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ARTS AND LETTERS

The Artists Taking on Mass Incarceration

More and more art is challenging long-held assumptions about the criminal justice system.

The interdisciplinary artist Sable Elyse Smith in her New York City studio on July 5, 2022, with works from her “Coloring Book” series, still in progress.
Credit...Tommy Kha

By Adam Bradley

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Posters from Dread Scott's "Wanted" (2014), a community-based art project that addressed the criminalization of Black and Latino youth. Credit...Courtesy of Dread Scott

Some of the most vital art being made today reminds us that we are all much closer than we might imagine to mass incarceration. "In cities in America, we're used to police sirens going all the time," says the New York-based artist Dread Scott, 57, who has long engaged with themes of race and justice. "We're used to the sound of police helicopters flying over our heads; we're used to seeing images of cops harassing Black folk; we're used to seeing wanted posters," he adds. For "Wanted" (2014), a community-based art project out of Harlem, Scott enlisted a former police sketch artist to make portraits of local residents who haven't committed any crimes. "Wanted for lifestyle choice," one of the posters reads. "The male was observed standing on a corner with other males. The suspect exhibited dress and behavior typical of alleged gang members," the notice continues.

The posters look so much like actual ones issued by the police department that they elicit double takes, calling attention to the overpolicing of young Black and brown people, and to the dangerous assumptions made about them. The message, according to Scott, is straightforward. "There are many things right now that are normalized that should not be accepted," he says.

For a nonincarcerated artist, venturing behind the prison walls often means normalizing absurdities: learning that a paint color you've been using for months is now considered contraband; discovering a collaborator is missing — sent to solitary, transferred to another facility or simply gone without explanation; reconciling yourself to the fact that, no matter how democratic your artistic practice, you will walk free that day and the people you are making art with and about will not. The art of mass incarceration, in all its forms, might just be the last distinctly American art we have left: a testament to our cruelty, as well as to our ingenuity — our irrepressible drive to create meaning out of darkness. Gaspar recalls a conversation she had recently with Christopher Coleman, one of the men from her ensemble, about the work it took for the group to transform a sterile room in the jail into a space for creativity. "What was that like?" she asked him. "It was so powerful," he told her, "that even the guards became unshackled." Art, perhaps better than anything else, can do that: liberate us, if fleetingly, imperfectly from the manacles that bind us.

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