

Displays of Power

I've spent nearly thirty years making paintings of architecture, exploring our built landscape to understand dynamics in American society and shifts in our culture over time. Nowhere is our architecture more revealing than in our institutional buildings—often massive structures, designed to communicate our collective ideals and mythologies. Recently, my studio work has focused on two areas of inquiry: paintings of exhibition space (museums), and paintings of carceral space (prisons). With this show, I'm excited to present these two series in conversation for the first time.

Of course, all architecture shapes the experiences of those who move through it, but institutional space is particularly structured to communicate social codes and standards for behavior. This is true of both museums and prisons, but their similarities don't end there. The contemporary art museum and the modern prison complex are also related through their aesthetics: a predilection for minimalist, stripped-down spaces bound by poured concrete, a heavy reliance on the grid as a spatial principle, and they are both often notable for their massive scale, emphasizing the power of the institution (and by extension, the social system as a whole) relative to the individual.

I would also describe both museums and prisons as *hyper-visual*, where sight/ vision is a central concern or focus of attention, and it is overtly controlled by those in positions of power. In an art museum, of course, we assume the role of "viewer" the moment we step inside, understanding that we are submitting ourselves to a (mostly) visual experience that has been carefully curated/ structured within the exhibition space to promote certain objects, individuals, and cultural narratives above others.

In prisons, the dynamics around vision are even more consequential. For the guards, sight functions as a form of power; the space has literally been designed to maximize their visual access and authority. The incarcerated person is constantly surveilled and must accept this state as an essential aspect of their confinement. In addition, their own visual experience is heavily policed and often narrowly restricted. Access to views beyond the prison walls (through windows or during "yard time") can be extended as a reward for "good behavior" or taken away as a form of punishment. I have learned from my work with incarcerated artists that a key benefit of maintaining an arts practice inside is that it allows a person to reclaim some control over visual experience in a world where one's agency has been deliberately diminished.

I find paintings to be an apt medium for capturing the visual dynamics at work in these institutional spaces. Paintings—through the prescribed boundaries of the picture plane, through composition, through the richness of painted gestures and the tactility of surface—have the power to seduce a viewer and thereby exert their own form of control over visual experience and the conclusions that may stem from it.

A handful of books that have influenced my work are available to peruse in the gallery. These include:

Corrections and Collections: Architecture for Art and Crime by Joe Day

Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space by Brian O'Doherty

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander

Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair by Danielle Sered

The Prison and the American Imagination by Caleb Smith

–Sarah McKenzie