

Aperture Traveling Exhibitions

# Prison Nation

Photographs by Deborah Luster, Emily Kinni, Lucas Foglia, Jamel Shabazz, Bruce Jackson, Jack Lueders-Booth, Zora Murff, Stephen Turlentes, Joseph Rodriguez, Sable Elyse Smith, Jesse Krimes, and Nigel Poor.



Sable Elyse Smith

# Prison Nation

Most prisons and jails across the United States do not allow prisoners to have access to cameras. At a moment when an estimated 2.2 million people are incarcerated in the US, 3.8 million people are on probation, and 870,000 former prisoners are on parole, how can images tell the story of mass incarceration when the imprisoned don't have control over their own representation? How can photographs visualize a reality that disproportionately affects people of color, and, for many, remains outside of view? Coinciding with Aperture magazine's spring 2018 issue, "Prison Nation," this exhibition addresses the unique role photography plays in creating a visual record of this national crisis, despite the increasing difficulty of gaining access inside prisons.

Since its early years, photography has been used to create and reinforce typologies of criminality, often singling out specific groups of people. Today, it is essential for photographers to provide urgent counterpoints and move beyond simplistic descriptions of the "criminal" or the imprisoned. Much of the work gathered here—from a recently discovered archive at San Quentin in California to portraits of prisoners participating in a garden program at Rikers Island in New York City or performing a passion play at Louisiana's Angola prison, a facility located on the site of a former slave plantation—underscores the humanity and individuality of those incarcerated. Some projects explore the prison as an omnipresent feature of the American landscape, often serving as a local economic engine, or delve into the living conditions and social systems of prisons, while others address the difficult process of reentering society after incarceration. One series was produced in prison: Jesse Krimes made 292 image transfers with prison-issued soap while he served a five-year sentence.

Incarceration impacts all of us. Americans, even those who have never been to a prison or had a relative incarcerated, are all implicated in a form of governance that uses prison as a solution to many social, economic, and political problems. Empathy and political awareness are essential to creating systemic change—and through Aperture magazine, this exhibition, and the accompanying series of public programs, "Prison Nation" may provoke us to see parts of ourselves in the lives of those on the inside.

## Contents:

Includes approximately 90 photographs in a variety of sizes. Also included is an installation of Sable Elyse Smith's book *Landscapes and Playgrounds*; Nigel Poor's podcast *Ear Hustle*; and *Purgatory*, an installation of 300 prison-issued soap remnants by Jesse Krimes.

Participation fee:  
\$7500 for an 8-week showing

Availability:  
Beginning Spring 2018

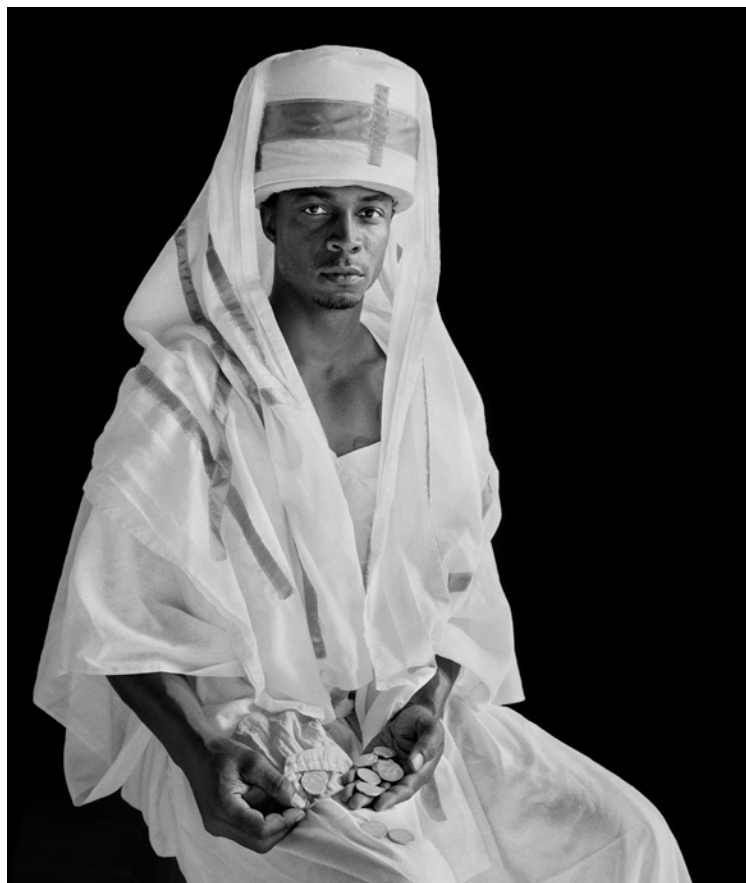
Related publication:  
"Prison Nation"  
Aperture Magazine

Contact information:  
Annette Booth  
212.946.7128  
aboath@aperture.org  
aperture.org/traveling-exhibitions



# Deborah Luster

In 2013, Deborah Luster, known for her photographic essays on the nature of crime and punishment, documented *The Life of Jesus Christ*, a passion play being performed for the general public at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, a maximum-security prison. The play was an opportunity to humanize incarcerated people for a non-imprisoned audience. Luster's striking portraits, with their simple backdrops and luminous lighting, depict the intense individuality of the prisoners in their costumes.





# Jack Lueders-Booth

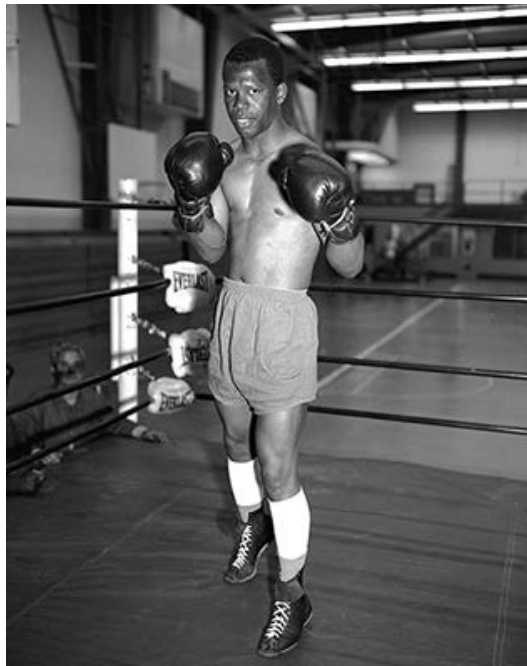


For four years, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the United States was ramping up a decades-long war on drugs, Jack Lueders-Booth photographed the inmates of one of the country's oldest women's prisons. In this series of intimate and challenging portraits, there are no barbed-wire fences, rusting metal bars, or khaki uniforms; instead, the women, in their own clothes and often among friends, stare directly into the camera.



# Collection by Nigel Poor

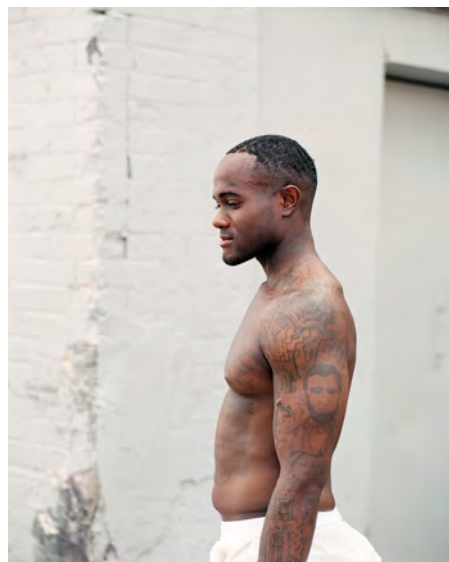
While teaching a history of photography course at San Quentin State Prison, Nigel Poor stumbled on an astonishing visual archive, some ten thousand images depicting prison life at its most murderous and its most mundane. "It's everything about life in prison that you see when you go in there," Poor said, "the most depressing and funny and bizarre." Most recently, Poor is also a cocreator of Ear Hustle, a widely-acclaimed podcast released in 2017 and produced entirely inside San Quentin.





# Emily Kinni

Huntsville, Texas, is one of the largest prison towns in the United States. In her latest series, Emily Kinni photographed men recently released from Huntsville, waiting at a Greyhound bus station several blocks from the prison. Kinni's quiet, sensitive portraits and landscapes portray the transition toward uncertain freedom, as ex-detainees navigate passage to their new lives, carrying with them mesh bags with their personal belongings. Kinni's series appears to ask, When and how will these men truly feel free?



# Zora Murff

From 2012 to 2015, Zora Murff photographed young people at Iowa's Linn County Juvenile Detention and Diversion Services. The state requires that the identities of minors not be revealed, a restriction that Murff turns into a poignant artistic strategy, as he reflects on how incarceration can erase identity and humanity.





# Joseph Rodriguez



In the 1980s, after serving time on Rikers Island, Joseph Rodriguez began what would become a career-long account of the criminal justice system. One such account, from 2008, is series about reentry, which focuses on individuals at Walden House, a transitional treatment center in Los Angeles for men, women, and children. "Not everybody makes it," Rodriguez says. But, he adds, "we don't all stay in this darkness."





# Stephen Turlentes

Stephen Turlentes's serial photographic study, *Of Length and Measures: Prison and the American Landscape* (1996–ongoing), documents how the expansive carceral system materializes within local environments of small towns, rural communities, and urban neighborhoods. Taken at an expansive distance, these nightscapes capture the radiant glow of the high-intensity LED lights that render the facility grounds visible to the armed guards on night duty. These points of light signal the paradoxical role of these correctional facilities in diminishing the lives of those inside, while simultaneously sustaining the lives of small towns and neighborhoods that depend on these institutions for local employment and revenue.

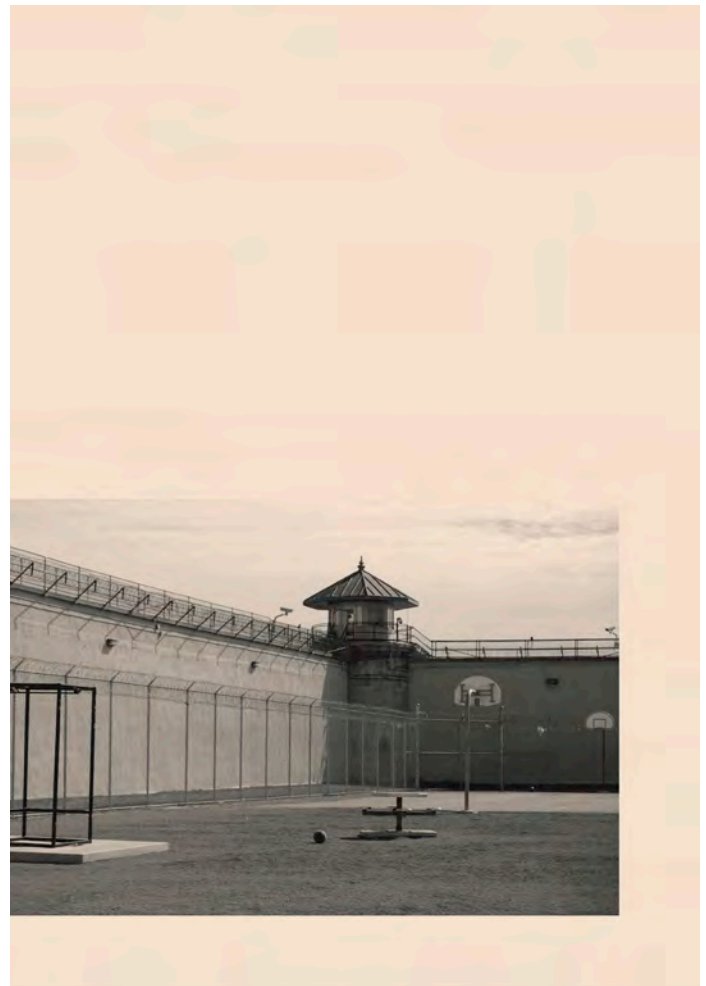


# Sable Elyse Smith



Landscapes & Playgrounds (2017), Sable Elyse Smith's recent artist's book, is a meditation on two sites of the prison environment after which the book takes its name. Amid a series of small photographs that are never quite center-aligned, some awash in hues of turquoise and beige, or overlaid with blocks of solid color, language becomes essential. One can glimpse, through handwritten letters, the intimacy between an incarcerated father and a daughter that is not theirs alone, but one embedded in surveillance.

**WE ARE A WEIRD  
TRIANGLE OF SILENCE AND  
SMILES AND PAUSES, OF  
STEPPING BACKWARDS ONE  
FOOT AFTER ANOTHER AFTER  
ANOTHER UNTIL WE'VE  
FOUND THE COLD CORNER OF  
A WALL. IT STRAIGHTENS  
MY BACK. I TRY TO STAND  
FLAT AGAINST IT, KNOWING  
THAT MY BODY HOLDS A  
WEIGHT WAY BEFORE MY  
MEMORY. AND I CAN ONLY  
THANK IT FOR NOT CREATING  
THE LANGUAGE AROUND  
ITSELF.**





# Lucas Foglia

In 2014, Lucas Foglia, known for his portraits of the American West and off-the-grid communities in the rural South, photographed inmates at two of the five organic gardens on Rikers Island, part of America's first program devoted to prison horticultural therapy. The island jail complex in New York, recently named one of the country's ten worst correctional facilities, houses roughly ten thousand offenders at any given time, most of whom are waiting to be tried and sentenced. Foglia's images restore a measure of respect to Rikers inmates who participate in the GreenHouse program. "It's the only place where we feel like human beings," one recalled.



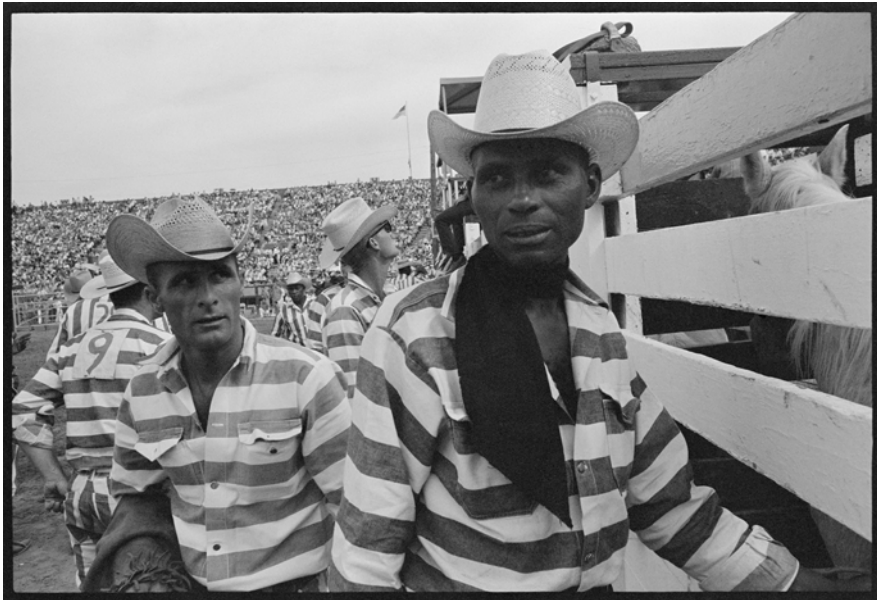
# Jamel Shabazz

Born in Brooklyn, Jamel Shabazz has followed in the footsteps of concerned photographers James Van Der Zee and Gordon Parks by focusing on communities of color in New York. At the age of twenty-three, fresh out of the army, Shabazz saw an opportunity to make a difference and became a corrections officer at Rikers Island, all the while keeping his camera on hand. In an conversation with Zanirah Shabazz and Lorenzo Steele, he reflects, "I think it's very important to show this work to help people see the human side of those incarcerated. We hear about prisons. But, what is the face of the inmate? What does the inmate look like?"

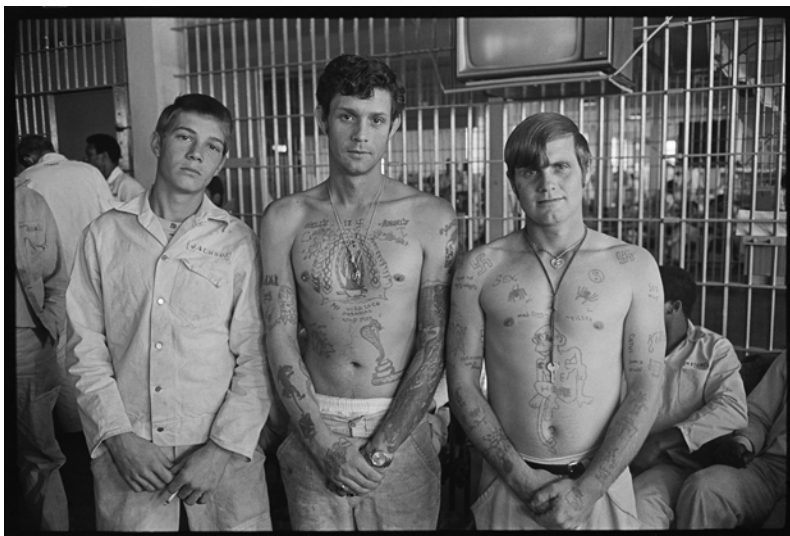




# Bruce Jackson



Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, Bruce Jackson, an oral historian, folklorist, and photographer, compiled extensive studies of prisoners in Texas and Arkansas state prisons, often located on the sites of former slave plantations. Of the work, Jackson says that his aim was to record “the ways of prison life, the factors that make for an independent world: the language and code, the stories and sayings, and, sometimes, the songs.” Jackson has continued his committed engagement with the U.S. prison system for decades since, yet his important documentation hasn’t received the attention it deserves.



# Jesse Krimes

In 2009, Jesse Krimes—who studied studio art at Millersville University and is now an activist for prison reform—was sentenced to seventy months in prison for a non-violent drug offense. Until his release, in 2013, Krimes made clandestine works of art, often with ingenious methods of transferring photographic images from newspapers onto prison-issued bars of soap or sheets using hair gel purchased from the commissary, and sent them home, piece by piece, through the mail.





# Chandra McCormick & Keith Calhoun



"Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun's work *Slavery: The Prison Industrial Complex*, begun in the early 1980s and ongoing to this day, shows the continuation of this violence through photographs of life at Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary," explains historian Sarah Lewis in the pages of "Prison Nation." The husband-and-wife team has been documenting their home of New Orleans for the past twenty-five years with a focus on social and cultural history. *Slavery* restores humanity and visibility to the inmates at Angola, a 18,000-acre prison farm, where, as recently as the 1980s, prisoners received write-ups for not picking cotton fast enough.

