
THE DRAWING CENTER

The Pencil Is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists

October 11, 2019–January 5, 2020

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The Drawing Center

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Wednesday: 12–6pm
Thursday: 12–8pm
Friday–Sunday: 12–6pm



New York, NY... *The Pencil Is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists* is an exhibition of more than 140 drawings by imprisoned artists from around the globe. Featuring works produced over a roughly two-hundred-year period, the exhibition presents powerful evidence of the persistence of human creativity in the most inhumane of circumstances. For each of the incarcerated artists represented in *The Pencil Is a Key*, the act of putting pencil to paper is a vehicle through which they proclaim their individuality and measure their humanity against systems of repression. Together, their drawings are containers of memories, records that bear witness, tools for survival, weapons in the fight for justice, and portals to a better future.

Organized chronologically, *The Pencil Is a Key* interprets the term “incarceration” broadly to mean any situation in which an individual is denied their freedom. This includes penal incarceration; imprisonment of combatants during wartime; systematic imprisonment by governments on the basis of political affiliation, gender, sexuality, race, or religion; as well as forced restriction of movement and involuntary imprisonment in psychiatric institutions. Throughout the exhibition, drawings by artists who were or currently are prisoners are presented alongside works by prisoners who became artists while incarcerated.

Examples include political prisoners such as Gustave Courbet, who was held in Saint Pélagie Prison for his role in the Paris Commune uprising of 1871; leaders from Southern Plains nations, who were incarcerated in the US military’s Fort Marion following the Red River War (1874–75); artists imprisoned during World War II as noncombatants like Hans Bellmer, who was interned in France, and a young Ruth Asawa, incarcerated first at the Santa Anita Racetrack, and later at the Rohwer Relocation Center, as part of the US government’s mass internment of Japanese Americans; as well as artists in Soviet Gulags, Apartheid-era South Africa, in Central and South American countries under military dictatorships, and in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. The exhibition also presents drawings by members of contemporary American prison populations who found their talent through prison art programs, as well as collections of works by anonymous artist incarcerates working in drawing subgenres specific to US prisons in the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including drawings made on prison-issue handkerchiefs (known as paños chicanos), drawings on the exterior of mailing envelopes, and hand-drawn playing cards.

Although captivity does not create a uniform style of drawing, there is little doubt that sustained periods of isolation from society have an impact on artistic expression. Artists often draw what they see, and in prison the view is radically limited. As a result, more portraits are produced than landscapes, and landscapes are most often views out of windows or otherwise reliant on magazine or book illustrations. In some astonishing cases, like that of Guantanamo prisoner Abdulmalik Abud, landscapes are meticulously rendered from memory. Along with portraiture and landscapes, drawings embedded in epistolary texts are common, as are scenes that document daily life in incarceration—some quotidian, others horrific.

Throughout *The Pencil Is a Key*, examples abound of the ingenious ways that incarcerated artists draw by any means available to them. Laundry pencils, ballpoint pen refills, food, and bodily fluids are applied to scraps of cloth, letters, envelopes, bills, and discarded packaging. Foldable, flat, and unassuming, drawings are also easier to hide than are three-dimensional works, an advantage in circumstances where the act of artmaking itself has the potential to constitute insurgency. But beyond these practical concerns, are other, more existential reasons for the choice of such a primary medium as drawing. Incarcerated artists represented in *The Pencil Is a Key* use drawing as a means for investigation and reportage, for currency, for mapping, sketching, counting, and measuring, and these activities can be helpful, even essential to surviving imprisonment or for struggling against it.

Laura Hoptman, Executive Director, remarked, “In this moment throughout our country and around the world, when all kinds of freedoms are being called into question, it seems to me that we could not have picked a more urgent topic than the ability of drawing to articulate our humanity and express our determination to be free, even in the most dire conditions. For the first exhibition created under my auspices as Executive Director, I wanted all of us at The Drawing Center to collaborate on a show that made a full-throated argument for the essential nature of drawing—or in broader terms, art—to our lives, and in a bigger sense, to the definition of ourselves as human beings.”

The Pencil Is the Key is organized by the curatorial team at The Drawing Center: Claire Gilman, Chief Curator; Rosario Güiraldes, Assistant Curator; Laura Hoptman, Executive Director; Isabella Kapur, Curatorial Assistant; and Duncan Tomlin, Curatorial Research Intern.

Image: Sérgio Sister, *Impress your feelings with your fingerprint*, 1970, Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler

Publication

The Pencil Is a Key is accompanied by a 150-page softcover catalog, which includes full-color illustrations of all of the works in the exhibition, and essays by Dr. Nicole R. Fleetwood, Director of the Institute for Research on Women and Associate Professor of American Studies at Rutgers University; Dr. Valérie Rousseau, Curator at the American Folk Art Museum in New York; and Courtenay Finn, Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, where the exhibition will travel in 2020.

The publication will be available for purchase at The Drawing Center and in its online bookstore at drawingcenter.org. As with every publication produced by The Drawing Center, *The Pencil Is a Key* will also be available to read in a digital format, free of charge on issuu.com.

Public Programs

Thursday, October 24, 2019, 7:00-9:00pm, Free
Theatre of the Oppressed: The Nature of the Crime

The Drawing Center is pleased to host a performance of *The Nature of the Crime*, a play by the

Theatre of the Oppressed NYC about the role that crime plays in people's lives. The production chronicles the stories of three characters: a husband trying to provide for his family, a student attempting to better his life after being in and out of jail, and a parolee who loses his MetroCard and sets off a chain of events that undoes his status. Following the performance, the actors and audience will engage in theatrical brainstorming, called Forum Theatre, with the aim of catalyzing creative change on the individual, community, and political levels.

Tuesday, November 5, 2019, 6:30-8:00pm, \$5

In Conversation: Artist José Alvarez (D.O.P.A.) and Assistant Curator Rosario Güiraldes

Join artist José Alvarez (D.O.P.A.), born Devyi Orangel Pena Arteaga, and Assistant Curator Rosario Güiraldes for a conversation on the portrait series Alvarez began while detained by US Immigration for a period of two months in 2012 at Krome Detention Center in Miami for immigration violations. Four days into Alvarez's incarceration, one of his fellow detainees encouraged him to start drawing to stave off the symptoms of depression. In the following months, Alvarez made over thirty drawings of undocumented immigrants held at Krome.

Tuesday, November 12, 2019, 6:30-8:00pm, \$5

Talk: Art Educator Phyllis Kornfeld on Criminal Justice and the Arts

Join Phyllis Kornfeld—an art educator with more than 36 years of experience teaching art in US prisons—for an illustrated lecture featuring artwork by incarcerated people from across the country. Their imagery and their words, along with Kornfeld's first-hand experience contrast the dehumanizing darkness in their lives with an energetic capacity, and desire, to express beauty, truthfulness, humor, even joy, and with the dignity and creativity that is inherent in being human.

Thursday, December 5, 2019, 6:30-8:00 pm, Free

The Innocence Project: Blind Injustice Opera

The Drawing Center hosts a reprised selection of The Innocence Project's *Blind Injustice* opera, followed by a conversation with opera subject Exoneree Nancy Smith and Director of the Ohio Innocence Project, Mark Godsey, along with the NYC Innocence Project's Senior Staff Attorney, Nina Morrison. This program is produced in partnership with the American Folk Art Museum.

Tuesday, December 10, 2019, 6:30-8:00pm, \$5

In Conversation: Artist Timothy Curtis, Chief Curator Claire Gilman, and Community Leader Dawan Williams

Join Chief Curator Claire Gilman, artist Timothy Curtis, and Dawan Williams, Program Coordinator for the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Restorative Justice Guild program, for a discussion on art making in the context of the modern US prison system.

Credits

The Pencil Is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists is made possible by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Agnes Gund, Lonti Ebers, and the Director's Circle of The Drawing Center.

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About The Drawing Center

Founded in 1977, by curator Martha Beck (1938-2014), The Drawing Center is a museum in Manhattan's SoHo district that explores the medium of drawing as primary, dynamic, and relevant to contemporary culture, the future of art, and creative thought. Its activities are both multidisciplinary and broadly historical, and include exhibitions, public programs, publications, and a unique artist-run exhibition program aimed at the contemporary artists' community.

Forthcoming exhibitions at The Drawing Center include monographic exhibitions of Curtis Talwst Santiago, Guo Fengyi, and Huguette Caland. In Spring 2020, The Drawing Center will also reprise *Bellwethers: The Culture of Controversy*, a new speaking series that convenes writers, cultural critics, and artists to examine a polemical topic of our moment.

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