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Between the bars: Maier exhibit focuses on mass incarceration in the U.S.

By Casey Gillis
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Artist Sandow Birk's series of paintings depict prisons within grand landscapes reminiscent of the Hudson River School painters (Jay Westcott/The News & Advance)

The inspiration for the Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College's latest exhibit came from a postcard that was a fraction of the size of the photograph it was sent to represent.

The card, sent to Maier Director Martha Johnson, was advertising an exhibit by photographer Stephen Tourlentes, and featured a stark, black-and-white image of a rural landscape with barely discernible bright lights in the distance.

"I was just fascinated by it," Johnson says, describing the image as "amazing and beautiful and otherworldly. I was transfixed."

Then she realized what the subject of the photo really was.

Those lights in the distance were emanating from a maximum security prison, and the image itself was part of Tourlentes' series of photographs featuring prisons in rural areas, "dotted throughout the countryside," Johnson says, in "these rural areas that would be totally dark otherwise."

Tourlentes, who lives in Massachusetts, began the series after a prison was built in his Illinois hometown.

"On the outskirts of town, the night sky was punctuated with a brilliant glow that changed my perception of the horizon," he writes in his artist statement. "This transformation of the landscape revealed an unseen human cargo held in time and place."

It also made Tourlentes aware, he says, that "we are living in the era of mass incarceration in the U.S."

The image on that postcard, and the significance of Tourlentes' series, sparked something in Johnson. She wanted to go deeper.

The result is "Carceral States," the Maier's 106th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art, which opens with a reception at 5 p.m. Friday and continues until Dec. 15.

The Maier's annual exhibition is meant to be about contemporary society, Johnson says, and mass incarceration is an incredibly timely topic.

"It brings up issues people are debating right now," she says.

Johnson admits it was a topic she was unfamiliar with, so she approached members of Randolph College's faculty and set out not only to curate the show but create a conversation about mass incarceration.

To that end, the Maier's annual Helen Clark Berlind Symposium, which is held every year in conjunction with the annual exhibition, will feature three of her colleagues.

J. Nikol Jackson-Beckham, a communication studies professor who has helped inmates at the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women earn their associate's degrees, will speak about Food Access and Incarceration.

Noël Wolfe, a visiting professor of American culture, who teaches courses in African-American history, the history of incarceration, race and law, will introduce a screening of Ava DuVernay's documentary "13th," an in-depth look at the U.S. prison system, and lead a discussion about it.

Art history professor Lesley Shipley will talk about feminist artist Judy Chicago's iconic 1970s installation, "The Dinner Party," which inspired one of the pieces included in "Carceral States."

"Part of it is knowing I'm no expert in mass incarceration," Johnson says. "But ... we do have a couple people here who do study this [who can] help us all learn about this. Hopefully, we as a museum can provide an opportunity for this conversation to take place."

The exhibit includes work that not only offers commentary but also shows “the power of creative expression for incarcerated individuals and how that can help with reentry,” Johnson says. “There’s just a lot of themes at work.”

“Not every idea we are presenting in this exhibit is negative ... because there’s a lot of hope,” she says. “In the power of creativity. Being able to tap into your value as a human.”

That idea is perhaps most evident in *Women of York: “Shared Dining,”* an installation created by 10 women incarcerated at the York Correctional Institution, a high security Connecticut prison.

It was inspired by Chicago’s “The Dinner Party,” which featured three tables arranged in the shape of a triangle with 39 place settings, each representing an influential woman in history.

“She’s thinking about a way to celebrate women’s history as an artist, so she comes up with the idea of ‘The Dinner Party,’ kind of like a last supper thinking about, ‘Well, who was actually cooking the last supper?’” says Shipley. “So she puts together this huge installation, and it’s all her idea and the imagery is all her idea but she does get a lot of assistance from ... scholars as well as craftspeople. It’s this giant installation that involves china painting, ceramics, tapestry, all kinds of really crafts-based practices that really are typically associated with women.”

“Shared Dining” traces its origins to 2013, when activist and art historian Elizabeth Sackler and Joseph Lea, a former librarian at the York prison, teamed up to offer art workshops to inmates there.

After Sackler showed participants “The Dinner Party,” they began calling themselves the Women of York and spent six months creating their own version of it.

Using materials available at the prison, they created tributes to women who were important to them, ranging from private people to public figures — including race car driver Danica Patrick and activist Malala Yousafzai — to the Virgin Mary.

“Shared Dining” was first displayed in an annual prison arts exhibition in Hartford, Connecticut, before Sackler arranged for it to be shown at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, alongside Chicago’s original piece.

“For incarcerated women to have an opportunity to express what’s going on internally for them — it’s a way to bring out in three dimensions the things that are within,” Sackler told *Broadly*, a women’s interest channel on Vice.com, in 2015. “I think that’s true for all people. [Art] is healing. It is certainly transformative, and that is true whether you’re behind bars or outside.”

At the Maier, “Shared Dining” will be on display in the room next to the main gallery with a video about Chicago’s piece, as well as a separate documentary photo series telling the story of a woman who was in prison for most of her son’s childhood, Johnson says.

In the main gallery, the work runs the gamut. Nine of Tourlentes’ photos — featuring prisons across the country, from Wyoming to Mississippi to Virginia — are included.

There's also a series focusing on what Johnson calls "fantastical" backdrop paintings in prisons, in front of which inmates and their families can be photographed during visits.

Photographer Alyse Emdur was inspired to create the series after finding a photo of herself as a child, visiting her brother in prison and posing with him in front of a tropical beach scene. She began corresponding with inmates and asked them to send her their portraits in front of these backgrounds, which she eventually compiled into a book that will be on display as part of the exhibit.

She also completed a photo series, taking images of the backdrops, pulling back to "show what is just beyond the frame of the prisoners' photographs," Emdur explains in her artist statement. "I pulled my large-format camera back to reveal the security cameras and windows and bars and the institutional furniture to show the contrast."

Contrast plays heavily into the landscape paintings of Sandow Birk, whose work is reminiscent of Hudson River School painters' elaborate, grand scenes — but with prisons tucked into the backgrounds. Johnson says Birk became engrossed with the idea of California as a paradise, until he heard on the radio that it was the most incarcerated place in the U.S.

"He was really struck by this conflict, so he went out and painted the prisons of California."

Duron Jackson takes a different perspective, creating large-scale graphite images of aerial views of prisons — "the footprints of prisons," Johnson says.

The smallest work is a series of 4x6 photos, from Virginia Commonwealth University graduate Mark Strandquist's "Windows from Prison Project," for which he asked prison inmates the same question: If you could have a window in your cell, what place from your past would it look out to? Then he and a team of photographers went out, made those pictures, and sent them to the inmates — who could only have 4x6 photos, hence the size.

Since the project began in 2012, it has grown into a national postcard-exchange program, interactive exhibits and a high school curriculum that connected incarcerated teens and high school students.

In his artist statement, Strandquist writes that his goal was to create images with prisoners that didn't further stereotype, traumatize or dehumanize them.

"The project started with the belief that by engaging with individuals as human beings (through dialogue and creative exchange), something powerful and politically activating could arise."