, "You are not worthy of trust," despite their own wounds and doubts, to fill the space with a different energy. Prison would have us believe that it is impermeable, so I love it when the heart leaks through.

When I was first incarcerated, I was ushered into the "impermeable barrier" that was my idea of prison. From the beginning, it was an adversarial experience. The courtroom was divided into prosecution and defense, each with the goal of "winning" the case. Arriving in prison, I discovered the "blue/green line" pitting the COs and offenders against one another. As time passed, I also accepted the dominant societal division between citizens and the incarcerated. This finds expression in a view of the outside world as the "real world" with all of the "real people." By extension, prison space is seen as somehow unreal, and those locked inside aren't considered real people. (Pinocchio syndrome, I call it.) In all of this, I never want to lose sight of the fact that that I was the original adversary when I victimized another person. But in prison,

my life quickly became defined by all of these “us vs. them” dynamics, and I existed in a constant state of “otherness.” Some primal part of me recognized this and attempted to replicate the impermeable barrier, building a personal force field around myself for my protection, so that I couldn’t be touched.

I knew nothing of carceral space, its heart and its guts. Carceral space is an inherently fluid and permeable space. While I thought I was safe and untouchable, all kinds of new beliefs and expectations settled unseen into my soul. My bubble popped, and at first, I struggled to recognize the man within.

Over time, my understanding of carceral space has been blown wide open, and I now recognize it as the very nature of possibility. It is not fixed, despite what the architecture and operational structure would have us believe. We have the capacity to change the system. Our modern prison system was devised just over 200 years ago. Benjamin Rush, a Quaker, designed the first penitentiary, founded on the religious principle of penitence. Many of the mechanisms for penitence that Rush envisioned, like solitary confinement, have been almost universally acknowledged as inhumane and harmful today, but yet I recognize him and the other brave men and women like him as kindred spirits. They understood their position and responsibility as stakeholders in the evolution of carceral space and were trying to create a better system.

Concrete and steel seem solid, but they have proven fragile constructs at best. Carceral space crosses and encompasses all these barriers and more. It finds a home in me and reaches out into the world to touch everyone there as well. It is not a political or criminal problem. It’s a human problem that needs human solutions. I firmly believe that art can be a part of that human solution. Art teaches us and invites us to see the world differently. It allows us to touch places in ourselves too tender or too painful for initial reckoning. It can give meaningful and soulful expression to the pain and harm contained within prison walls. “Art is that which moves us,” and true change is found in a soul in motion.

Suggested Readings and Resources:

Abbott, Jack Henry. 1981. *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters From Prison*. New York: Random House, Inc.

Alexander, Michelle. 2020. *The New Jim Crow* (10th Anniversary Edition). New York: The New Press.

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Foucault, Michel. 1978. *Discipline & Punish*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

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Story, Brett. 2019. *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power Across Neoliberal America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wener, Richard. 2012. *The Environmental Psychology of Prison and Jails*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Podcasts:

Ear Hustle: <https://www.earhustlesq.com/>

With/In: <https://www.thisiswithin.com/>