



Performance by the participants of the Prison Arts Collective, Friday, July 21, California Institution for Men in Chino

How Art Is Helping Southern California Prisoners Reconnect With Their Humanity

[Matt Stromberg](#) | September 1, 2017 | 7:32am

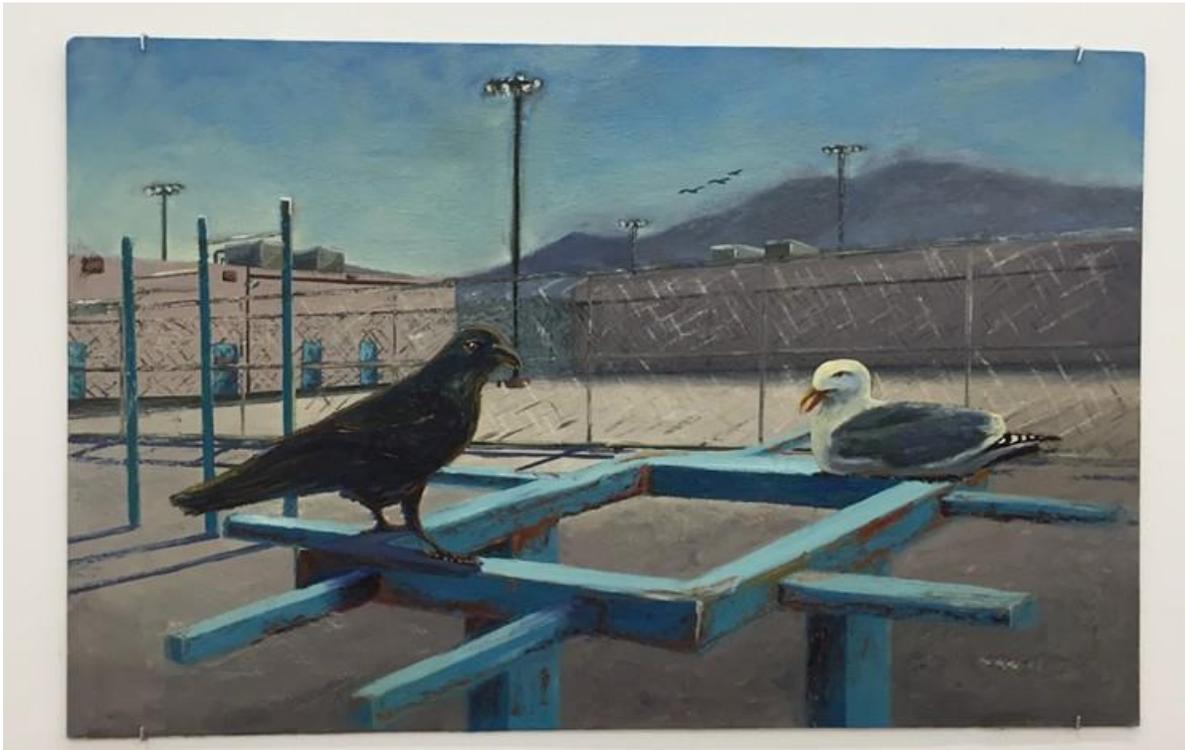
The yard at the California Institute for Men, a state prison facility in Chino, is a large, flat expanse of green and brown, ringed by chain-link fences, barbed wire and guard towers. This is where inmates in prison blues congregate for recreation or exercise, some of them lifting weights under the punishing Southern California sun, as guards look on.

At one end of the yard sits the gymnasium, an imposing gray concrete structure. One morning earlier this summer, several dozen prisoners and a few guests gathered there, not for a sporting event but to witness a multidisciplinary arts performance put on by the prison's inmates.

Inside the gym's doors was a hanging installation of colorful, three-dimensional words constructed out of cardboard and paper: hateful, manipulative, grudges, compassion, faith, redemption. This linguistic sculpture served as a backdrop for a performance put on by about 15 inmates. They took turns stepping up to the makeshift stage with their backs to the audience,

CDCR (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation) PRISONER printed in yellow on their blue uniforms. As each one turned around, he held a card that identified him in another way: son, grandpa, daddy, brother. Each man flipped his card over, revealing a drawing, painting or collage he had made. Between these presentations, a young man named Angel read a communal narrative of personal transformation that he had woven together from interviews with his 14 fellow participants. “Each individual laid a brick,” he said later. “Ultimately we built something beautiful, like a monument, a building.” Afterward, two men with acoustic guitars performed an original song titled “Redemption,” a theme that ran through all of the day's creative expressions.

This performance was the culmination of a collaborative multidisciplinary workshop organized by the Prison Arts Collective, an offshoot of the Community-Based Art program at California State University, San Bernardino. The CBA was started by artist and educator Annie Buckley in 2013 with the intention of bringing art to underserved communities through classes taught by her Cal State SB students. “It's an interaction with the site, it's about finding a meeting ground between what they're interested in and what we can offer,” Buckley explained. “It's not a one-size-fits-all. Our programs are each slightly different depending on what the site's needs are.” The CBA Prison Arts Collective is a part of Arts in Corrections, an initiative of the California Arts Council and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The workshop was funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



J. Tercero, *Birds Don't Know They're Free*

Buckley and her students began the program at places such as a local Boys and Girls Club and a shelter for teens, and eventually were contacted by administrators at the California Institute for Men at Chino, who wanted to bring the art program to the prison. An eight-week pilot program

was so successful that it has expanded to several other locations: the Institute for Women in Chino, the California State Prison in Lancaster and two new sites in Blythe, near the Arizona border. The classes include drawing and painting, printmaking, sculpture, creative writing, even yoga.

“All the classes have a balance of art history, art making and reflection. That’s how you grow your understanding of art,” Buckley says. “We bring in other contemporary art to show them that their art is part of something bigger.”

None of this would have happened were it not for the motivation of Stan, a soft-spoken inmate at CIM with salt-and-pepper hair and a trim mustache. Stan was instrumental in convincing the administration that the prison needed a proper art program. He had previously taught art to many of his fellow prisoners, leading workshops that resulted in the murals covering the walls of the gym. Somewhat surprisingly, Stan had no artistic background when he began his incarceration 30 years ago. Shortly after he arrived, he wanted to make birthday cards for his children and got an art lesson from a fellow prisoner. “I started learning how to paint and people wanted to buy my paintings and I thought, ‘I might be on to something here,’” Stan recalls. “I started learning about my internal dialogue — is it constructive or critical? I never knew anything about my internal dialogue. I started to bring about this change in my life, looking at things differently. The biggest thing for me is teaching other people how to paint. I’ve taken hardened criminals, gang members, people struggling with addictions, and opened their eyes to a new way of life, helping them bridge the distance to their loved ones.”



M. Nguyen, *My Choice of Weapon* (2017)

Although each class in the Prison Arts Collective teaches a certain artistic skill to participants — the preferred term to refer to people in the program — the real benefits go well beyond the skill itself. “They learn about collaboration and community. That’s what got them in there in the first place, not valuing community, friendships, relationships,” says Phung Huynh, an L.A.-based artist who has taught both men and women in the program.

“There were times when it got tough, it got heated, but that negotiation is a major skill and life lesson, being heard and visible,” Huynh says of the collaborative, multidisciplinary workshop, in which participants had to come up with the structure and content themselves.

Christina Quevedo, a lead teaching artist with the program, stressed the benefits of interacting with people from outside the prison system. “They’re getting [contact with] people that aren’t in the institution. They haven’t had that in a long time. Some people haven’t heard their first name in 15 years,” she says, since many inmates are referred to only by their numbers or last names. “It makes them feel human again.”

Shortly after *L.A. Weekly's* visit to the men’s prison in Chino, another presentation was staged by participants in a similar collaborative multidisciplinary workshop, this time at the California Institute for Women. Like the men, the women were tasked with coming up with their own theme and structure, and they had chosen “A City Without a Name.” On the floor of a modest chapel building, the women had constructed a small town out of basic art materials. Shoes made from construction paper lined the “roads,” imploring visitors to put themselves in the inmates’ shoes. The women had taken small rocks from the yard and written words of encouragement on them, intending for them to be placed back outside as small tokens of inspiration. A colorful hot air balloon made of tissue paper hung from the ceiling, a symbol of the freedom that eludes them. As at the CIM, the women used this installation as a backdrop for a performance of poetry and spoken-word narratives about their experiences.



An inmate performs her spoken-word piece at the California Institute for Women.

The participants had worked for weeks to make this come together, developing their sense of collaboration and problem solving in the process. “A lot of us didn’t know each other on the yard, but in here, we’re friends,” said a participant named Debra. “The city seems to have built itself,” said Porsha, the primary artist behind the hot air balloon. “It came together like a real-life community.”

The day after the visit to the facilities in Chino, CB1 gallery in downtown Los Angeles held an opening reception for a new group exhibition. Titled “Beyond the Blue” (and up through Sept. 2), it features work from several Prison Arts Collective programs, small bits of the prisoners’ lives able to travel beyond the walls. Portraits hang next to bucolic landscapes and fantastical abstract works. The white-walled gallery might seem a far cry from the land of prison blues, but CB1’s founder Clyde Beswick has a unique connection to both worlds. Two decades ago, Beswick served time in prison for a white-collar crime; he became involved in prison support programs after his release, even becoming a prison chaplain.

“Anything that can be done to improve their lives, their thinking, their creative processes, is worth it,” says Beswick, who notes that there were few educational or rehabilitation programs during his incarceration. “The bottom line is they’re people like you or me. They’ve just done something wrong.”

The CB1 exhibition isn’t just about helping the artists, however; it’s about changing the way people on the outside view their work. “A lot of people who saw the show didn’t realize they were incarcerated,” Huynh says. “That’s what we’re aiming to do, show them specifically in art spaces. They need to be in galleries. We’re careful not to tokenize their experience.”

Ultimately, no one expects the majority of the participants in these programs to be able to support themselves from their art once they are released. The Prison Arts Collective doesn’t teach skills that are directly marketable, such as culinary proficiency or automotive know-how, but personal growth, discovery and transformation are at the heart of the program.

“I knew that I was in the middle of something that was going to change my life,” Stan recalls of his artistic awakening. “That’s when I realized I didn’t need drugs. I just needed to wake up with a colored pencil or a paintbrush, and I was off and running.”

Prison Arts Collective, "Beyond the Blue," is open through Sat., Sept 2, at CB1 Gallery, 1923 S. Santa Fe Ave., downtown. cb1gallery.com/project/prison-arts-collective-beyond-blue.