Cellblock Visions:
Set Free in the Penitentiary

March 3 - April 12, 2014

I showed the world how evil I can be, and now I want to show the goodness in me.
-Charles Mosby

The artwork in Cellblock Visions was created by individuals incarcerated in American jails and prisons from coast to coast, serving anywhere from six months, to life without parole, to awaiting execution. They became members of a society where, unexpectedly, almost everyone is making art using whatever materials they can get their hands on—food wrappers, toilet paper, soap, handkerchiefs and envelopes, the stuff of traditional prison “folk art.” Inmates learn drawing and painting from each other and from how-to books. Much of the art, cards, handkerchiefs are sent home, serving to keep families together, to give spouses and children the material proof that they continue to be loved.

In good times, in states and institutions where the goal is rehabilitation, art programs offer work space, contact with artists and teachers, and access to art supplies. For the great majority of inmates, it is the first time they ever made a picture in their adult lives—an explosive event and a transformative discovery. Because of where they are and their histories of poverty, abuse, and violence, many inmate artists, intense and obsessive in their approach, demonstrate extraordinary inventiveness. They paint without ambition because they are going nowhere, without ego because it has been battered to shreds. They tell the truth, without pretense or self-consciousness, unfettered by concepts or theory. This pure expression of
individuality creates a wide variety of style and imagery, and at the same time, the commonalities of their imprisonment color every piece: isolation, pent-up energy, profound tension.

Creativity in the arts stimulates a person’s better nature, generating self-respect and respect for others. This art reveals not faceless statistics or raging animals, as inmates are often portrayed, but human beings with the same potential for good and evil as the rest of us, capable of acting out of their highest impulses. They will be in better shape getting out than they were when they went in.

- Phyllis Kornfeld, exhibition curator

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