

Art from inside: Stateville prisoners find limited release

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Inmate Arkee Chaney works with ceramics.

Art from inside

Stateville prisoners find limited release

By William Swislow
Photos by John Dziekan

It's not your typical art mecca. Signs warn that guests, who must pass through multiple security checks, are subject to search at any time. The men you see marching down the long, bare corridors aren't obvious Renoir or Picasso fanciers. And the artists are often barred from their studio by periodic lockdowns.

This all makes sense because these artists are behind bars at Joliet's Stateville prison—a maximum security art environment, but also one of the Midwest's most creative.

Don't think that's an extreme claim. The work of Stateville's inmate-artists, whose loyal following ranges from Joliet housewives to influential Chicago artists and collectors, is sought after not just for its novelty value, but for the same qualities art lovers look for when they go into a gallery or museum. Indeed, prison art has made it into museums on more than one occasion, including a 1981 show organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. A prison art program in Texas recently received a writeup in Esquire magazine, while inmate craftsmen in Montana are gaining attention for their belts, bolo ties and



Prisoner Murice Martin has been painting for 30 years, opening windows into black culture and history.

other creations made of horseshair.

The art's broad appeal, quite apart from the criminal backgrounds of the artists, was on display recently at shows in

Hyde Park and at Stateville.

Whether it's flowers you want, colorful Caribbean vistas, portraits of Michael Jordan, brutal depictions of prison life, conventional clown paintings, satires

of "white man's justice," pastel celebrations of worship, expressionist nudes, gritty views of the inner city, cellblock-shaped ceramic desk organizers or abstract visions, these prisoners

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microfilm.

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can meet your needs. In nearly every case, their work is more interesting than what you would find at the local hotel art sale or even at a lot of River North galleries.

Most buyers are "looking for a higher kind of art work," said Jeff Whitfield, who has run the Stateville art program for nine years. "The guys aren't painting cute puppy dogs. And the public's not buying the cute puppy-dog stuff."

"There's something basic about it. There's some sort of strong force behind it," said one browser at an August sale just outside the walls of Stateville prison.

Most of the pieces are perfectly suitable for, say, a child's room or a doctor's office, which is where two collectors said they hang many of their finds. But the works also display idiosyncratic bursts of creativity that

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appeal to more specialized tastes, including the aficionados of outsider art who haunt these sales.

"The work that I'm interested in here is very personal," said Lynn Bailey, a Chicago collector of outsider art, which encompasses the efforts of artists, typically self-taught, who work outside the mainstream art world and whose vision is generally highly stylized and personal.

"I like the use of space," she said of Harvey Ford, a Stateville artist who has a substantial following. "And these are extremely personal feelings about the city and life and death, even the evils of cigarettes."

Does it make a difference that Ford and the other artists are prisoners? To some extent. But it's the prison environment, not the crime, that seems to matter.

"I am interested in the art they produce because they lead such isolated lives," Bailey said. Like other browsers at the Stateville sale, though, she said she doesn't want to know what the artists did to wind up there.

"I think it's a good idea it's not promoted what kind of crimes some of these people did. Just judge the work alone," she said.

"When I heard about the shows, I [thought I] would not want a criminal painting," said Angel DiPasquali, a Joliet housewife who was at the show with her mother and child. "But when I saw the stuff, it showed me that no matter what someone's done, there's something good in them."

"I don't particularly want to know what they did [to be in prison]," added DiPasquali, who said she has been coming to the inmate exhibitions for three years and owns 15 to 20 such paintings.

Although the pictorial efforts of some well-known murderers, including Richard Speck and John Wayne Gacy, have achieved some fame—if not recognition for artistic merit—prison artist Hector Maisonet said he doesn't want to be put beside Speck.

"I've done a lot of mistakes in my life. But I'm not evil," he said. "I'm trying to show the outside people my real inside."

"We all learned another side of us" through art, added painter and portraitist Ulysses Jacobs.

For Whitfield, whose seriousness about art rubs off on the inmates, the idea of collecting the work of prison artists for the notoriety of their crimes is like "fingernails on a chalkboard."

"We have never pushed art as by high-level criminals. These guys are being highlighted for the art they're doing, not their criminal name," he said.

By focusing on the crimes, Whitfield said, "all's you're doing is trying to piece together the past rather than building the future."

For most of the Stateville program's 40 inmates, the past does not include artistic training or experience with art.

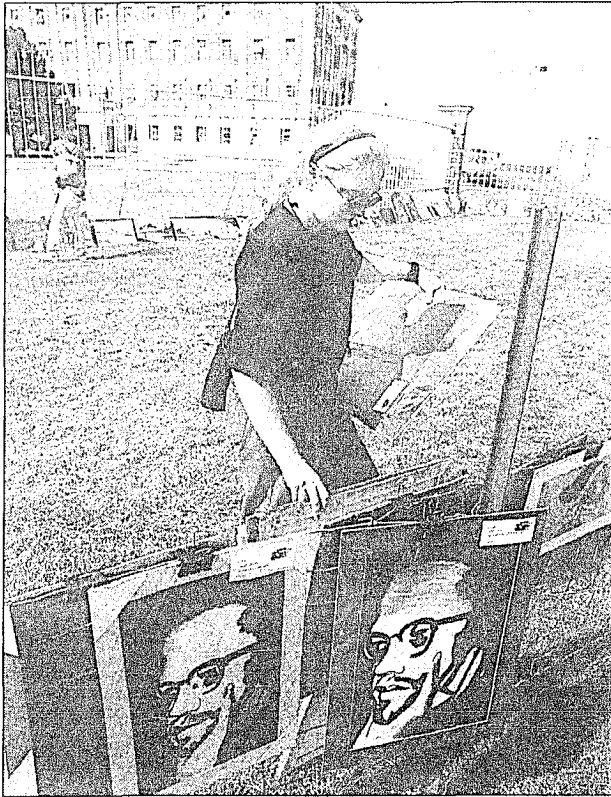
"It's a shame they came to jail to learn to be creative," inmate Simon Gutierrez said of his prison colleagues. "They never had access [to art]."

"Under the Christmas tree they get guns, they get six-shooters," he noted. "[They'd] be different guys now if they had made them see something they can do with their own mind. Instead of giving them basketballs, give them paints."

"I didn't know I knew how to draw," said Arkee Chaney, who started making pictures about a year ago, after trying ceramics. "When I started to do serious drawings, I found out I was a serious artist."

"I don't know what I can do until I try," he said. "The more I explore, the more I find out that I can do."

Chaney and his colleagues didn't look like your average artists during



Tribune photos by John Dzilekan

A late summer art show outside Stateville draws a number of aficionados.

a visit deep within the noisy prison. The seven or eight inmates sorting through work in their cavernous two-room studio with its kilns, shelves of pots and paintings scattered around were dressed in prison blues, not the black that is nearly universal in art circles. They were African-American or Hispanic, reflecting the majority of Stateville's population, covering a wide range of ages, and they were solidly built to a man—clearly guys not to be messed with, but also men who could be eloquent when discussing their art.

Their range of technique and polish is as wide as their subject matter, which is to be expected in a group that includes inmates who have been painting for years alongside guys picking up a brush for the first time.

Thus Murice Martin, who has been painting for some 30 years, opens windows into black culture and history with his polished, naturalistic oils, while Ford's more expressionist drawings range from quirky nudes cavorting against pyramids and half moons (which are symbolic of sex, he said) to abstract plays of color and shape.

"He's doing the stuff out of the heart and his head. He's not hiding anything with craftsmanship," Whitfield said of Ford's drawings. "We encourage these guys to do their own work, their personal work."

Here's how the prolific Ford, whose cardboard-backed, plastic-wrapped drawings fill boxes, describes his own creative process: "You sit there, look at a blank piece of paper, take a photo of your mind and wait for your hands [to go to work]."

"It's another form of life on other planets. I try to see something in a different dimension," he said of his abstract pieces.

Sometimes he crumples the paper first and follows the lines that result.

Knowing the paper is important, he said. And above all, "You got to put yourself into that picture. If you don't, you got what everybody else does, a plain old flat picture. ... Anybody can draw a straight line, but you got to bring it to life, to make the straight line do something different."

Making those lines different not only reflects the inmates' creative imaginations, it's also a lifesaver, and they take it very seriously.

"I got to find some kind of way to



Hector Maisonet abhors comparisons to Gacy and Speck: "I've done a lot of mistakes in my life. But I'm not evil."

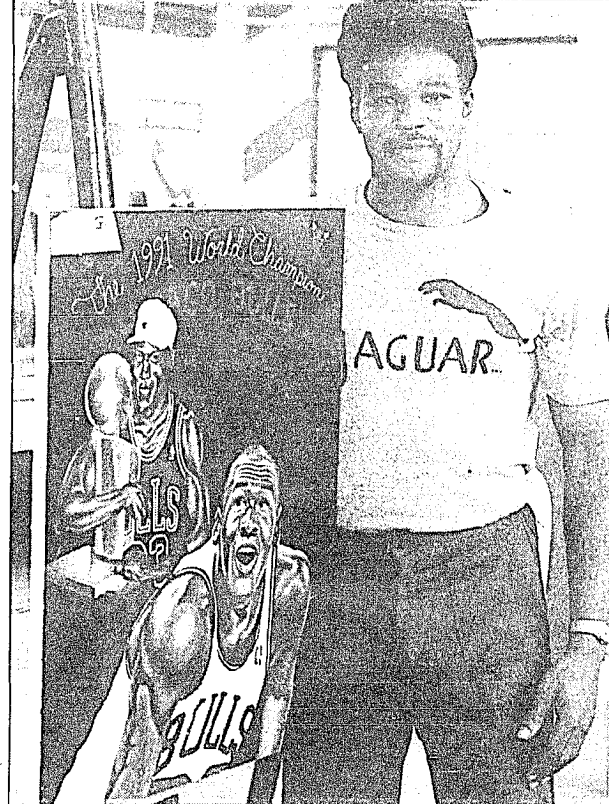
occupy myself instead of just laying back and deteriorating," said Chaney, who is serving a natural-life sentence.

"You're locked up in the penitentiary, but you're not locked up ... because you're so wrapped up in your art work," he said. "I'm content with my art."

"You get into your own type of reality. ... It beats being in the cell house all day," said Maisonet, who has been making art—ceramics and pictures—in the program for about six years. "This is a drug to me, especially when I create."

For Ford, art is an all-day thing. Like some 70 percent of the other inmates, he has a prison job. But between washing dishes he doodles, he said, and can get ideas just looking at something on the wall. "You never quit looking. I get to thinking art, eating art, dreaming art."

"You crave it," agreed Jacobs,



"We all learned another side of us" through art, says Ulysses Jacobs, with his portrait of Michael Jordan.

well.

The Stateville program was started in 1955 by John Hudak, a Joliet artist who volunteered to introduce some of the inmates to art, according to Whitfield, who has a bachelor's degree in fine arts and runs his own lettering and sign-painting business on the outside. The effort became formal in the late 1960s, when the state legislature passed a law letting inmates sell their work.

At times that work can take strong shape, but Whitfield said censorship is rare.

"The only kind of censorship we do would be based on the location where we are showing. A strong sexually oriented piece would not be appropriate at the mall," he explained. "The whole idea of doing the work is to express your feelings. If you censor that, you take a chance of destroying something that is real."

Although the artistic end of the Stateville program is going strong—"Pick a building and I can fill it with art," said Whitfield—there are plenty of other problems, including the lockdowns that periodically keep the guys out of their studio.

Teaching the inmates and keeping them in supplies has become increasingly difficult given the state's budget troubles. As a result, Whitfield says, the program is "slowly eroding."

"The real-life situation: Do you hire another correctional officer or do you hire an art teacher?" said Whitfield, who does the teaching and administering and who organizes three to five shows a year. "We're battling heavy odds keeping this program running."

The inmates concur. When asked what are the biggest problems they face making art, their responses revolve around logistics and bureaucracy.

The biggest obstacle, according to Maisonet, "is the art teacher not being available for class." When Whitfield is unavailable because of other prison duties, the studio—normally open 9:30 to 11:30 and 12:30 to 3—is closed.

The result, as Chaney described it: "I'm destroyed when we can't get over here."

Whitfield said budgetary constraints have forced a shift in the program from formal classes toward

more independent projects, which include the many works offered for sale to the public as well as cards to send home to families, and pictures to decorate cells.

But "it can slow progression if they're not in a formal class learning skill-building techniques. They have less skills to work with to get their work across," he said.

Other facts of prison life also cause trouble.

"The amount of violence in the place affects class participation," Whitfield said. "The more we're shut down [by lockdowns], the more they are likely to find something else they'll have to plug themselves into."

"What the program needs is to be a necessity," he noted. "When you look at the overall system—rising violence, short staffing—then we become a minor element."

Besides another teacher, Whitfield would like to get an electronic publishing system for the art studio and a permanent sale space that could handle work from all over the state. He is looking for donations as well as art books and other materials, plus contributions of time by visiting artists and other volunteers.

The program is able to provide some supplies to novices. The more successful artists buy their own materials with sale proceeds and share them with newcomers. And going into winter, Whitfield noted, 22 men are moving off the waiting list and into the program.

Ninety percent of the take from sales—which reaches \$12,000 to \$17,000 a year, according to Whitfield—goes to the artist and 10 percent to the inmate benefit fund, which underwrites a variety of programs for the inmates. Prices tend to be low; \$10 to \$20 for a painting is not uncommon. A few elaborate works may cost a few hundred dollars. The most successful of the prisoners may make up to \$1,500 from one show.

The income, though modest, makes a difference.

"This is a job. Although we love it, it provides for us, our families," Jacobs said.

Despite the obstacles that have tested the strength of the program, the intense commitment of the inmates shows in the intensity of their work and in their competition with each other to produce the best, and most saleable, works.

Still, that doesn't stop them from teaching each other.

"The older guys taught me how to work the charcoals, the oil paints," Jacobs said, adding, "I was more of a realist until I saw Ford's work."

What they learn, according to Whitfield, includes three things that could sound like clichés, but have real meaning when you look at the work and hear the men talk about it: pride, self-respect and accomplishment.

The shows—including a statewide show to be held in the spring at Jefferson Square Mall in Joliet—are a step toward those goals, but Whitfield and the artists also are looking toward broader recognition in the art world.

"It would give a lot of the guys hope if someone actually made it into a gallery," Whitfield said. "They put their heart and their soul into it."

The return on that investment is the start of a transition beyond prison life and, it is hoped, the crimes that preceded it. Maisonet, who is in his mid-30s and expects to leave Stateville at the beginning of next year, calls it "rehabilitation from within."

"I ain't through yet. I got things up here you wouldn't believe," Maisonet said, pointing to his head. "I'm expressing so much that you see a lot more in there than I do. There's no limitations to art."

To donate books, magazines, materials or time—or, on a larger scale, display space or a Macintosh graphic-arts system—to help the Stateville inmate art program, write Jeff Whitfield, Stateville Correctional Center, P.O. Box 112, Joliet, Ill. 60434.