

https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/article_d0004c47-824c-5a33-8bd0-4720a2872878.html

Blue House Civic Studio's 'Mixed Media' tackles imprisonment, and life after, through art

BY SUE STRACHAN | sstrachan@theadvocate.com MAR 22, 2019 - 11:01 AM

1 of 17



"Playing the Game" (2019) by Ashley Teamer; Kiana Calloway (2018) by Carl Joe Williams (cropped to fit); and "Items Missed 1" (2018) by Ryn Wilson (cropped to fit).

Images provided by artists

The statistics of incarceration in Louisiana don't tell the whole story.

Until last year, Louisiana was the prison capital of the world. In 2018, the Bayou State locked up 712 out of every 100,000 citizens (only Oklahoma, with 719, imprisoned more).

Members of the Blue House Civic Studio in New Orleans wanted to go beyond those grim numbers, to grapple with the narratives of the people caught up in the prison system. Using the tools of art — paint, video, audio, print — the Blue House community set out to make a difference in the way incarcerated, and formerly incarcerated, people were understood.

Part of this endeavor is an exhibition, "Mixed Media," which seeks to use art to focus attention on systemic problems, said Blue House Civic Studio co-founder Aron Chang. Other members who worked on the project included Maggie Hermann, Bridgette Ortiz, Eriks Reks, Alex Stokes and Lilith Winkler-Schor.

“Most importantly, it asks the viewer and reader to enter into difficult topics, such as incarceration and criminal justice, through the eyes and experiences of both the artists and their subjects,” Chang said.

The exhibition, a first for the studio, opens at the Blue House, 1700 S. Rampart St., in Central City, from 7-9 p.m. on Friday (March 22) and will be on view from 9-5 weekdays through April 30.

A website devoted to the project at <https://issue1.mxd.media/> also launched the same day.

Paintings, videos and other art grew out of interviews and discussions with formerly incarcerated people themselves.

Artists Ashley Teamer, Carl Joe Williams and Ryn Wilson were asked to create works for the exhibition, attending round-table discussions and dinners at the studio to learn more about the issues and about formerly incarcerated people who agreed to participate, who are also involved in organizations that help people in the same situation: Kiana Calloway, VOTE (Voice of the Experienced), Roots of Renewal and Project Detour; Chasity Hunter, Young Women with a Vision; Dianne Jones, Women with a Vision; Dolfinette Martin, VOTE, Operation Restoration; Adinas Perkins, VOTE; Daniel Tapia, Rising Foundations; and Maryam Henderson-Uloho, Sister Hearts Thrift Store.

It's hard to calculate the impact of incarceration on communities and the state as a whole. And while life in prison has its own issues,

separating families and interrupting lives, other problems start after an inmate is released, the artists learned.

Teamer focused on "collateral consequences" — the practical hardships and stigma that follow people long after they have done their time. Williams set out to educate and inform the public, in a straightforward way, about the bleak circumstances of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. And Wilson wanted to focus on the way women, in particular, are affected by prison time.

“Daily discriminations as far as employment, as far as housing, as far as Medicaid and things of that nature” are a problem for people who have spent time in prison, Kiana Calloway, who was incarcerated at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola for 17 years, said in his interview. “Just being a number in the state of Louisiana. It’s not like I’m a needle in a haystack because I’m like a needle in a stack of needles at this point.”

In interviews with The New Orleans Advocate, the three artists discussed how their conversations with formerly incarcerated people inspired their work.

Carl Joe Williams

Carl Joe Williams creates paintings, installations, sculptures and music. Housing equity is one of his interests. He was part of the Blue House Mixed Media project early on.

“Aron Chang emailed me and asked me if I would be interested in being involved,” said Williams. “It sounded really interesting and right up my alley in terms of type of work I like to do and the issues I like to address.”

Williams went to an informational dinner that the Blue House set up with the artists and formerly incarcerated people.

“There was a guy named Daniel Tapia,” said Williams. “We were just talking, some regular type of vibe, but then I started asking him questions about his incarceration and thought it would be interesting to get this recorded and actually do something.”

As Tapia recounted his experiences in prison, where he spent 12 years, the idea of creating a mixed media piece, including video and painting, came to Williams, who eventually made a video of Tapia talking about his life in

and out of prison. Williams also interviewed and made videos of other formerly incarcerated people, including Maryam Henderson-Uloho, Kiana Calloway and Adinas Perkins.

“It was an opportunity to connect with people who have been through some troubles and traumas,” said Williams.

“I was creating a vehicle for them,” he added. “They trusted me, so I was appreciative of that.”

Williams focused on the videos at first, “because I felt like they have a bigger possibility to educate and inform, make some change.” Paintings, which were created from still images from the videos, were intended as companion pieces to go along with the video.

The videos are still in production and won't be included in this exhibition.

“We (Blue House) are actually doing things that we can last — to right the wrongs of the system. I felt like I wanted to be a part of this any kind of way. So, I wanted to do whatever I could to magnify the void with what kind of talent or vision I have,” said Williams about his participation.

Coincidentally, as he worked on his art for the Blue House exhibition, he also started to create a piece for “per (sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana,” which is on view at the Newcomb Art Museum until July 6. Ryn Wilson, a fellow Blue House exhibitor, also has work in the Newcomb show.

Williams doesn't want his work for "Mixed Media" to be too "poetic" or abstract. “I wanted it to be straightforward, kind of a PSA message ... BAM!”

Ashley Teamer

"What if you had to tell every single person you met what your biggest mistake was from this point forward?"

The question resounded with artist Ashley Teamer as she listened to interviews conducted by fellow artists and Blue House Civic studio members with formerly incarcerated people.

“And so, that's why I wanted to take the one quote and kind of put it in this maze, because it is ultimately unwinnable,” said Teamer, who created two interactive multimedia pieces that look like board games to illustrate this concept.

One piece is based on the game "Snakes and Ladders," and the other one is connected circular mazes with a die on a chain. The pieces are intended to allow viewers to understand the perspective of those caught up in systems of control and surveillance. A native of New Orleans, Teamer is manager of the Youth Empowerment Project's Design Works Program, as well as a DJ.

YEP is located near the Blue House in Central City. It was there Teamer met Chang, who enlisted YEP design graduates for various projects.

Teamer was also affected by the words of Maryam Henderson-Uloho, who served more than 10 years in the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women in St. Gabriel, in an interview with fellow Mixed Media artist Carl Joe Williams.

"Collateral consequences is the negative effect of incarceration after incarceration, which means, 'I went to prison. Then I did my time. Then I was released. Then I came out,'" Henderson-Uloho said in her interview.

“And that's when my time really began because I can't vote. It was difficult for me to get credit cards. I couldn't get a credit card.

"I couldn't get a bank account. You wouldn't rent places to me because I'd been to prison. I couldn't get a job, because I'd been to prison. I couldn't get a car."

Teamer said, “It just keeps going from there. And I think that was the main thing that stuck out to me about everyone.”

“I hope people see this visual representation,” said Teamer. “And it is clear that it is a system of continuous punishment, that people never actually pay back their due.”

Teamer also sees inequity when she enters a courthouse.

“Why is everyone in here black?” she wonders.

And though she doesn't address that directly in her pieces, she does hope that people will rethink how they judge someone who has been incarcerated.

“So maybe people will think, ‘Oh. Wow. I met that person and I judged them, but I actually don't know their experience, and they are doing probably a lot more stuff than I actually could even imagine,’” Teamer said.

It's a perspective she says she learned from her sister, attorney Cherie Teamer, who told her that she does expungement, helps people get their child support settled, and helps people get their licenses back.

“Just all the things that you have to do in order to find a normal life,” said Teamer.

“People are working on changing it,” Teamer said. But it's slow. “I think people still are kind of like, ‘You know, you do the crime, you do your time,’ and it just is not it.”

“I want people to just literally look at these pieces, and be like, ‘I guess that's not really how it is,’” said Teamer. “Or at least, with the concept of this project, it will be super clear that it doesn't work, and it needs to be changed.”

Ryn Wilson

In “Mixed Media,” Ryn Wilson wanted to focus on the way women are affected by incarceration in “Still Human, Still Lives – Women in Incarceration.”

“While the #MeToo movement is making great progress in our society when it comes to listening to women’s voices, that doesn’t necessarily include incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women,” Wilson said.

Most of Wilson’s work focuses on women’s issues in some form. For “Mixed Media,” she created still-life photographs and portraits. She also worked on some of the interviews with Williams.

Wilson's art was based on a question she posed to women who spent time behind bars: “What items did you miss most while incarcerated?”

The still-life photographs poignantly showcase the everyday items that were out of reach in prison. Dianne Jones named a curling iron, make-up, tampons, hair dryer, her bike and her stove. Chasity Hunter missed her phone; Dolfinette Martin craved creature comforts like a bathtub, a real mattress and pillows. She also missed soap, shampoo, razors and her favorite

sanitary pads. "I missed being able to buy the pads that I wanted, you know? Because all women ... we're not the same," said Martin.

While some women cited specific items they missed the most, some talked about more abstract parts of everyday life, which Wilson illustrated in the two portraits.

"Adinas mentioned that she missed sitting on the porch, which is a very New Orleans thing to do," said Wilson.

Henderson-Uloho missed human interaction. She read a lot. As a result of her experience, after her release, she founded a thrift store in Arabi called the Sister Hearts.

"The whole point about the thrift store that Maryam runs is that she gives (the formerly incarcerated) jobs and then helps them get any resources they need, such as housing, food stamps or anything else to help them get back on their feet," said Wilson.

"Two-thirds of women that are incarcerated are women of color, and I felt like that is involved in every step of the process. It's being arrested,

what juries and judges are deciding, how they are being treated, and poverty in society. It's a huge, huge system," Wilson said.

"It's about the system and the problems with the system," said Wilson, who reflected that no matter what crime they committed or for one they didn't commit, it's still about punishment. "They still should have the opportunity to be rehabilitated."

Blue House Civic Studio "Mixed Media"

On view through April 30

1700 S. Rampart St.

9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday

thebluehousenola.com

[Click here for the "Mixed Media" website.](#)

In addition to the exhibition, the studio has organized a number of other events, which are at the studio unless otherwise noted:

March 22: Mixed Media Exhibition Opening, 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Celebrate the artists, their work and the launch of the accompanying website. [Click here for more information.](#)

April 4: Coffee Hour with Adinas Perkins, 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. Learn about VOTE and how Perkins works to keep families together.

April 11: Coffee Hour with Daniel Tapia, 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. Learn about the Rising Foundations and Tapia's work at the courthouse.

April 13: Blue House Civic Studio Team and Mixed Media Artists Panel on art and social change, 2 p.m., at Tulane University Freeman Auditorium.

April 17: Coffee Hour with Jon Wool, 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. Learn about the criminal-justice reform work of the Vera Institute for Justice.

How to follow the artists and organizations on social media:

Blue House Civic Studio: Facebook and Instagram: @bluehousenola; Twitter: @blue_house_nola

Exhibition hashtag: #MixedMediaNola

Artists:

Ashley Teamer: Instagram: @ashleyteamer

Carl Joe Williams: Instagram: @carl.joe.williams

Ryn Wilson: @ryn_wilson

Organizations:

The First 72+: Facebook and Twitter: @First72Plus; Instagram: @thefirst72plus

Operation Restoration: Facebook: @OperationRestouration.OR; Instagram: @operationresturationtheor; Twitter: @theOR_NOLA

Project Detour: Instagram: @project.detour

Rising Foundations: Facebook and Instagram: @RisingFoundations; Twitter: @rising504

Roots of Renewal: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter: @RootsofRenewal

Sisters Heart Thrift Store: Facebook: @Sisterartsthiftstore; Instagram: @sisterhearts_thriftstore; Twitter: @sistershearts13

Voice of the Experienced (VOTE): Facebook: @VOTENOLA; Instagram: @vote_nola; Twitter: @FIPVOTENOLA

Women with a Vision: Facebook: @wwav.org; Instagram: @wwavnola; Twitter: @wwavinc

FOLLOW SUE STRACHAN ON TWITTER, FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM @SUESTRACHAN504.

You May Like

Sponsored Links by Taboola

The Shake Shack Ordering Secret You Need To Know

Wikibuy

This Amazon Upgrade is Even Better Than Prime

Honey

U.S. Cardiologist: It's Like a Pressure Wash for Your Insides

Gundry MD Total Restore Supplement

Shut The Front Door! The New Audi Lineup Is Simply Astonishing!

Audi Cars | Search Ads

If You Like to Play, this City-Building Game is a Must Have. No Install.

Forge of Empires - Free Online Game

Our \$5 Wines Are Better Than Most \$50 Wines

Firstleaf

Louisiana Senior Drivers Who Drive Less Than 55 Miles a Day Are Entitled for Extra Rate Decrease

Insured Nation

Earth Shoes Zurich Bern - Womens Dress -

\$125 - earthshoes.com

MORE FROM THE ADVOCATE

- The new plan for old Charity Hospital is foolish, Healing Minds NOLA president says
- Letters: A tourist laments New Orleans' challenges
- Body of missing Gonzales man who disappeared ahead of fishing tournament in Toledo Bend found
- Rabalais: What does being No. 1 mean for LSU? Great respect, a great start, great pressure
- More than 40 students removed from Tangipahoa Parish public schools for campus brawls

MORE FROM OUR PARTNERS

-
-
-
-

Recommended by

|