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REALITY CHECK COMICS
Joseph R. Dole

Undoing the Carceral State

A visual protest against injustice

Joseph Dole is an artist, author and criminal justice scholar. He's also been locked up in Illinois prisons for the past 26 years, since he was 22. One of his books, *Control Units and Supermaxes*, about the destructive effects of extended solitary confinement, he wrote while inside the near-total isolation and sensory deprivation of a supermax prison. In 2022, Dole was awarded a grant from Illinois Humanities to organize this exhibition. He commissioned 13 other artists, men imprisoned with him at Stateville Correctional Center, to create works that responded to a simple prompt: What's something about the prison system that people on the outside don't understand?

That lack of understanding—the disconnect between people inside and outside of prison—is an intentional part of the American criminal system. Prisons are remote and largely inaccessible. Communication with incarcerated people is made difficult and sometimes forbidden. And the tough-on-crime policies that fueled mass incarceration have relied on a rhetoric of fear that conjures up images of "inmates" as irredeemable monsters deserving of permanent punishment.

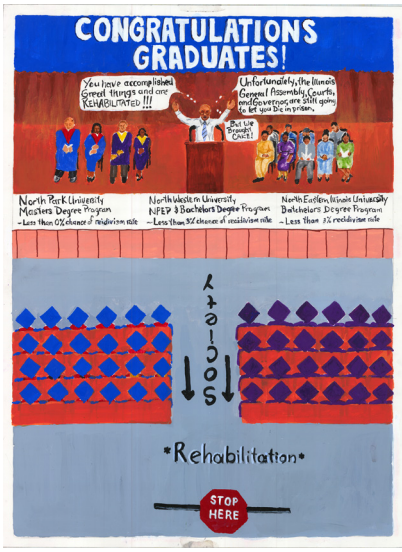
Undoing the Carceral State is an effort to dispel the myths. The 31 works included here—illustrations, paintings, comics, satirical retellings of received narratives—represent a resistance to being warehoused and disappeared. In their outrage, honesty and humor, the art is also an attempt to bridge the gap of incomprehension. The works explore the contexts and conditions of the artists' lives in prison. They cover everything from policing to the pain and destruction caused by long-term incarceration.

"Men come to prison as a punishment, not for punishment," the British carceral reformer Alexander Paterson wrote in the 1920s. But as several of the works in this exhibition reveal, prison for these artists has deprived them not only of liberty but also of their physical well-being, their health, safety, and nutrition. Stateville, a maximum-security prison about an hour outside Chicago, was built more than a century ago and has been allowed to deteriorate. The temperatures tend to extremes of heat or cold. There's black mold, falling concrete and crumbling lead paint. For years, staff has been told not to drink the water inside because it's contaminated. But the men locked up in Stateville don't have that luxury. In his painting of the prison's kitchen, Ernesto Valle shows that the men in custody there still eat food cooked in the contaminated water from giant vats labeled "poison" and "radium." They still shower in it. And confined to their cells, as Valle displays in another painting *My Water is Toxic*, they often have no other choice but to drink it.

Many of the incarcerated artists in this exhibition are serving natural life sentences; the rest of them have been condemned to terms so long– from 45 years to 80 years–that they essentially amount to the same thing. They are among the roughly 200,000 people in U.S. prisons right now sentenced to grow old and likely die in prison. To put that in historical perspective: fifty years ago, at the start of the mass incarceration era, 200,000 was the total of all the people locked up in every state and federal prison across the country. A few of the works in *Undoing the Carceral State* contend with the ways that extreme sentences have become commonplace. For the cover of *Reality Check Comics*, a series by Dole, he depicts Oprah Winfrey as a judge who joyously dispenses excessively long sentences as if she's gifting free cars: "You get a life sentence! You get a life sentence!" In Luis Trevino's work,

Excessive Sentencing, the proverbial "books" a judge throws at a defendant display the names of different "tough-on-crime" laws that have built up sentences over the decades and eliminated many opportunities for release— "truth in sentencing," "firearm enhancements," "felony murder," "life without parole."

Several of the artists in their work wrestle with a fundamental question about their lives and probable deaths in a cell. *What is the point of prison? What do we, as a society, want an extremely long punishment to accomplish?* The United States locks up more people than any other country, about 1 in 6 of all the incarcerated people in the world. This thing we do more than anyone else, you'd think we'd have a clear answer to why we do it. Kenneth Key's *Prelude to the 13th Amendmen*t feels like a fever dream of America's unrealized ideals, with the flames from the Statue of Liberty's torch illuminating the faces of Black men and women locked behind bars. The painting also includes text accusing Illinois of violating its own constitution: the article stating that the objective of incarceration is "restoring the offender to useful citizenship." Illinois abolished parole in 1978 (a fact that appears in a number of the artworks), and only people convicted before 1978 are still eligible to come up for a parole review. Of the 29,000 people currently incarcerated in the state, fewer than a hundred (and none of the men in this exhibition) have the possibility of parole. So what kind of personal change might lead to someone finally being released? *Illinois Dept. of Corrections* by Christian Dior Noel offers a grim response: a corpse in a blue prison uniform.



Despite little prospect of ever leaving prison, the artists in this exhibition have nevertheless worked tirelessly to make themselves useful citizens. They've rehabilitated themselves, chasing down nearly very creative and academic opportunity available to them. *Untitled* by C.D. Everett shows the men in graduation regalia on the stage in Stateville's auditorium. The illustration lists the actual Bachelor's and Master's degrees many of them have managed to earn from inside prison. Standing beneath the words "Congratulations Graduates," a speaker announces, "You have accomplished great things and are REHABILITATED!!! Unfortunately, the Illinois General Assembly, Courts, and Governor are still going to let you die in prison. But we brought CAKE!"

During the summer of 2024, a federal judge ordered that Stateville be closed down. The conditions were too dangerous. A man had recently died there, one of the artists' classmates, possibly due to severe heat and lack of ventilation. Since then, Stateville has been cleared. Joseph Dole was transferred to another prison 300 miles south. All the men in this exhibition have now been moved. Their new facilities generally are more modern, built in the 1980s-1990s. But the artists are also further from family, from critical resources, and also from one another and the work they were able to do together.

At Stateville, Dole and some of the other artists had formed an organization called Parole Illinois that's dedicated to bringing parole back in the state. They've written actual legislation that they've shared with legislators in Springfield. That is also part of the work they were able to accomplish from behind bars. They're committed to changing state law so that everyone in prison, at the very least, can have a chance to be seen and heard by a parole board. So that a parole board can evaluate who they are today and consider whether after decades of incarceration they are worthy again of freedom.

--- Ben Austen, 2024

THANK YOU:

Joe Dole and all the artists, their families and supporters who remind us, everyday, that freedom is a constant struggle.

Joe Sorrentino and Shari Stone-Mediatore, Nana Ampofo and the whole Parole IL team for their guidance throughout this installation and for their on-going support create pathways for freedom for everyone who is locked up and for their steadfast care for so many folks in IL who have life and long sentences.

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