



One Nation, Behind Bars: Examining Prison Culture Through Photography



Jack Lueders-Booth, from the series *Women Prisoners, MCI Framingham* (Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Framingham), 1978–85

Forty years ago the situation in U.S. prisons was still, in some ways, normal. The War on Drugs was yet to begin (1982); federal mandatory minimum sentences were not yet in place (1986), though some states had gotten a jump on the concept — notably New York, where the Rockefeller Drug Laws took effect in 1973. Since then, the U.S. prison and jail population has ballooned fivefold, reaching some 2.3 million people now (of whom 40 percent are Black and 19 percent Latino), plus many more on parole or probation. Mass incarceration — and the explosion of related businesses that make up the prison-industrial complex — is entrenched in American life. In the late Seventies, by contrast, in some facilities and if you looked the right way, prison life could seem borderline quaint.

When Jack Lueders-Booth ran a photography workshop at the Massachusetts women's prison in Framingham, from 1978 to '85, the institution still allowed inmates to wear their own clothes. The velour sweaters and layered hairstyles in his portraits of the workshop participants give away the era. The women wear makeup, pose in cells decorated with memorabilia, or in pairs of friends. One holds the book Mick Jagger: *Everybody's Lucifer*. It is still a prison. There are cold brick walls, peeling pipes. But these are warm, soulful portraits that express individual personalities and bespeak a fundamental human dignity.

Lueders-Booth's is one of fourteen photo-based projects that make up "Prison Nation," an exhibition now on view at the Aperture Foundation gallery in Chelsea, and the theme of the spring issue of *Aperture*, the foundation's quarterly. The initiative addresses a dilemma: The U.S. has, by far, the world's highest incarceration rates. Yet little about prison life is widely known outside — the fictional portrayals of *Oz* or *Orange Is the New Black* notwithstanding — and authorities have, if anything, bottled up access over the years. The

exhibition's crisp, effective wall text poses the problem: "How can photographs visualize a reality that, for many, remains out of view?"

The answer: By using every possible tactic, getting inside the walls through education programs or by the favor of cooperative wardens; or finding oblique ways to convey the enormousness of the prison system and its impact on every canvas, from the individual psychologies of inmates and officers to the landscapes and local economies where prisons are spatial behemoths and anchor employers.



Bruce Jackson, "Cummins Prison, Arkansas," (1975)

Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick began shooting in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola in 1980, and continued until 2013; their project has appeared, among other venues, in the Venice Biennale. The time-series nature of their work helps dispense with any romanticism about prisons of yore; the exhibition juxtaposes black-and-white photographs of prisoners doing field labor in 1980 and 2004, and the similarities — lines of men bearing heavy tools, **guards on horseback** — underscore a legacy of brutality going back to the prison's roots as a plantation. The prison photographs Bruce Jackson made in Texas and Arkansas in the 1960s and 1970s extend the message, stark documentary compositions inhabited by a chilly, apprehensive feel. (Jackson also helped gain prison access for Danny Lyon, whose lyrical 1971 book *Conversations With the Dead*, a classic of U.S. prison photography, is not represented here.)



Photographer unknown: A guard at San Quentin State Prison, April 8, 1961 COURTESY NIGEL POOR

Less familiar is the remarkable archive of thousands of photos that the artist Nigel Poor came across through her work at San Quentin State Prison in California. Most recently, Poor co-created the revelatory podcast *Ear Hustle* with two incarcerated men, Earlonne Woods and Antwan Williams. The trove of photos pulls us back several decades, presenting life as seen by the now-anonymous prison guards who took them. These are often violent images — bruised faces, the impact of assaults and brawls — along with snapshots of prison ceremonies, football teams, a Christmas tree. One photo shows the dummy a prisoner left in his bunk during an escape attempt; another, a crude tunnel, presumably for the same purpose.



Jamel Shabazz: Pretrial detainees posing, Rikers Island, 1986 COURTESY THE ARTIST

Beginning in 1982, the photographer Jamel Shabazz worked seven years as a correctional officer on Rikers Island. Shabazz is known for vivid, often joyous images of Black and Latino life in New York, particularly in the early days of hip-hop culture. But with the escalating crack wars, young people began to bounce between the island jail and the streets. Back from the Army and offered civil-service jobs in the post office and the correction department,

Shabazz chose the latter. “Correction was the best place for me, because a lot of young brothers were being locked up and I had a desire to make a difference,” he explains in an *Aperture* interview. A 1986 image of four pre-trial detainees, young men in casual clothes striking an artfully casual pose — one crouches in front, hands open with a luminous smile — has the body language and easy energy of similar shots Shabazz made on Lenox Avenue or the Fulton Mall.



Emily Kinni, *Untitled*, Huntsville, Texas, 2017

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As we move to the present, we see fewer images from inside, and more from life surrounding the core fact of mass incarceration. In Huntsville, Texas, site of nine prisons housing over 15,000 inmates, Emily Kinni went to the Greyhound station and invited men newly released to pose for portraits, sharing Polaroids with them and often keeping in touch. These affecting images are likely the first time the subjects control their own depiction after years inside. In one, a young man has removed his shirt and stands in profile, revealing a tattoo of Abraham Lincoln on his arm. Another shows the lower body of a man readying to board the bus. He totes his belongings in two onion bags; his wrinkled hand marks him as quite old.



Stephen Tourlentes, “Wyoming State Death House Prison, Rawlins, Wyoming” (2000) COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CARROLL AND SONS, BOSTON

A different pathos haunts the long-exposure nighttime photography of Stephen Tourlentes, who has made a series of images of prisons in their landscape, sometimes up close — as in an image from Waupun, Wisconsin, where placid little houses on tree-lined streets give way to the halo-lit walls of a prison at the end of the block — and sometimes from a great distance, ultra-bright lights on the horizon in the Wyoming plateau or backlighting a row of palm trees that surrounds a prison in the barren Arizona desert. There are no humans in these compositions, just institutions that mark the land, harsh disruptions of the ecology.

There is not enough prison-related photography; at the same time, it is a renewing field, broader than one might deduce from this exhibition, in part thanks to the dissemination potential of social media. Everyday Incarceration, a curated feed on Instagram, is one place to scout projects on the prison-industrial complex and its community impacts. More broadly, the system's injustice and racial bias has become the subject of influential scholarship (such as Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*) and activist mass-media projects (such as Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th*). Prison abolitionists, long toiling in the activist underbrush, may be starting to get a fair hearing.



Lucas Foglia, Vanessa and Lauren watering, GreenHouse Program, Rikers Island

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Zora J Murff, Megan at 16 , 2014, from the series Corrections , 2013–15

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But a strength of this show is how it depicts artists as participants, not just documentarians. Shabazz worked in the system; so did Zora Murff, who spent time as a tracker for a country juvenile justice system in Iowa, and made portraits — blurred or posed so as to conceal the subject's identity — of youth he dealt with. Deborah Luster, who presents large-format portraits of inmates dressed for a prison Passion Play performance, has worked on prisons and violence since the 1990s, spurred by her mother's assassination in 1988 by a contract killer. The multimedia artist Sable Elyse Smith shares pages from her artist's book that centers on her relationship with her long-incarcerated father. Here, the material spills out of photography and into the epistolary, with a cheery handwritten letter ("What it do