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Rehabilitation



"Society can't really visualize prisoners as even human beings. I'm going to bring your attention to that."



Creativity behind bars and then well beyond

Once-imprisoned artists
are gaining traction in
the world of galleries

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

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Five years into a 13-year sentence on drug-related charges, Jared Owens rediscovered his childhood love of ceramics and taught himself to paint. He was overseeing the art room by the time Gilberto Rivera, a graffiti artist, and Jesse Krimes, with an art degree from Millersville University in Pennsylvania, transferred to Fairton to finish their terms. They shared art magazine subscriptions, supplies, ideas and camaraderie in resistance to their circumstances.

With the help of Owens and Rivera, Krimes covertly gathered prison bed-sheets that he collaged with New York Times images, using hair gel and a spoon to lift and transfer the printed ink onto his contraband canvases. He smuggled pieces out, one by one, through the prison mail room. Over three years, the subversive practice evolved into a monumental mural, a Hieronymus Bosch-like allegory of heaven, earth and hell, that he titled "Apokaluptein: 16389067" — Greek for apocalypse coupled with Krimes's inmate number. It stretched 15 feet by 40 feet when he was finally able to assemble the 39 segments for the first



WORKING MOMENTS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

time upon his release in 2013, after serving six years on drug charges.

"This isn't about some outsider coming in and doing an arts program — it was them on their own, seizing that space, whatever dignity they could craft, and then carrying that with them when they came home," said Alysa Nahmias, director of "Art & Krimes by Krimes," a film that will be released in theaters on Friday by MTV Documenta-

leased and working as assistant's with Mural Arts Philadelphia's restorative justice program.

These artists were among several dozen in the landmark exhibition "Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration," which debuted in 2020 at MoMA PSI in New York City and has been touring since (it just opened at Brown University in Rhode Island). Organized by Nicole Fleetwood, the Mac-

Arthur award-winning art historian, it gave new visibility to people fighting societal erasure in the U.S. carceral system, which now imprisons an estimated two million people annually — a 500 percent increase since 1970.

Now a small cadre of artists from the exhibition are gaining traction in the art world, with gallery representation, museum acquisitions, prestigious commissions, residencies and fellowships. With the aid of powerful donors, artists, arts leaders and activists, the members of this vanguard are working structurally to pave the way for their peers.

Fleetwood — who described the peer mentoring at Fairton, echoed in prisons around the country as "inspirational" — hopes the exhibition "helps to shake up cultural institutions in terms of their gatekeeping around what they typically show."

"Marking Time" drew more than 35,000 visitors at MoMA PSI despite Covid restrictions and won critical raves.

"Marking Time" was definitely pivotal in all of our careers and pretty much legitimized folks who come from this incarcerated background," said Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter, an artist in the exhibition who was imprisoned for eight months on charges that included felony conspiracy. She is now on staff at MoMA PSI as a project manager for learning.

Baxter has just been commissioned to lead workshops with women incarcerated at Rikers Island in New York City, to culminate in a community mural.

The art dealer Barry Malin has seen a

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