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DARK MOFO 2018

We Asked Inmates to Critique an Art Show About Jail

"Any exploration of imprisonment is a journey to freedom."

By **Mahmood Fazal** | Jun 22 2018, 8:13am



Photos by Rémi Chauvin

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When you walk into a gallery your mind settles into a mood that feels contemplative and unclenched. You look around to see quiet chatter from suburban flâneurs. You see statement eyewear and long coats by German designers with names that sound like riddles. You become open to new experiences that shape or deconstruct your frame of thought.

In many ways, walking into a prison is the opposite of walking into an art gallery. In lock-up, prisoners rebel against the order in a desperate attempt to preserve their character. There, inmates become CRN numbers or, if they're lucky, derogatory nicknames.

As I approached Barwon Prison, a maximum security jail in Victoria, the silence was brooding. There were abrupt horns and calls for inmates from a distant loudspeaker, the prisoners officers were chuckling with frowns, and I was ushered into a side room to be strip searched because the scanners were

“playing up.”

In an art gallery people want to be alone with the work. In a prison, inmates want to be together. In a gallery setting, the baggage you bring with you informs your perspective. In prison, your past dictates your worth.

Barbara Polla is an artist who has attempted to bring both worlds together at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG). After working in the Swiss National Parliament, Barbara co-directed Galerie Analix in Geneva and curated several exhibitions across Europe.

A Journey to Freedom is Barbara’s exploration of “Art and Freedom.” It ties together works by contemporary national and international artists working across installation, sculpture, video, photography, and virtual reality, as part of MONA’s Dark Mofo program. “Imprisonment and freedom are two faces of a double sword,” notes Barbara. “Any exploration of imprisonment is, by itself, a journey to freedom”.

VICE contacted prisoners and sent in photographs of artworks from *Journey to Freedom*, along with a sentence describing what they were looking at.



In 1993, Ricky Maynard started a series of photographs of indigenous prisoners in South Australian gaols.

Cameron / 34 / Grievous Bodily Harm / Aspiring Social Worker

Here's what Cameron thought of the above work by Ricky Maynard: No More Than What You See

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Us kooris, brother, we're trapped in or out. There's no way out for us, and the artist catches that in his pictures. The scars on the brother's arms and legs, they don't hurt me as much as that one "Abo" tattoo. Because that paints the picture of what we've become, something that's not ours but theirs.

The black and white makes us feel lonely. We are lonely I guess but jail can be a colourful place too if you think about it. There's colour in the chats, there's colour when you eat together, there's colour when your family visits or gets slotted beside you. Doesn't mean it's all good colour but it's more complicated than that. There are tough fellas in here, and bright young men with big dreams and little hopes.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that Ricky is showing us jail the way we expect it. He's a photographer and he sees it. But not the way it feels. The two brothers walking along the fence is closest, but the fence isn't important. The important part is that they are talking. And that's what matters in here.



Nicolas Daubanes installation "Prohibition" explored the creativity of inmates with minimal means. The "facility" consists of alcohol mixtures generated by a fermentation method accelerated with the aid of condoms, fruit, sugar and bread.

Chris / 28 / Aggravated Burglary / Aspiring Mechanic

Chris talks about Nicolas Daubanes' Prohibition

That's some interesting hooch mate. It doesn't look like that in here. But I guess that ours isn't art. We're happy to piss off the looks and just get wasted. You know we drink out of habit from the outside to try and feel like we are outside, and escape jail for a bit.

When we get drunk on hooch, some think it's a sign of weakness. Like you can't handle the reality of doing time because you're drunk. Being drunk brings out people's real emotions, and feelings are high in here. Because we spend so much time hiding them and trying to strut around like sick cunts.

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A lot of the boys want to fuck inside too. They won't talk about it because they try to act all hard and that. But everyone loves being sucked off. And it's when your pissed on hooch you can have those conversations without feeling awkward. The hangovers just kinda do their thing, and you'll just nod toward your celly and it becomes a thing. Whenever you say should we prepare a new batch, it's code for we should fuck soon. I know where I stand. I've been in jail since I was 20. And it's hard talking about feelings when it's not a psych or chaplain asking.



Jean-Michel Pancin preserves the memory of abandoned prisons in France. For his installation Pink Palace, Pancin has used an original door from the Risdon Prison in Hobart and laid concrete that mimics the dimensions of a prison cell.

Mohammed / 34 / Attempted Murder / Aspiring Rapper

On Jean-Michel Pancin's Pink Palace

It's different here, it's opposite if you know what I mean. I'm sitting in that cell they're walking on, I'm praying here you guys are looking at it and thinking about

it. I'm trying to break out, just so I can get dragged back in.

You don't feel the temperature of the cell and how it changes. It's cold when you want it to be hot and hot when you want it to be cold. I have someone sitting by the door while I get changed in case someone runs in and takes my shit. Where's the paranoia? It's open. We're shut out. My parents don't even call me anymore. My wife fucked my best friend. And my cousin told me about it over the phone. That's how time does your head in.

I appreciate that the artist wants to remember the dead. Because nobody remembers us when we are alive. I sound like I'm complaining but this is the reality of shit. I go to bed and have to tell blokes to shut the fuck up because they're crying all night. The scars of our names are on the door of the cell. And the toggies raid us and smash our faces in. We bleed in the cells. There's blood of every prisoner in this cell. And we take it home with us too.

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Don't think about us when you see this cell in a museum, put your face on the floor, beat your head against the door, and forget about thinking. Just feel how it feels because that's what it's like in here.

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When I find a brand I like, I tend to stick with it.

- a Yes. Mostly out of habit, but I could switch if convinced another brand is better**
- b No, not really! I always go for the discount products**
- c Yes, definitely! I tend to develop emotional connections with brands**
- d Well...if it's the cheapest one**
- e Nah! That's boring. I like to explore new, innovative products and brands**

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