

The Artist as Witness

The Art Gallery

Eastern Connecticut State University

**“In the dark times
will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.”**

— Bertolt Brecht, 1938.

(facing page)
Sue Coe, *One of the Cruellest Beasts*, info?

The Artist as Witness

The Artist as Witness presents a group of artists whose work has a laser focus on conflict and suffering, commentaries on injustice, and provoking social change. It is a visual companion to our NEA Big Read grant for the graphic novel, *The Best We Could Do*, by Vietnamese American writer Thi Bui - itself a work of witnessing, par excellence. Bearing witness through everyday events, Bui traces her journey through Viet Nam, Malaysia, and the United States, melding together grief and hope, the personal and political, the familial and national. Our exhibition comprises works by academically trained artists; artists trained in the Community Partners in Action Prison Arts Program; and students of art, sociology and history from Eastern, Central, UConn and Manchester Community College. They all challenge us with their profound engagement, whether as direct participants, or sympathetic supporters and allies. Their witness is rendered in meticulous figuration, the emotions conveyed are raw: empathy, compassion, outrage.

Käthe Kollwitz’s desire to “bear witness” and “express... the suffering of human beings,” is mirrored by Sue Coe’s intent to “help serve justice and highlight the oppression that is concealed.” Elise Engler performs a daily ritual of witnessing of listening to, and illustrating, the daily radio news broadcast. In 1996, Nancy Chunn famously transformed the daily front page of the New York Times – with her comments, redactions, and drawings. Chunn channels our collective “talk backs” to the media into a visual record of her own stream of consciousness reflections on both the events transmitted and the world itself.

Revealing draftsmanship is common to these artists: its legibility is particularly suited to their evidentiary vocation. To look closely at a drawing is to trace the history of its making, and, in this sense, each drawing acts as its own witness. The artists follow assertion by Art Spiegelman that “history is far too important to leave solely to the historians.” Instead, they materialize history through the work of hand on paper and canvas. They give history corporeality, a physical presence.



They render solid proof of unjust events so that they become impossible to ignore. From the time of Goya's 1810's *The Disasters of War*, artists have chronicled orally transmitted stories and documentary evidence of the effects of war and incarceration.

The graphic record produced by these artists challenge traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality, as well as the idea that history can be a closed discourse, or even, simply, a progressive one. Their subjective commentary on 'injustice is an alternative to, and questions, the widely accepted veracity of photography.

The *Artist as Witness* brings together nine artists working from the 1930s to today, and features new, student work made for the exhibition. Each artist produces consciously political art in response to specific events, or circumstances; their work is characterized by figurative representations of people and actions. They return often to the same image or theme over and over again, to accumulate evidence and solidify their commentary. The *Artist as Witness* informs the ways we understand the ethical imperative to witness. It provides a bracing reminder of the danger inherent in being a politically committed artist who feels compelled to speak about what she sees.

The *Artist as Witness* brings us face to face with the political moment. It demonstrates the modest means, but immodest impact that has been the gift of fine draftsmanship for millennia. This exhibition is our modest contribution to the ubiquitous and necessary attention in today's art world, to social injustice. It is an integral part of Eastern's role as a public gallery serving the campus and neighboring communities.

Julia Tikhonova Wintner, Art Gallery Coordinator, 2021.

The Best We Could Do

Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do: an Illustrated Memoir* (2017) weaves an intimate tapestry of stories about the Vietnam War through memories of family and motherhood. Critiquing how dominant accounts of the Vietnam War often focus on a male hero and narratives of violence and brotherhood, Bui's work offers new perspectives through which we witness narratives of the Vietnam War. She re-frames the masculinist history, anchored in war, guns, and imperial aggression, and offers an alternative narrative of the Vietnam War through the lens of motherhood and birthing. Bui's work helps give voice to discarded and unrecorded history particularly of women during the war and recuperates them affirming their importance in understanding history and cultural identities shaped by such exclusions.

Utilizing tropes of displacement, *The Best We Could Do* speaks to war, migration, and refugee experiences. Focusing on birthing, bodies, and their relations with one another, Bui calls attention to the ways in which the female body becomes a site for reframing the delivery of children as well as the country of Việt Nam. Bui does not recount the loss of battles or the number of soldiers who perished in the war, but rather redirects the discourse of the Vietnam War to the loss of children, making the collective loss of war intimate and personal. The traumas of losing family and nation are reconstructed through visual and narrative forms of communal witnessing. Bearing witness, Bui "traces her journey in reverse, over the ocean, through the war, seeking an origin story, that will set everything right" (40-41).

Precariously holding together, the personal and political, and the familial and national, grief and hope, Bui's graphic novel provides opportunities to consider the palimpsestic constitution of communal witnessing. While, Bui is a direct witness to the conditions of war, she is also a witness to the testimony of her mother and father. The audience too engages as witness to Bui's witnessing of trauma and loss. Interrogating temporality, spatiality, and image, Bui's graphic novel addresses the ruptures of trauma and urges the audience to listen and respond. While we, the audience, may not have directly experienced trauma or understand trauma's voice, it is nevertheless important to listen and serve as a witness. Memories of war are complex and contentious and whose memories and voices are legitimated and counted as history are shaped by multiple factors. *The Best We Can Do* offers us the possibility of different archives of memory through our communal witnessing.

Stella Oh, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Women's and Gender Studies, Loyola Marymount University





Sue Coe, *Paul*, 1994, charcoal and collage on bristol board.
From the AIDS series.

(preceding page)
Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 2017 (detail)

Käthe Kollwitz and **Sue Coe** are outliers in the context of an art world that, even in its more rebellious moments, has tended to serve the interests of the powerful. Both artists found niches in genres— printmaking and illustration—that connect directly with the general public but are not heavily contested by men. And as women, each intuitively understood the far-ranging effects of discrimination and oppression. “Women are closer to the heel of the boot,” Coe observes. “They are forced into the roles of being the caretaker, the peacemaker, and as such are the last line of defense for the most vulnerable.”

Rooted in the real world, the art of Käthe Kollwitz and Sue Coe communicates with people in a visual language they understand. Though their styles are very different, both artists combine immediately recognizable representational elements with an expressive abbreviation of form that directly engages the emotions. Kollwitz sometimes spent years refining a single image, trying out variations until she found the most effective synthesis of content and form. “It’s always been a balance of form and content, throughout the history of art,” Coe notes. “The work must achieve a level of technique to convince the viewer to look at the sincerity of the content.” “Admittedly, my art is not ‘pure’ art,” Kollwitz declared. “But art nonetheless.” One-hundred-and-fifty years after the older artist’s birth, the magnitude of her accomplishment still resonates, not just with followers like Coe, but with those of us who know we have yet to achieve equality and justice for all.

Galerie St. Etienne, New York

“Graphic narratives have the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility.”

— Hillary Chute, 2016.



“While I drew, and wept along with the terrified children I was drawing, I really felt the burden I am bearing. I felt that I have no right to withdraw from the responsibility of being an advocate.”

— Käthe Kollwitz, 1920.

“The activists felt it was essential that they bear witness to the events. To bear witness is not only to observe, but also to provide proof and testify.”

— Andrea Bowers, 2006.

(facing page)
Käthe Kollwitz, *Death Seizes a Woman*, 1934, lithograph.



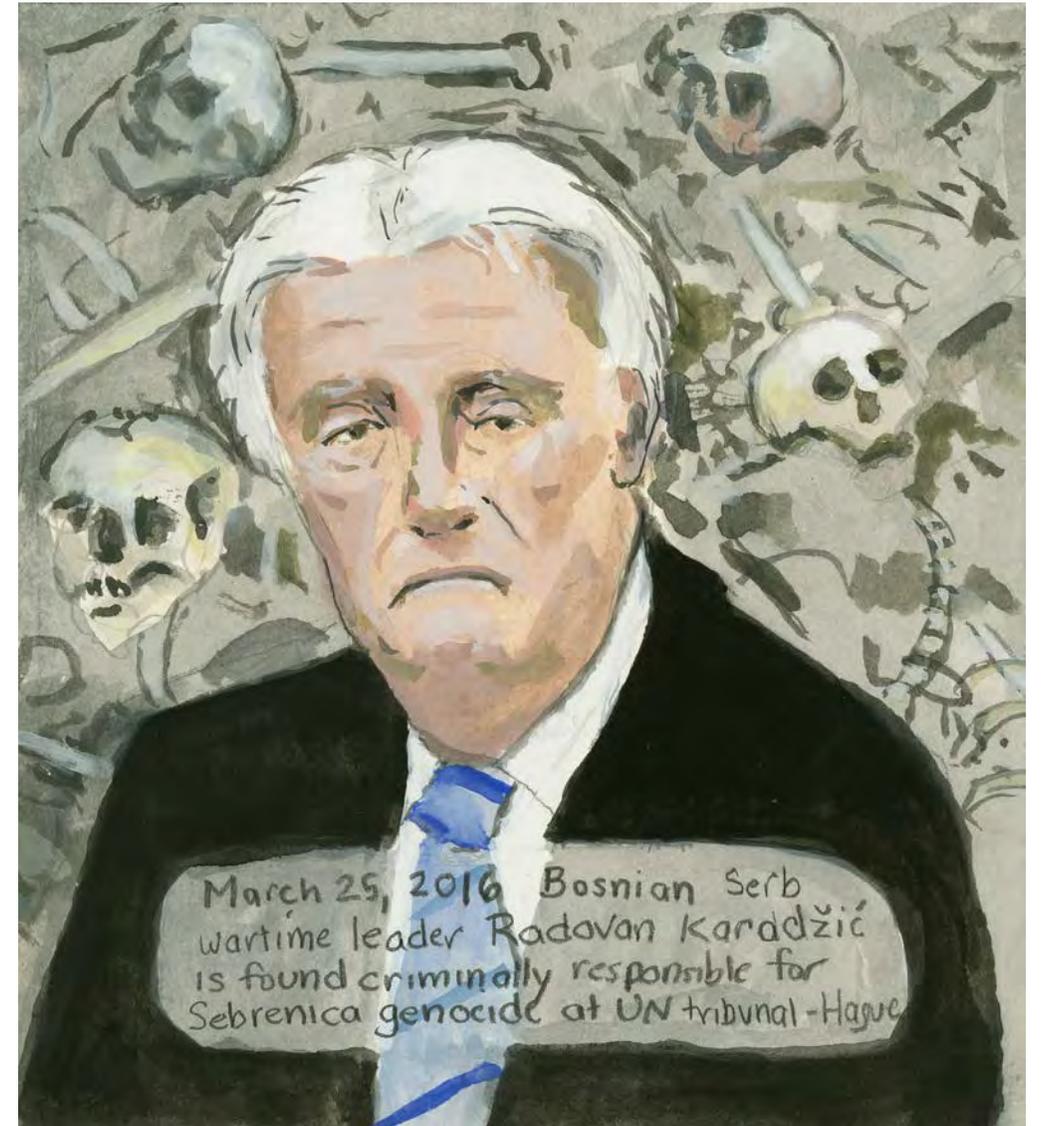
Michael Reddick, *Count's Clear*, 2005, pencil on bristol board.

Michael Reddick is incarcerated at Connecticut's Cheshire Correctional Institution and has been working with the Community Partners in Action (CPA) Prison Arts Program for over two decades. His drawings feature layers of pencil and erasure, and seem to document a struggle inside the paper itself, as much as a struggle inside the artist and the prison surrounding him.

(facing page)

Michael Reddick, *Wandering Slowly*, 2004, pencil on paper.





(above, facing page & following pages)
Elise Engler, *Diary of a Radio Junkie, 1888 Days of Waking Up to the News*, mixed media collage on paper, 270 drawings, various dimensions, 2016-2021. (details & installation shots)

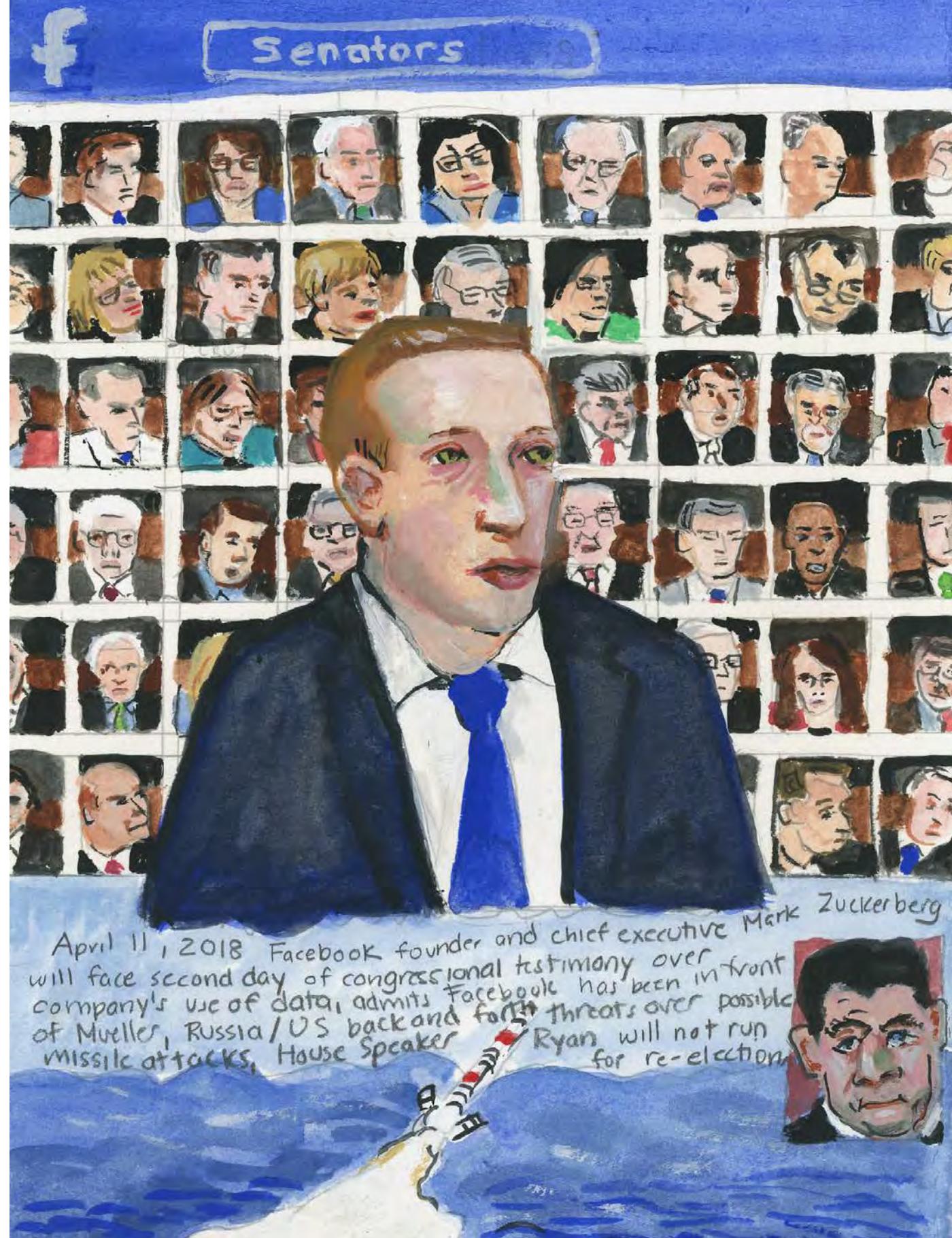
"For the Diary I had planned to depict one headline each day for all of 2016. I was not expecting to chronicle a prolonged drama. When Donald Trump ran for office and won and I quickly realized this was not the time to stop my drawing. His would be a presidency like no other, and I wanted to continue to document it, day by day. So over the course of five years, I carried on rising at the crack of dawn to catch the morning's radio news.

By the end of 2019, my work formed a record of one of the most turbulent periods in our history. I had no idea that the coming year would top it. When the Covid-19 pandemic began and George Floyd was murdered, an already frenetic time drastically ratcheted up.

My art has alternated from the personal; drawing everything I own, chronicling travels, or depicting block-by-block the entire length of Broadway in Manhattan (A Year on Broadway), to the political as with Tax-onomies and this Diary project. I never quite know where the work will land until I start and see where and how it all goes."

Elise Engler, 2021

A Diary of the Plague Year: An Illustrated Chronicle of 2020 by Elise Engler, 288 pages, was published in 2021 by Metropolitan Books.







“Out of the artist’s mind through the point of a pen or pencil comes proof that the world is solid, material. But the proof is never familiar.”

— John Berger, 1956.

On paper, and in his mind, **Ryan Carpenter** builds and destroys a desolate world. He plays out an ongoing story of loss, discovery, connection and disconnection. He is everyone and everything in this world. And, he is the witness. His drawings report back, and keep track, as paths are paved and pulled apart, and as he morphs from one being into another. The decaying hulks of mammoth robots loom – a reminder that a different, magical, world once existed, outside of his mind and outside of his drawings, in his youth.

(preceding pages)

Ryan Carpenter, *Jumping In* (detail), 2020, pen on paper.

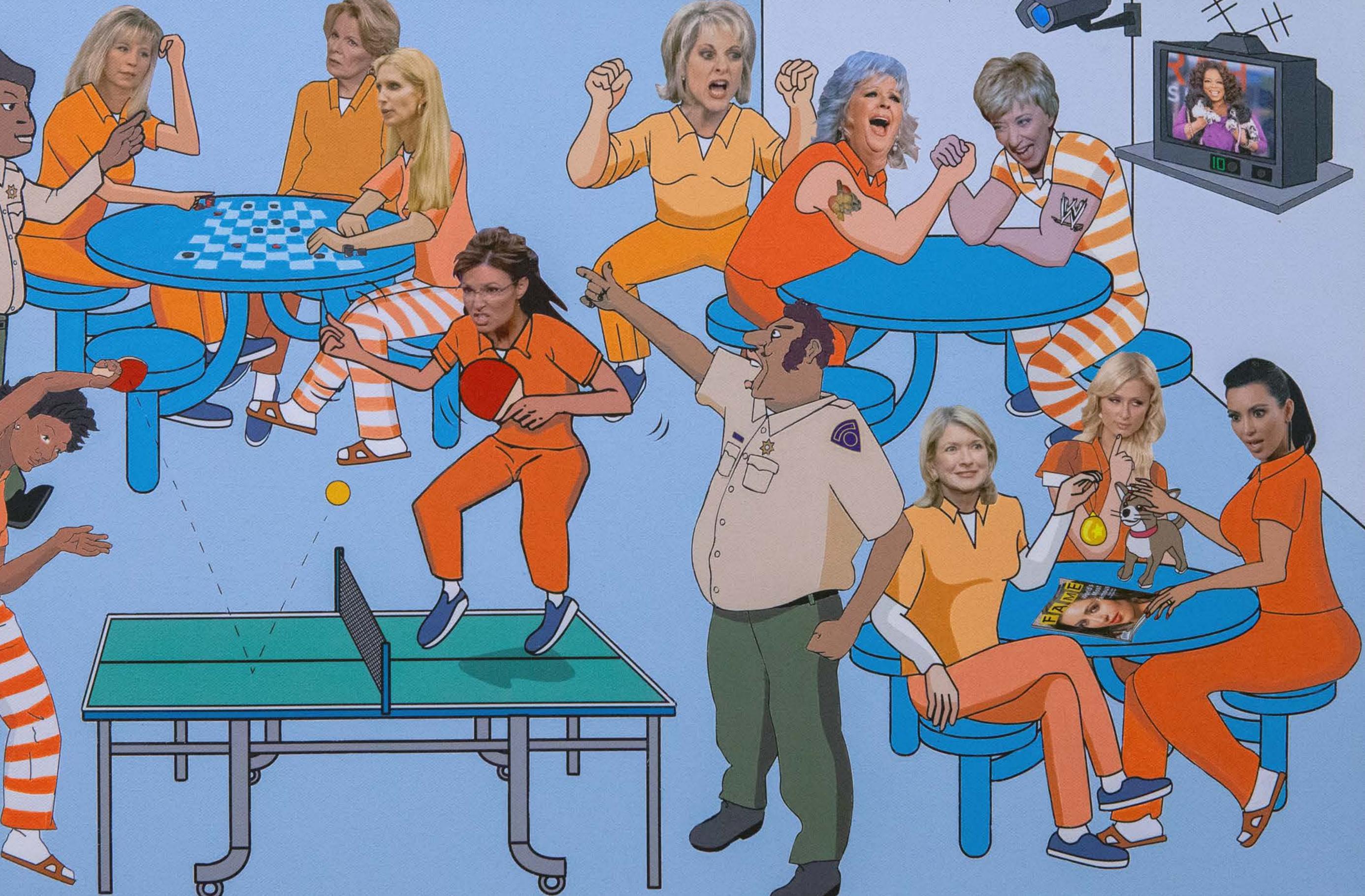
(facing page)

Ryan Carpenter, *Dancing with a Stranger*, 2019, pen on paper.



With a dose of dark humor, New York artist **Nancy Chunn** explores...appropriate text to follow....

(facing & following pages)
Nancy Chunn, *The Jail*, (detail) from the series, *Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear*, *Incarcerated for removing her mattress tag, and awaiting bailout by her friends, Chicken Little covered in the women's shower area. The Jail houses undesirables, crooks, pedophiles, cultural icons gone bad, products that should be banned, plus the dangerous batshit political crazies*, 2014-16, acrylic and giclee ;prints on 27 canvases, and 3-D printed sculpture.



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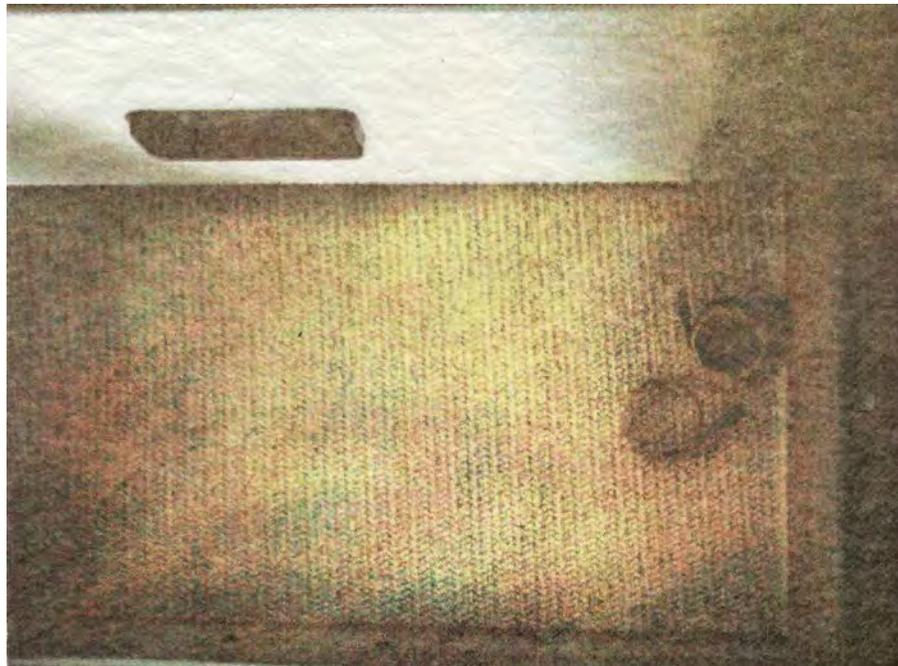
Michael Caron, *My Cell*, 1996, carved soap.

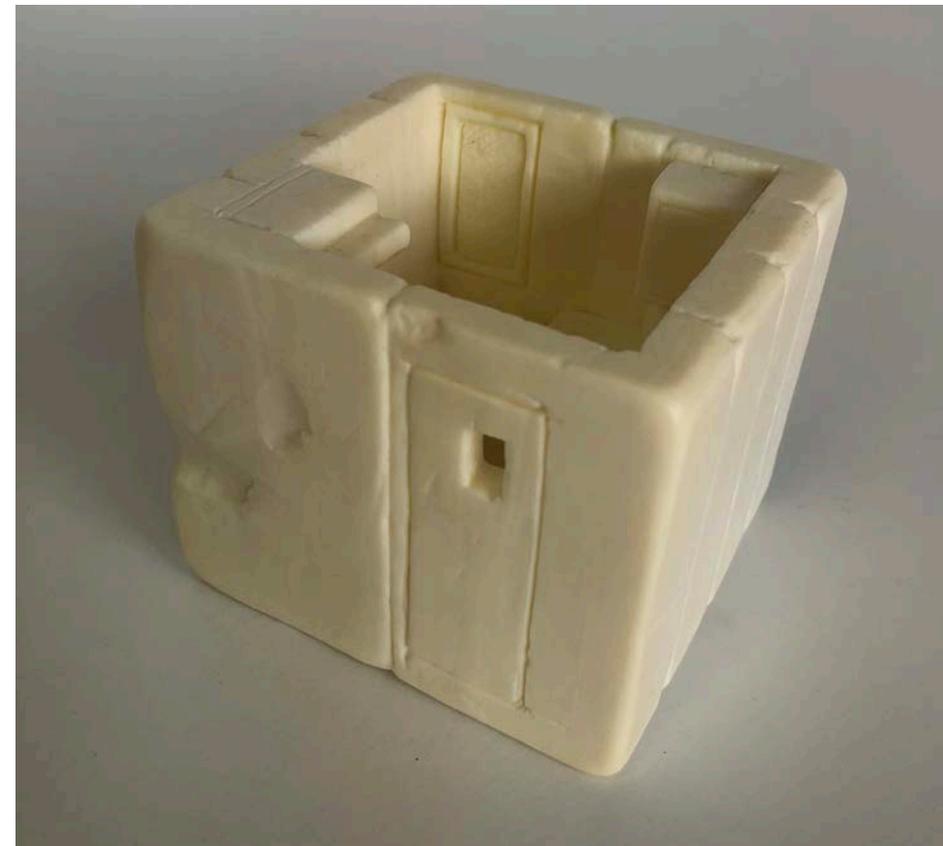
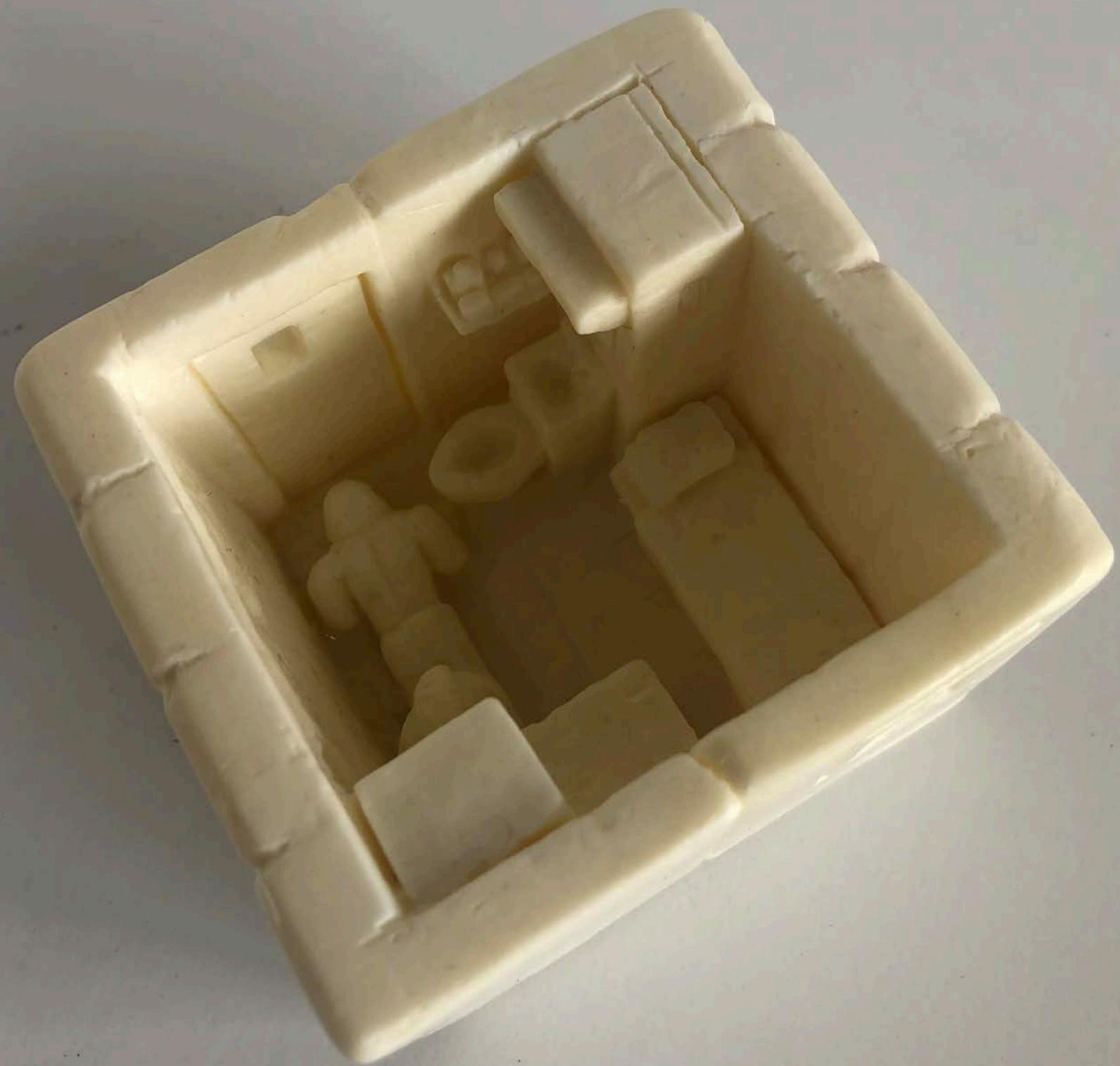
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Rowan Renee, *No Spirit For Me*, selection of 12 photo-lithographs, 2019 (details).

“My work is fundamentally in service of overcoming the shame and culture of silence that creates the conditions for abuse – especially within families. Abuse is simultaneously aggrandized (it’s only perpetuated by monstrous people) and normalized (when it happens, we pretend we don’t see it.) Abuse within the family gets even more complicated when it intersects with the criminal justice system, and the only remedy available is punishment for everyone involved – family separation and criminal charges with economic sanctions – instead of addressing the contributing factors of poverty, trauma or structural inequities that make it difficult for people to break out of the cycle. My work explores my own personal and family history to make space the nuances of feeling and experience that can rarely be aired at all, much less deeply considered, with a topic that evokes such strong emotional response. In this way, I saw art-making as a vehicle for healing for experiences that our culture considers unspeakable.”

— **Rowan Renee.**

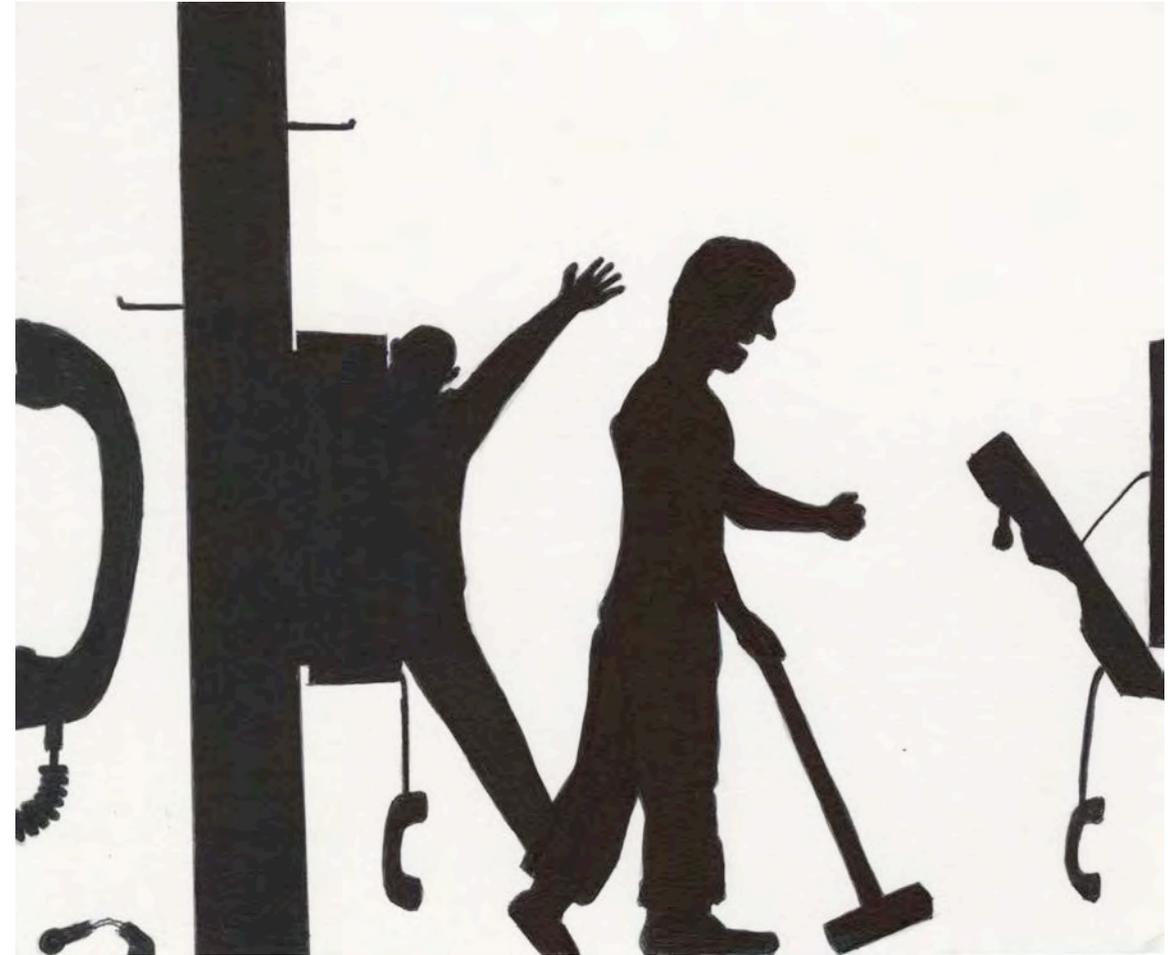




(above & preceding page)
Michael Caron, My Cell, 2005, carved soap.

“I’ve carved every cell I’ve ever lived in. It’s Easy. It’s something I can totally control. How can I get it wrong? I’m locked in the cell, and it is all there, every detail. I’m in that cell every day”

— Michael Caron



Lee Jupina Sr., *No Phones*, 2014, pen on bristol board.

Attending a CPA Prison Arts Program workshop at Osborn CI in Somers, CT, **Lee Jupina Sr.** was given a stack of small Bristol board, a handful of ball point pens, and an assignment: make a new drawing every day and use up the pens completely.

His first drawing took the shape of a spot of peeling paint in his cell. He filled in that empty, jagged spot with as much ink as he could and went from there, establishing a stark silhouette style to first document the prison, and then his own dark, tragi-comical vision/version of the world. Dark drops are often piped into his drawings from above. "It's the contaminated world finding a way in," he says, to infect his drawings.

(preceding page)

Lee Jupina Sr., *Faces & Places*, 2014, pen on bristol board.

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**The Art Gallery
Eastern Connecticut State University**

October 18, 2021 - January 14, 2022

Exhibition curator and catalog editor, Julia Winter, Art Gallery Coordinator,
Eastern Connecticut State University.

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Manager, Community Partners in Action.

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in their academic community and lifting me and many others up during this time. The
contributions of Professor Mark McKee, Gallery co-curator, our student workers and
interns have been critical to our success.

— Julia Winter.

“A pencil is cheap and can be carried anywhere, behind an ear, along with a scrap of paper. Art can happen, function as visual journalism, a record. I draw every day. If you stand on any street corner for twelve hours making a drawing every ten minutes you are recording social and political life in the way of a witness. “

— Sue Coe

THE
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PRISON
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[on cover]

Lee Jupina Sr., Drawings, 2014-19,
pen on bristol board.

1st row (left to right):

*What / Thirst / Waiting / The Stump / A Mind Game
/ The Act / Reach / The Third / Brainwave /
Untitled / Pressure / Ashes*

2nd row:

*Hell / A Good Day / Into Darkness / No Trust /
Darkness of Light / Take a Shot / Faces & Places
/ Broken Rope / Purification / Look in the Mirror /
Burn One / Get That*

3rd row:

*Bugsey / On the Rails / A Good Morning / In the
Clouds / Climbing a Wall / Should I or Not /
Dripping Atoms / Reflection / Beheaded / Fishing
Trip / Dark Cover / Red*

4th row:

*The Fighter / Relax / Stalker / Porcelain God / It's
not what you think / Intelligence / One of a Kind /
The Mirror / Just a Bite / No Phones / Nailed / The
Wall*

5th row:

*Daylight / Hunter / Rec Time / Locked Up /
Destructible / Mouse Hole / Anyone Can Enter /
Power / A Lot of Work / She's Square / What is
Your Plea? / One Too Many*

6th row:

*The Ole Mule / The Structure / The Passage /
From the Water / The Earwig / A Pint / A Pinch /
Under the Stairs / Laborer / The Leak / Running
the Mountains / Can't Resist*