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Art

Incarcerated Artists and Authors Shed Light on Prison Censorship

The exhibition *Return To Sender*, co-organized by Mariame Kaba with PEN America, explores the prison industrial complex's mechanisms of silencing.



Maya Pontone 21 hours ago



Hector (Bori) Rodriguez, "War Against Censorship" (2023), colored pencils, #2 pencils, glow-in-the-dark acrylic paint, acrylic varnish, 36 x 36 inches framed (image courtesy the artist and Mariame Kaba)

The United States Constitution's Bill of Rights ostensibly protects Americans' freedom of speech and expression; however, for incarcerated people, this fundamental civil liberty is often **compromised**. A new art exhibition in New York City, curated by prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba and co-organized by nonprofit

PEN America, puts a spotlight on the harsh realities of carceral censorship experienced by currently and recently imprisoned artists, authors, and readers.

“Prisons don’t just censor material, they censor people,” Kaba told *Hyperallergic*. A long-time transformative justice organizer, author, and educator, Kaba is the founder of **Project NIA**, a grassroots initiative aimed at the abolition of youth incarceration, helps lead the **Interrupting Criminalization** advocacy initiative, and published the acclaimed book *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* in 2021.

In partnership with organizations **Empowerment Avenue**, **Rikers Public Memory Project**, and OlaRonke Akinmowo’s **Free Black Women’s Library**, *Return to Sender: Prison as Censorship* is a group show of works by artists, authors, and activists that exposes the multi-faceted system of surveillance and censorship implemented through prisons and promotes a greater call to action for the abolition of the prison industrial complex. The exhibition is hosted at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA) Project Space on West 39th Street through October 28.



Pablo Mendoza, “United States of Redaction” (2023), acrylic on paper, 27 x 34 1/2 inches framed (image courtesy Mariame Kaba)

Although books, letters, and artwork are among the tangible examples of some of the censorship that plays out inside prisons, Kaba explained how bans on literature, art, and communication are only products of a broader system of criminalization and policing.

“People’s voices are censored, people’s bodies are censored, people’s visits are censored, people’s ability to read things are censored,” Kaba continued. These mechanisms of erasure are explored through the exhibition’s multitude of visual, audio, and interactive installations such as a model prison mailroom, a library of radical texts by Black authors, an oral history listening booth, a reconstructed prison cell, and numerous works of currently and recently imprisoned artists and authors that focus on their experiences with carceral censorship.



Corey Devon Arthur, "First Amendment" (2023), mixed media, 22 1/2 x 28 inches framed (image courtesy the artist and Mariame Kaba)



Curator Mariame Kaba explained how she wanted to exhibit censorship not just in written materials, but in other forms such as space. (photo Maya Pontone/*Hyperallergic*)

A display of stitched-together artworks by author and artist **Corey Devon Arthur**, who has been incarcerated since he was 19 years old, provides visual evidence of how artists in prison also struggle under strict mail censorship policies. Separated into equal-sized quadrants, Arthur's mixed-media works were mailed to the exhibition organizers in four separate envelopes that were later pieced together for display. But while Arthur's art made it out of Otisville Correctional Facility, where he is currently being held, other pieces commissioned for the show remain missing, like those of incarcerated artists Lamavis Comundoiwilla and Elizabeth Lozano, who mailed out their portraits of imprisoned writers Zhi Kai and Kwaneta Harris over a month before the show's opening. In the portraits' absence, the exhibition organizers displayed photographs of Kai and Harris in their place.

Moira Marquis, a project manager for PEN America's Freewrite Project in the nonprofit's **Prison and Justice Writing program**, explained that incarcerated people struggle to outsource reading material. This is illustrated across the three artworks by Pablo Mendoza, Danbee Kim, and Kruttika Susarla that reinterpret Faith Ringgold's offset lithograph "**United States of Attica**" (1972) mapping carceral censorship across the country. These restrictions on literature are further explored on another wall that displays four collages by Marquis and Araya Ratanaphruks incorporating printed prison narratives and archived returned mail from PEN America's prison writing program with gold leaf detailing. The barriers imposed on reading material

also impacts writers in prison, as drafting any sort of publication is often “time consuming and cumbersome” due to policies that require physical mail to be scanned and digitized.



The exhibition included this model prison mailroom installation, which displays how mail is censored by prison staff. (photo Maya Pontone/*Hyperallergic*)

“[Our incarcerated authors] can’t get their author copies a lot of the time,” Marquis said, explaining how prison authorities often reason that these published copies “would give them some kind of social standing amongst the other people who are incarcerated” and thus pose a security threat.

Still, in spite of the extreme censorship restrictions imposed on people in prison, the words of writers and artworks by people currently behind bars have still managed to make their way onto the walls of the EFA Gallery, echoing Kaba’s point about *Return to Sender* being an act of resistance against the prison industrial complex in itself.

“All the different ways that [prisons] try to break our connections to each other are impossible to do,” Kaba said. “They are never able to completely— even though they want to — control people.”

To coincide with *Return To Sender*, EFA will be hosting several free public art and educational events focusing on abolitionism, including a collaborative zine workshop this Saturday, September 23.



Corey Devon Arthur, "Revolution" (2023), mixed media, 22 x 17 inches (image courtesy the artist and Mariame Kaba)



Installation view of Medar De La Cruz's "Remembering Rikers" (2023), ink and acrylic on paper, 28 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches each framed (photo Maya Pontone/Hyperallergic)

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