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Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration

MARCH 2021

By Darla Migan



Installation view: *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, MoMA PS1, New York, 2021. Courtesy MoMA PS1. Photo: Matthew Septimus.

On View

Moma PS1

September 17, 2020 – April 4, 2021
Queens, New York

Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration is an exhibition of more than 35 artists interrogating the logics of the carceral system. In the eponymously titled book published on the occasion of the exhibition, scholar and curator Dr. Nicole R. Fleetwood argues that since we are living in the era of mass incarceration, art happening in the context of the prison industrial complex is significant to contemporary art and culture writ large. Through video, sculpture, painting, drawing, photography, and mixed media (including intricate and painstaking utilization of found objects), the variety of art practices in *Marking Time* are unsurpassed in their ingenuity and offer finely tuned analysis of the *long durée* of America's "law and order" ideology.

Many works attend to how people warehoused in cages use art to resist the disorientation that arises not only from being confined, but especially as feelings of abandonment are interlaced with the systematic use of shocks intended to undermine human dignity. In *Your Appeal is Denied* (2017), part of Aimee Wissman's series *Prison Postcards* (2017), the artist reflects on her rage in the moment that a judicial detail added 74 days to her supposedly completed sentence. As people subjected to the legal and extra-legal punishments often blurring the line between insiders and formerly incarcerated people, I felt the determined resolve by the artists in this exhibition against being dissolved by a parallel, state-authored narrative of the "bad" subject.

In pursuing the research for the exhibition—beginning from her own personal experience as a relative of incarcerated individuals and as a professor of American Studies and Art History at Rutgers University—Fleetwood explains how the felt measure of "penal time," "penal space" and "penal matter" may also be re-directed or repurposed by artists. As is the case anywhere, privilege informs the location and arrangements of the artist's studio in prison—impacting the scale of works, the scope of materials available, and the subject matter of the practice. For example, the scale of works made by artists often tracks privileges "earned" by building rapport with corrections officers (C.O.s) who might overlook art practices critical of the system or, at least, refrain from confiscating art supplies.

In the public program "Chosen Family: *Marking Time* Artists Talks with Mary Baxter," artists and activists James "Yaya" Hough and Russell Craig recounted how one's regular possessions always includes court documents and prison correspondence, bureaucratic markers that one exists within the system. I was stopped in my tracks by a work Hough made incorporating an email from the warden's office regarding the increased price of a "double back" meal, filed under the draconian heading: "Cost of Replacing Commonly Damaged Items." *Series of untitled works on paper* (c. 2011-2017) shows a slouching guard positioned as if riding the neck of a bearded figure in the open sky above a penitentiary.

The line between the criminalized and un-criminalized is also a space of intimacy—coerced, fraught, dangerous—but nonetheless detectable. Imprisoned people must permit themselves to posture in subservience in order to become well read in the language of C.O.s. In turn, some artists in the exhibition were able to manage their managers and carve out spaces of dissent—creating hiding spaces doubling as makeshift art storage for example. Worn playing cards in Jesse Krimes's *Purgatory* (2009) show faces pressed from newsprint onto slivers of prison-issued soap, materializing and metaphorically expressing the experience of being caught between the publicity of the mug shot and the social death of solitary confinement. If "penal time" is broken down by the relative measure of privileges or punishments doled out while being chained and

caged, then the focused attention of making—drawing and painting portraits or posing for a family photo—become symbolically and even temporarily disruptive to the goals of the state.



Larry Cook, *The Visiting Room #4*, 2019. Digital photograph, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist.

George Anthony Morton's *Mars* (2016) is a portrait in chalk and graphite showing a figure from the shoulders up. A heavy shadow focuses the articulation of line and curve at the neck and collarbone in contrast with the luminosity and precision detailing the facial features. But this portrait truly shines with its deft use of chiaroscuro around the halo of the figure's crown of hair. The ethereal effect works to position this portrait within the 500-year old genre of religious painting, seamlessly cutting across many interconnected worlds through a single sitter. In what feels like the polar opposite of the depth of respect for the interiority of the figure in *Mars*, the politically efficacious term "superpredator" was memorably taken up by Hillary Clinton in the 1990s to criminalize Black children and teenagers. The epithet is repurposed by Halim Flowers in *Superpredator* (2019) through his poetry on digital prints that literally write the artist into art history. In *Black Migration* (2019) one stanza penned in blue ink imagines how our increasingly destructive annual hurricanes mete out the mourning of African peoples at the bottom of the ocean. These lines of poetry curl around a 2019 *Wall Street Journal* article on Jacob Lawrence titled "Telling the American Story" to disassemble the old/new news of 20th century American painting, as well as the insider/outsider dichotomies at work in the context of both arts institutions and the corporate-carceral state.

In the video *Ain't I a Woman* (2018), the artist-activist Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter aka Isis Tha Saviour shares her story of how stress and lack of prenatal care sent her into labor one month early and the trauma she suffers after being shackled for 43 hours while giving life to her son.

Baxter has become an international advocate for bringing the movement for reproductive justice into prison abolition, echoing concerns for the well-being of Black families expressed by women's rights activist Sojourner Truth in her 1851 speech *Ain't I a Woman*. I learned from the Miami based collective, *Women on the Rise!* that girls and women have become the fastest growing population of incarcerated people in the United States¹ and I was especially struck by the presence of children expressing trepidation and strength in Larry Cook's *When Dad Comes Home #2* (2013). In Rowan Renee's *No Spirit For Me* (2019) the artist explores what happens when family secrets are publicized according to the logics of criminality.

The juxtaposition of the two large sculptures in a middle gallery anchor the exhibition. *The Leavenworth Project: One Ton Ježek* (2018) reconfigures hundreds of stacked cafeteria (hospital, school, prison, military barracks) meal trays in Daniel McCarthy Clifford's "anti-monument," celebrating the lineage of political activists and radical dissenters locked up at the Leavenworth, Kansas penitentiary. Sable Elyse Smith's *Pivot I* (2019) is a geometric horror perfecting the insult endured by visiting families forced to sit on uncomfortable stools that encourage spending even less time than allotted with loved ones. Together the two sculptures form overlapping encounters organizing the grammar of institutions. Children and young people do not become lifers through the statistics reporting conviction rates and unjust sentencing; they become lifers through the all-consuming calculus of a minutia of traumatic relations to state power.

The incessant repetition of the idea that a menace looms over America requiring encroachment on rights of the Other (see Richard Nixon's "silent majority," Ronald Reagan's "war on drugs," or George W. Bush and Barack Obama's "war on terror") hardly allows us to imagine the harm done to so many. But the art exhibited in *Marking Time* shows the myriad ways that the state, always spreading out and calibrating new tentacles, captures entire families. Throughout interviews with activists, educators, and artists (many wearing all three hats simultaneously), the different stories shared kept bringing me back to ways that "law and order" policies always work to obscure the families who are treated as both absent *and* part of the problem (i.e. responsible for constructing the "bad" subject) thereby redeploying tactics from Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 "Moynihan report" as needed.



Rowan Renee, *No Spirit For Me*, 2019. Installation view in *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, MoMA PS1, New York, 2021. Courtesy MoMA PS1. Photo: Matthew Septimus.

Does an apparatus such as “broken windows” ordinances (an inheritance of Reconstruction-era vagrancy laws) maintain the supply of “free” labor for global markets? In the construction of racialized subjects, geography—and specifically real estate—become location devices intended to cull and corral populations supposedly necessitating intervention by public institutions and always ready to meet demands for corporate extraction.

Alongside the grassroots communities collaborating to make this exhibition happen, if the productivity of economic markets (creating the gargantuan levels of financial support necessary to exhibit *Marking Time* at MoMA PS1) is based, in any part, on prison labor representing the most egregious wrongs of state-contracted carceral-capitalism, then what is the responsibility of institutions highlighting the interconnectedness of everything? When will prison abolition, and the “bad” outsider no longer be available as accoutrement to be extracted for cultural capital by the pseudo-noble artworld? In other words, how might the art institutions in service to cultural progress flourish without also incentivizing the status quo—effectively perpetuating relations of cannibalization?

The reality of our dependence on the carceral state and its contractual arrangements within state-sanctioned corporate imperialism may be a blind spot of our cultural commitments mimicking the out of sight-out of mind approach to for-profit prisons. Between forced and underpaid agricultural and industrial labor, prescribing profit-driven pharmaceuticals (see Wissman’s *Prison Postcard: Pick yer Poison or They Pick it 4 U* (2017)), overcrowding (now exacerbating the risk of exposure to COVID-19), and the exponentially widening circle of exploited family members, the conditions of the carceral system are the evidence against our progress. Fleetwood’s research with her collaborators shows that by maintaining the sharecropper prison system at Angola, for example, we encounter nothing less than the stability of systems which should be obsolete but continue to capture—even by way of appropriating community models of transformative justice and turning them into new protocols for “correction.”

1. Women on the Rise, <https://www.jillianhernandez.com/women-on-the-rise>

Contributor

Darla Migan

Darla Migan is an emerging art critic based in New York City. Since 2018 Darla has written essays on art and visual culture focusing on contemporary artists such as Bilge Friedlaender, Julie Mehretu, and Faith Ringgold. She completed her Ph.D in Philosophy with a dissertation on Adrian Piper’s contributions to B/black aesthetics and will enter the Whitney Independent Study Program in Critical Studies in 2021. Darla’s writing has been published in *Artnet News*, *CulturedMag*, and *Texte zur Kunst*.