CONFINED, BUT NOT CONTAINED

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the
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By
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* * * * *

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Pheoris West
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“My intent is to evoke emotions or feelings through expressive conscience themes that communicates visually what many may or may not think about.”

Jenita Landrum - Bittles

ABSTRACT

My interest in this series Confined, But not Contained evolved from my love of storytelling. The narrative of incarceration in my art making challenges the physical art process and the emotional responses that the viewer and I receive from the final product. The emotions that are present are echoed from my personal explorations and my universal concerns. The concept within my art making comes from a socially conscious awareness and a passion for humanity. The emotional response is a linkage between myself and art making. This linkage comes about in two ways, the first is an emotional response that comes from concerns or issues from my immediate surrounding and the current political climate. The second response is the way the final narrative dictates emotions throughout the materials and the physical art process. Creating art for me is a union between artist and emotions.
Dedicated to Roland Bittles and Cory Mychal Landrum
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer sincere appreciation and love to my sister Celestine Landrum #153323 for her support throughout this artistic process.

To my committee: Pheoris West, Stephan Pentak and Vesta Daniel for their support in asking all the right questions that helped artistically, intellectually and aesthetically discover a better way of seeing.

Thank you, Cathy Ellis.
VITA

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FIELDS OF STUDY

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Studies in Painting/Drawing
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For those whom humanity is to rare to be destroyed by walls, bars, and death houses”

Autobiographical Angela Davis

INTRODUCTION

My thesis exhibition, "Confined, But not Contained", (Figure 1) is a narrative, a personal story about my sister #153323 and my experience as the narrator. The concept alludes to the fact that my sister is physically confined in an institution, but her spirit and her mental state remain free from containment. The challenge of this series is to allow the narrative images to connect with the viewer physically, mentally and spiritually through installation. The walk-through installation psychologically reflects time, containment of the viewer, the act of confinement and the growth process of my sister despite a long period of institutionalization. As the narrator I thought that it was important to have the viewer to feel some of the feelings of confinement as I, the precipitant, experienced.

The physical process of my art making is presented within a variety of media throughout the installations. The combining of mixed media and installation increases the depth within each piece of the story. Part of the process is accomplished by transferring computer generated images onto institutional mattresses, mirrors and paper. The mattresses and paper are painted with oil, watercolors and natural dyes. The torn edges on the paper pieces depict decay, fragmentation and movement within the art making process. The
“If I get safe Contraceptives, I can paint romance, not abortion. If you create jobs, I won’t paint poverty. If you remove your armies from other peoples’ countries, I won’t have to paint wars. If you remove prisons I won’t have to paint incarceration. If you remove bloody nuclear weapons from my garden, I will find time to paint the flowers”.

Artist - Sue Coe

transferred text and her number are symbols that remind us that the consequences of institutional and socialization can be a loss of identity.

The concept of being free of containment, yet confine, is an emotional and physical state that we, as the viewer, take for granted. The emotional state of confinement are not limited to formal institutions, but also the institution of employment, marriage and family. I feel that part of my art making is personal, but this body of work has elevated to larger, challenging issues for society to see and to be made aware of.
RESEARCH

My main source of research has always been my direct contact with humanity and personally being evolved in the environments that perpetuated current issues or human concerns. My concerns and issues are brought forth by past study and research in women's studies, social psychology and working professions that reflect mental health, incarceration and urban living. I researched the physical structures of the Eastern State Penitentiary to help me understand the reasoning behind the structure and how the physical layout of prisons intend to increases the feeling of confinement.

I began my research with personal telephones calls, letters, and later face to face visits with my sister Celestine Landrum or # 153323 who is imprisoned at the Florence Crane Women's Facility in Coldwater, Michigan. Each method of contact was significant to the development of the series. My research began with fifteen minute personal calls and letters from #153323. These calls and letteres went from the very general reintroduction period to specific issues. Our conversations began with the personal progress she had made over the years. At that time she was just finishing her bachelor's degree, which I feel is a measurable element that helped to define her self esteem and mental renewal. Over a period of time our conversation and letters became more significant and specific for me, and I believe, for her as well. The telephone calls were a direct link to the past that I had left and the future meeting that had to take place.
Our communication had grown to be so productive that a face-to-face visit had to take place. I was not sure what was going to happen or be said at our first visit, but I was excited to have the reunion. I felt that there was so much that I wanted to ask her. I prepared a list of interview questions that would enhance my research. What did it feel like to be incarcerated for a long period of time? How are you treated? What is your everyday routine? How do you deal with separation from your daughter? The most important question was...

What happened that led to the incarceration? At this point I had no idea where all of this was leading for my work, it just felt like something that I needed to know. The face to face meeting was the turning point for me and my work. It was the missing link to all the oral research that I had been storing and not knowing how to use it. After the meeting, I knew what was important for the work and that it was a great narrative that had to be told. The visit opened my creative energy and made me aware first hand of the emotional response of being confined.

As my husband and I drove into the prison I could feel the anxiety and an emotional excitement stirring within me. I have always been amazed by the layout and the physical structure. I responded to the openness of the grounds and that there seemed to be a system of layering. From the outside I could see that the whole structure was fenced with layers of wire, it immediately reminded me that it was there to keep the confined in and the unauthorized out. A barrier between the confined and the unconfined. Yet once I entered I immediately became part of the confined. Within the outer layered structure I could see the female prisoners from a distance and they could see me, but the distance allowed no
communication. The strong visual impact of the outside structure and the rows of the fences seem to enhance and distort visual response and forbidden communication. This response to the fences and distorted views seemed to be important to me because it never left my mind.

My feeling of being confined and knowing that once inside the visiting room I was going to be contained for a period of time heightened my sensations. I became hot, nervous and impatience with the system. My physical response prompted the question: Did everyone in contained places react on some level? As we waited for my sister to enter, the feeling of being institutionalized is ever present. The visiting rooms are designed for discomfort. The visiting rooms are large with guards that sit or walk around enforcing the rules. Small groups of hard chairs are placed around a short table to permit exchange of any items as you are being viewed by camera. A small area on the other side of the room has telephones that some visitors use to communicate with prisoners on the other side of the wall this is a higher level of confinement. My reaction to the telephone stations was that only a limited amount of communication was to take place without physical touch. The concept of the stations in my installations were from the reaction of the strong visualization of the waiting room. The feelings and physical reaction from being confined seemed to be important to me as a visitor. Therefore, I decided to allow the viewers the experience the feeling of confinement with limited communication.

After my husband and I waited for a short time, my sister #153323 entered. She was smiling with a warm glow around her. We were allowed to hug and then had to sit. She was not allowed to get out of her chair and the chairs were not to be moved. The visit went well.
While we talked a lot, most was surface talk that we both enjoyed, but I didn't get to all my questions. She was bright, beautiful and smart where the confinement was almost all physical. She did tell us her version of the story that lead to her incarceration and that's when I felt that it was more then a story about a victim or the institution. She never denied that something horrible happened and that she was involved in a rear rape, that lead to a scuffle, then to the death of a man. She admitted her part of the act, but she confesses that the man was alive when she left the scene of the crime. After the visit, my husband and I were walking out of a prison with a renewal of life. #153323 was a breath of life that we didn't expect.

After the visit, I wrote the story down highlighting things that seemed to be important to me. As I became more specific about my questions, her response became more significant to the work. She responded by writing everything that positively affected her growth. She presented issues of concerns such as education, sexual harassment, employment discrimination, race relations, loss of self and identity, rules and regulations, and how she became a spiritual being, what mentally sustained her. I found that I was not just creating a body of work about my sister, but was looking at a world view from another person's eyes yet the eyes and issues were no different than mine.

**Contemporary Influences**

Once I heard the story from my sister, I began to look at my present art making and what artists were influencing the development of a series. Many artists inspired me, but Sam Gillian and Joan Mitchell were my source in the early stages. Both of these abstracted
"The narrative mode is a distinct tradition within the African-American art. Story telling is found in its folk art traditions as well in its various contemporary genres of art making. One could even argue that within the African American community, no art is developed without narrative, whether explicit or implied." She further states that "the narrative can be used "literal, suggestive and visual to create a partly personal, partly fictional account of contemporary society". Deborah Willis

painters influenced my work with their use of bright colors and their abstract process to create a rhythm within their work. I paid close attention to the way both artist used the process of paint to create their marks that added another meaningful dimension to the process. I knew that color was important to me and it was going to be significant to this new body of work. I felt that creating rhythm and finding marks that would increase the narrative within my work seemed important. I began looking at narrative contemporary artists as a source of information and influence. Sue Coe, Leon Golub, Eric Fischl, and Lorna Simpson have used narrative elements to develop strong bodies of work that have allowed the viewer to bring their own emotions to the works. I was not sure how I was going to integrate the story of my sister but there seems to be vast amounts of information from her life to create art from. I feel that the initial questions within my work are the same parallels Deborah Willis states in the passage of Lorna Simpson. The probing questions that I asked my sister and this body of work are questions that make a partly fictional narrative. I looked at other artists that were painters using figures in their narratives. Sue Coe and Leon Golub were two artists that used the figure in their narrative to create a tension and dialogue within the works. I focused on Sue Coe, her work was disturbing and violent, but there is a sense of truth that she allows each of her figurative images to display.

The impact that Sue Coe displays in her work are important to the significant gestures and compositions used in my paper pieces and some of the mattresses. The gesture of the
"Simpson's style creates a format for her critical examination of race and gender. Within society weighted with oppression, repressive and consumer-oriented behavior, she deals specifically with the notion of invisibility, representing black women as survivors, protagonists and victims. Simpson, narrator, is essentially asking "Who is invisible?". Deborah Willis

body, and the total composition in her work seems to create a visual story line that engrossed the viewer. I wanted the figures to have an implied gesture that would bring forth emotional truth to the images that depict my sister's mental state. I wanted the viewer to be a little disturbed by some of the violence and by the bewildering gestures.

Leon Golub's use of larger-than-life figures in his paintings to create a tension had a great influence on the scale that is present in my work. His use of large figure, scale and aggressive marks pulled the viewer into his story. For many of his pieces, the background was not important to complete the narrative. I worked with this theory of allowing the gesture to have power by simply using one large figure, aggressive marks and no background to dictate an emotional response.
PROCESS AND APPROACH

Installation

The goal of this exhibition was to allow the viewer to bring some consciousness or awareness through the story. I felt that it was necessary to allow the viewer to physically experience their emotions through a wall installation. The installation contained elements of the act, and the renewal of my sister. The size of the installation was important to the issue that was presented.

My intentions were to create an entrance that was so narrow that it instantly confined the viewer in an uncomfortable space (Figure 2). The length of the hallway had to be long enough to force the viewer to walk in a physical confinement for a distance. The end space allows the viewer to experience containment and the feeling of being off balance in a mirrored room with her number repeated on the walls. The feeling and emotions that each viewer receives from being in temporary confinement are a minimum to how my sister must live each day. The mirrored room represents the viewer as a possible prisoner with the repeated number transferred across the viewer that remind the viewer of how easy it is to be confined and what happens to your identity once you get to prison (Figure 3).

I see the chair as metaphor for my sister. I used the chair as a means to hold her personal belongings that shows items that may sustain ones mental and spiritual state
"I have no first name, I am referred to by my last name or by my prison number #153323."

Celestine Landrum #153323

(Figure 4). Through my research my sister Celestine or #153323 wrote and talked at great lengths about how education, family and religious beliefs, sustained her. I searched for a container that reflected a women that was ready to go, the era that the makeup case came from gave the viewer a sense of time. My sister has many thoughts about her daughter and her grandchildren, they are a major drive in seeking release from prison. I used old and new photo’s are markers that reflected memories of time that had passed between my sister and her family. The old worn bible is a metaphor for were her strength and her found belief in God. The diploma is a symbol of educational accomplishments and a measurable means of using her time productively. I chose to use the chair standing alone glowing in the dark to highlight her self renewal and to show that she has done her time with little support.

**Mattresses**

The painted mattresses allude to the fact that an act of rage was committed surrounding a bed. The paintings are painted in a very expressive use of marks that symbolize a human blood bath. (Figure 5) The paintings are presented in an abstract form of conceptual figurative images that represent the rage. The colors reflect human body fluids that look like water markings on the soiled mattress. (Figure 6) The use of paint on a striped mattress reflect time and institutionalization. They are human in size to allow the narrative to speak to the viewer. The gesture of the body reflects isolation, confinement, and inner turmoil. At times the figure becomes part of the mattresses by bleeding into the patterns of the surface and other times it is a transparent top layer on an active surface. The figure and the surface present a physical space of confinement that the body can fit in and a limited
space for emotions to be contained. The process used to create the mattress paintings are a variety of techniques that were based on watercolor techniques. The mattresses are manufactured, then sealed with rabbit skin glue to the front and acrylic to the back to control the absorbency of applying lots of water for a wet in wet technique. Paint and natural dyes are dropped onto the mattress and a projected form of a figure.

**Drawings**

The drawings that are mounted to the outside structure are a reflection of different mental states over time (Figure 7). The concept of the repeated number 153323 alludes to lost identity and that she is identified by those numbers. The issue of lost identity over time also brings forth questions of how do you lose your identity? These drawing may answer the question by repeating the number that starts out as a first generation transfer then over time becomes worn and possibly recycled and then reused. In a state of physical confinement you are the number and only a number. The painting process is a very loose wet into wet watercolor technique. The use of mixing watercolor, recycled coffee grounds and ink as media achieves transparent and opaque areas that create depth and textural markings upon figurative images. The process of the recycled numbers are adhered to the paper with rabbit skin glue. There are a variety of sizes in the repeated numbers. The numbers are transferred with a natural solution that allow the number to move in and out of the figure and background. The numbers create a hatching or scratching on a wall as if marking time. These dense and crisp markings give presents of time to the figure and the space, they also create a pattern within the water makings and the paint. The torn recycled paper and the edges are elements of decay and fragmentation. The decay and fragmentation can be
perceived as decay to the physical body or fragmentation of the mental faculties that may occur over time of confinement. The figures are formally about line, gesture and space that they fit into. These figures are more literal, by being more literal the figure seem to say something different to the viewer about containment of a physical body and the possible mental and spiritual state.

Ceramic

The physiological impact is present within the ceramic pieces that represent death houses (Figure 8). The death houses are icons, they are spaces that a person may be confined to, a space where the act of rage took place or a space where someone might withdraw to as means of dealing with a mental state. The concept confined of space and how one deals within the space are the physical and physiological effects that may take place over time. The colors are colors that are within the prison area. The muted colors are painted in an expressive manner to reflect the remains of the act that was committed in the room. Some of the spaces are painted very thickly with Suzanne Stevenson slips to reflect time as in old and weathered, while others are painted in a transparent manner to show the laying of time in an old structure. I view the death houses in two ways. One as means of protection from the dominate culture and the other view is as a retreat from a society that doesn’t allow equality and justice.

Telephone Installation

The telephone station (Figure 9) is a symbol for the lack of direct communication that takes place between the outside world and the inmates. It is also a metaphor for possible oral connection between the viewer and the figurative images that are housed inside the
installation. The stations are to allow the viewer to observe the person behind the old dirty glass, also to try communicate by phone to the inmate, the ledges are narrow to permit the sitter from being comfortable and wanting to talk too long. I want the viewer to experience the helplessness of trying to communicate with someone that has been imprisoned (Figure 10).
CONCLUSION

The Confined But not Contained series has pulled my personal exploration and concerns to new heights. I have found that they are not just my views but they are shared by many. The series of Confined But Not Contained shared many emotions and feelings though the act of confinement and the present of the human body. Creating a body of work that blended two and three dimensional and mixing of media excites me to no end. I will continue to draw on my immediate surroundings and political concerns as means to create work from. I see the future Confined But not Contained continuing to develop into a powerful body of work that will continue to evoke emotional thoughts from the process of art. I will refine the installation by resolving issues that were presented from this exhibition. I feel that the metaphors within my art are interesting and that I will look closer at the meanings of my visual presentation with them. I see incorporating sound pieces that have been started. Sound is very important to the future of the installation, because it is significant to the confines of prisons. Using sound as a means of communication for the viewer. My goal for the ceramic pieces is the creation of a large installation in the form of a wall of death houses, really exploring the physiological effect of being in a confined space. The transcripts are a powerful means of written text. The transcripts provide a source of reality for me and for the viewer.
APPENDIX

FIGURES
Figure 2. Entrance into Hallway
Figure 4. Detail of Chair in the Mirrored Room
Figure 6. Mattresses #2
Figure 7. In My Space
Figure 8. Death Houses # 2, 3, 4 and 5
Figure 10. Detail of Telephone Installation
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