

Prisoners Use Hair, Liquids to Make Art

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The Associated Press

NEW YORK -- M&M's. Kool-Aid. Human hair. Coffee. Lime juice. These are some of the materials prisoners across the United States have used to create artworks now on display at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

"My accessibility to art supplies is extremely limited," Anthony Throop, an inmate at the California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi, wrote to explain his coffee on paper work. "As a painter this frustrated me, so I grew my hair for five months to make paint brushes."

Throop's work, "Long Time No See," depicts the silhouette of a prisoner lifting a visiting child high in the air.

It's one of 22 framed works hanging in a gallery at the Film Society of Lincoln Center for a show that opened Thursday and runs through Dec. 22.

The arts complex, in an effort to reach wider audiences, has been offering space on its 16 acres to more unusual presentations than its standard classical arts fare, including such oddities as stunt artist David Blaine's attempt last spring to set a world record for holding his breath underwater in a bubble.

The prisoner art is part of a collection of 239 artworks submitted to The Fortune Society, a New York-based private agency that helps former inmates re-enter daily life, linking them to jobs, education, housing and, for some, treatment for addictions.

Titled "Insider Art," the show includes paintings and drawings by men and women with little or no formal art training who are behind bars in 36 states, in state and federal prisons ranging from minimum to maximum security.

While the society does not request that they provide the reasons for their incarceration, their criminal records can be easily obtained using their names and public records. What is required of each artist is a brief testimonial describing the work submitted.

Jesus Padilla, who painted "The Blessing" at the Correctional Center in Tamms, Ill., said the work was inspired by his ancestral roots — Aztec Mestizo, Kwahadhi Comanche and Chiricahua Apache.



This undated photo of a work of art created by prison inmate Jesus Padilla was released in New York by the Fortune Society, Thursday, Nov. 30, 2006. The work, executed in coffee, ink and dyes made from Skittle and M&M candies, entitled "The Blessing" is inspired by Padilla's Aztec Mestizo, Kwahadhi Comanche and Chiricahua Apache heritage. The piece is part of an exhibit on display at the gallery of The Film Society of New York entitled: "Insider Art," a collection of 239 works or art executed in various media by men and women in prison. (AP Photo/The Fortune Society, Jesus Padilla) (Jesus Padilla - AP)

"I am not allowed any art material (aside from ink pen) so I have to improvise," he said. "For this piece I used coffee, ink and dyes made from Skittle and M&M candies."

Crushed M&Ms and a blank postcard are the main materials used in the multicolored "Soul 2006," by Don Johnson, of the maximum-security Pelican Bay State Prison near Crescent City, Calif. Johnson is serving three life terms in solitary confinement for murder and for slashing a prison guard's throat.

A crumpled brown paper bag is the backdrop for "Caine's Redemption," a drawing done with a pencil and a lime by Ralph "Tony" Hobson, who is at the Correctional Facility in Pendleton, Ind.

The Fortune Society said it tried to "put a human face on prisoners."

"These are people with feelings and skills, and this is their outlet," spokesman Brian Robinson said.

Each prisoner who submits a work receives a \$25 gift certificate to buy art supplies, which are available at some prisons; funding cuts have eliminated art materials at other prisons.

The Fortune Society was founded in 1967 by theater producer David Rothenberg after he staged an off-Broadway play dramatizing the horrors of prison life. Called "Fortune in Men's Eyes," words taken from a Shakespeare sonnet, it was written by former inmate John Herbert.

Former convicts started to show up at the play, networking with each other and Rothenberg, who organized the activity into the society that now operates on a \$14 million annual budget. The funds come from private contributions, grants and the government.

An auction of the works in the gallery will be held on Dec. 13, with bids already open on the society's Web site for all 239 artworks displayed online, including sculptures. The money goes to programs offered by The Fortune Society, including English as a second language, job training, writing and resume building.

On the Net:

The Fortune Society: <http://www.fortunesociety.org>