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NEW LOGAN CENTER EXHIBITION CONFRONTS MASS INCARCERATION

Max Blaisdell, staff writer

Jul 13, 2023

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Dorothy Burge's quilted portraits representing currently incarcerated Chicago police torture survivors on display in the new exhibition "Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment," at the Logan Center for the Arts, 915 E. 60th St.

Max Blaisdell

"Quiltivist" Dorothy Burge is a native Chicagoan who descends from a long line of quilters from the Deep South. Her hand-made textiles turn heads, pairing poignant political messages about race in contemporary America with pleasing aesthetics.

Many of Burge's latest works are now on display in "Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment," a new exhibition at the Logan Center for the Arts, 915 E. 60th St. Opened last week, the exhibition centers on the moral consequences of mass incarceration, especially during a global pandemic, prompting questions about who is forgotten and who is remembered after a period of widespread loss.

"Makes Me Wanna Holla," which runs until September 10, pairs artworks by Burge with those of current and formerly incarcerated artists. The works have been carefully assembled and curated by Michelle Daniel Jones, a sixth-year doctoral student at New York University who has a painting and a poem in the exhibition as well, as a part of the Mourning Our Losses Traveling Memorial. The show represents the culmination of the two artists' yearlong "Artist for the People" fellowships that were supported by U. of C.'s Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture and the Pozen Center's Human Rights Lab.

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Offering up an abundance of multimedia and multi-sensory experiences, the exhibition includes paintings, drawings and collages commemorating people who died in prison during the pandemic. As well as an interactive display with iPads that tests viewers knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on Illinois prisons and a playlist of songs that helped incarcerated individuals cope with the isolation and stress of the pandemic, the exhibition also includes clips from filmmaker Adamu Chan's 2022 documentary "What These Walls Won't Hold."

And yet, the exhibition which spans the confines of a two-room gallery on the first floor of the Logan Center does not overwhelm.

Immediately confronting visitors are Burge's series of colorful quilted portraits representing currently incarcerated Chicago police torture survivors, titled "Won't You Help to Sing These Songs of Freedom?" (Dorothy Burge is not related to the notorious Chicago police commander Jon Burge, who was involved in the torture of more than 100 people.) Her quilts hang down from the ceiling in neat rows, inhabiting the gallery space in a way that makes them impossible to ignore or to forget.

With no space between the portraits, the dozen survivors take on the appearance of a crowd, forcing the viewer to consider the number of police torture survivors who remain incarcerated. Each quilt's unique color scheme also retains a sense of the individuality of the survivor, not allowing them to be reduced to a simple number.

Burge is a self-taught artist who first took up quilting in the 1990s after the birth of her daughter. In 2020, she was named a Field and MacArthur Foundation Leaders for a New Chicago grant recipient, and more of her work will soon be featured in the Smithsonian's permanent collection in Washington, D.C.

Two other quilts depict Black transgender women who were murdered in Chicago last year. Another displays Eric Blackmon's poem "Sixteen" in red, black and green, the colors of the Pan-African flag. Blackmon, who was exonerated in 2020 after spending nearly 16 years in prison for a false murder conviction, recounts in the poem all that he lost and all the physical pain he endured while incarcerated with strict numerical precision. Line after line he measures his imprisonment down to the second and catalogs his injuries, a veritable litany of woes.

"724 dreadful days / 137416 and 1/2 hours / 8,244,993 miserable minutes. / All for a crime I didn't commit. / And I can't forget a second of it. / But who's counting?" Blackmon writes.

Since his exoneration, Blackmon has joined the staff of the MacArthur Justice Center as a paralegal and begun studies to become a lawyer. While incarcerated, he worked with the Chicago organization the Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project, as did some of the other incarcerated artists whose works are featured in the exhibit.

Carlos Ayala spent more than 20 years in Stateville Correctional Center. His pencil drawing "Stateville Lost Soul's" is displayed on the wall next to a memorial to those who died from COVID-19 while imprisoned.



A memorial for people who died in prison during the COVID-19 pandemic, created and curated by Michelle Daniel Jones for the exhibition "Makes Me Wanna Holla" at the Logan Center for the Arts, 915 E. 60th St.

Max Blaisdell

“While at Stateville Prison in Illinois, I saw individuals I knew for 20 years pass away from COVID-19, so the opportunity to represent them is an honor in and of itself,” Ayala wrote in the exhibit notes. “I want to show that my fellow comrades are not forgotten.”



The memorial, put together by curator Daniel Jones, is replete with photographs and candles, but the colorful tassels and bronze sculptures featuring the symbols of the world’s major religions make it look like an altar for the dead.

The exhibition also includes a precise replica of a prison cell; just looking at its cramped and narrow space can induce a sense of claustrophobia. The lack of physical space provokes the question of how any prisoner could avoid getting COVID-19 if their cellmate contracted it. The thin

blankets and two-inch mattresses on the bunkbed and the cans of Campbell's soup and Chef Boyardee ravioli complete the picture of the spare existence lived behind bars.

Complementing the opening was a screening of "What These Walls Won't Hold" on Saturday, followed by a talk with the filmmaker.

A formerly incarcerated person, Chan's film documented people overcoming physical boundaries separating the incarcerated from those outside through their organizing work and maintaining of relationships.

"So much of the experience of incarceration is about separation," he said.

The film recounts Chan's friendship with Issa, a prison activist who helps secure his eventual release, as told through their letters before and as the pandemic is spreading across the U.S. and through prisons. These epistolary exchanges, narrated in each's voice, recur throughout the film, lending it a level of intimacy and love that is deeply affecting without becoming saccharine.

"It felt poignant to share this story about how our community was building a lot of intimacy and closeness during this time when everybody was feeling isolated from each other," Chan said.

Though he learned filmmaking while still incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison in Marin County, California, Chan is quick to point out that he isn't any more grateful to the system for it.

"I was very privileged to be able to have that experience inside," Chan said. "But I also know that those things are only granted to the exceptional."

"It's not like everybody had access," he said. "There were only five of us."

One of his goals in making the film is that stories about imprisonment be told by prisoners themselves.

"I don't want other people making films about our experiences," he said. "There's been too much of that, and it's been very harmful."

And yet, Chan's belief in the power of art to facilitate positive social change is undiminished.

“When we share our stories with each other, it allows us not only to connect across shared experiences, but to inspire each other to build solidarity and open up a collective space of healing for each other.”

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Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment



Installation view of *Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment* at the Logan Center Gallery (photo by Sarah Elizabeth Larson, courtesy Logan Center Gallery)

The COVID-19 pandemic threw structural injustices into stark relief in countless contexts across the country, but the experiences of incarcerated people provided some of the most devastating evidence that our system does not value all lives equally. Social distancing was impossible in overcrowded facilities and personal protective gear was rarely available, resulting in rampant infection. Michelle Daniel Jones — a scholar, activist, and artist focused on the carceral system who campaigned in Indiana for the emergency release of sick and elderly inmates, as well as those serving brief sentences — has gathered 61 works by 50 presently or formerly incarcerated artists who created art about or during the pandemic. Hanging from the ceiling are compelling quilted portraits of incarcerated survivors of police violence by artist and “quiltivist” Dorothy Burge, as well as textile memorials to Albert Woodfox, who endured more than four decades of solitary confinement and torture, and two Black trans women killed in Chicago last year.

Logan Center Gallery (uchicago.edu)

Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts

915 East 60th Street, Chicago

Through September 10

New exhibition showcases art, voices and faces of those behind prison walls



Visitors at the opening reception for “Makes Me Wanna Holla” at UChicago’s Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts on July 7. Photo by Sarah Elizabeth Larson.

by Tori Lee



CHICAGO, IL.- “C/O! / I need a med-tech / I can’t taste or smell,” Jimmie Moody’s poem starts with a plea. “Yelled throughout the cellhouse / But nobody coming.”

Moody’s “Untitled,” one of many pieces brought together by curator Michelle Daniel Jones, is currently on display in the art exhibition “Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment.”

Open through Sept. 10 at the [Logan Center for the Arts](#), the exhibition explores the injustices of the carceral system through the voices and art of those who have experienced them firsthand.

The exhibition culminates a yearlong “Artist for the People” Practitioner fellowship for Daniel Jones and artist Dorothy Burge, co-hosted by UChicago’s Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture (CSRPC) and the Pozen Center Human Rights Lab.

“This fellowship is centered on artists whose work engages with the carceral system,” said Alice Kim, director of the Beyond Prisons Project at CSRPC. “The work of Michelle and Mama Dorothy is so powerful because it’s lifting up and making visible who is behind the prison wall.”

Walking into the space, visitors find themselves among Burge’s colorful series of quilted portraits—titled “Won’t You Help to Sing These Songs of Freedom?”—depicting incarcerated survivors of Chicago police torture and other stories of resilience.

Daniel Jones, with activist group Mourning Our Losses, curated a traveling memorial of over 60 pieces of visual art, poetry, music and oral history interviews. “We Shall Remember” features current and formerly

incarcerated artists speaking to the horrors of the COVID-19 pandemic while honoring those lives lost behind bars.

“I think the end result is just so intense and powerful to see all the different voices, different perspectives,” said Tracye Matthews, CSRPC’s executive director.

Who gets remembered?

In the early days of the pandemic, artist and scholar Michelle Daniel Jones was terrified for her friends behind bars. COVID was sweeping through prisons with lightning speed—those stuck in cramped cells some of the most vulnerable to infection.

Daniel Jones and a group of volunteers petitioned government officials for early releases. Their requests were denied. Since the viral outbreak, over half a million people in state and federal prisons have contracted COVID. At least 3,000 have died.

Through grief and anger, these organizers officially formed Mourning Our Losses in April 2020. With a digital memorial website, they sought to mourn those who had died from the virus, while continuing to advocate for the release of those still behind bars.

“We wanted to make sure people understand that people were dying significantly from this pandemic,” said Daniel Jones, co-founder of Mourning Our Losses. “But also raise the reality that a lot of the people who die in prison often have the silent unremarked death.”

The Mourning Our Losses team put out a call for submissions, seeking all styles of art that engaged with the pandemic and incarceration. The careful search resulted in 50 contributing artists, most of whom are formerly or currently incarcerated.

Each piece on display reflects a painstaking process filled with forms, background checks, communication hurdles and other hallmarks of prison bureaucracy. As a first-time curator, Daniel Jones was also acutely aware of how every participating artist was treated throughout the process.

“We wanted to make sure that you are identified the way you want—that you receive some compensation—and we take care of your work once the show is over,” Daniel Jones said. “That was hugely important to us.”

The traveling memorial “We Shall Remember” weaves all these voices together, creating a chorus resounding with despair, resilience, hope and pain of friends lost.

“While at Stateville Prison in Illinois,” Carlos Ayala said in his artist’s statement, “I saw individuals I knew for twenty years pass away from COVID-19. So, the opportunity to represent them is an honor.”

The exhibition team hopes that, through immersive art, visitors will be able to engage with people’s experiences in a way that endless news stories and statistics can’t get at. Hopefully, it will even propel them to action.

Won’t You Help to Sing These Songs of Freedom?

Quiltivist Dorothy Burge, known to friends as Mama Dorothy, first fully understood the power of quilts when she created one in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin—the unarmed teen who was shot to death in Sanford, Florida, while walking home in 2012.

“Doing that was kind of life-changing to me,” said Burge, who comes from a long line of Mississippi quilters. “It just really was a way for me to say, ‘This is what I think about what happened to us. This is what’s important.’”

She brought the quilt commemorating Trayvon to protests, to classrooms full of students to tell his story. Since then, when something hits her—something that needs action—she makes a quilt.

The exhibition is filled with many powerful quilted stories. A series of portraits paired with oral histories depicts survivors of torture at the hands of former Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge (no relation to Dorothy Burge) and his Midnight Crew.

During the 1970s and '80s, station officers of Area 2 waged a reign of terror across the South Side. City officials ignored countless reports of people being beaten, suffocated, burned and electrocuted by Jon Burge and his officers to coerce confessions—many of them false.

When the claims finally came to light, the Midnight Crew was found responsible for the torture of at least 118 people held in custody. Many survivors are still behind bars.

Alongside organizations like Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, Dorothy Burge has sought justice for survivors for decades. Recently, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson pledged funding for memorials—though Dorothy Burge says the fight will not stop until they are built.

“We're still fighting for reparations,” she said. “We're still fighting to get people out who were incarcerated because they were tortured into confessions.”

Additionally, there are quilted tributes to two African American trans women who were murdered in 2022; and another to Albert Woodfox, one of the Angola 3 who survived nearly 44 years in solitary confinement.

“For me to be able to take people to see the quilt and say, ‘Let me tell you who this person is. Let me tell you how this person overcame all the hardships,’” Dorothy Burge said. “I think that's a powerful, powerful message to young people.”

“Both artists are really saying these are ongoing, live issues that demand our attention,” Kim said. “So ‘Makes Me Wanna Holla’ is a perfect title.”

—“Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment” is open through Sept. 10.



uchicago news

'Makes Me Wanna Holla' puts injustices of carceral system on display

By [Tori Lee \(/taxonomy/term/58415\)](/taxonomy/term/58415)
Jul 28, 2023

New exhibition showcases art, voices and faces of those behind prison walls

“C /O! / I need a med-tech / I can't taste or smell,” Jimmie Moody's poem starts with a plea. “Yelled throughout the cellhouse / But nobody coming.”

Moody's “Untitled,” one of many pieces brought together by curator [Michelle Daniel Jones \(https://www.michelledanieljones.com/\)](https://www.michelledanieljones.com/), is currently on display in the art exhibition [“Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment.” \(https://www.loganexhibitions.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/makes-me-want-to-holla\)](https://www.loganexhibitions.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/makes-me-want-to-holla)

Open through Sept. 10 at the Logan Center for the Arts, the exhibition explores the injustices of the carceral system through the voices and art of those who have experienced them firsthand.

The exhibition culminates a yearlong “Artist for the People” Practitioner fellowship for Daniel Jones and artist [Dorothy Burge](https://www.dorothy-burge.com/) (<https://www.dorothy-burge.com/>), co-hosted by UChicago’s Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture (CSRPC) and the Pozen Center Human Rights Lab.

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Alongside organizations like Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (<https://chicagotorture.org/>), Dorothy Burge has sought justice for survivors for decades. Recently, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson pledged funding for memorials (<https://chicago.suntimes.com/city-hall/2023/6/16/23763683/chicago-mayor-brandon-johnson-juneteenth-police-brutality-burge-torture-victim-memorial>)—though Dorothy Burge says the fight will not stop until they are built.

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—“*Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment*” is open through Sept. 10. Visit [the exhibition website \(https://www.loganexhibitions.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/makes-me-want-to-holla\)](https://www.loganexhibitions.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/makes-me-want-to-holla) to learn about additional programming.

ARTS & CULTURE

Honoring the incarcerated

An exhibition at the Logan Center Gallery details the experience of COVID-19 in prisons.

by **Kerry Cardoza**

August 18, 2023



"Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment," Logan Center Exhibitions

Credit: Sarah Elizabeth Larson

“**M**akes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment,” on view at the Logan Center Gallery, makes visceral the impact COVID-19 had on incarcerated people. The experience begins with

a re-creation of a prison cell installed at the front of the main gallery. Designed by Chanton Bun, the “cell,” about the size of a parking space, is made to look like it is inhabited, with cans of food and a scant amount of clothing hanging from one of the bunk beds. During the height of the pandemic, some inmates around the state were confined to their cells for **23 hours per day**, often with cellmates and neighbors who had fallen sick.

Accompanying this installation are brief audio recordings of loved ones recalling incarcerated people who died from COVID-19 in prison. **One describes** the onslaught of the disease as hitting “like a truck full force,” recalling that at the height, there were 15 to 20 medical emergencies per day.



“Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment” makes visceral the impact COVID-19 had on incarcerated people. Credit: Sarah Elizabeth Larson

The center of the gallery is filled with colorful quilted portraits, suspending from the ceiling, by local artist Dorothy Burge, depicting incarcerated survivors of Chicago police torture and other people who have been impacted by violence and incarceration. Burge’s work is but one element of the exhibition that centers the humanity of incarcerated folks.

As artist and curator Michelle Daniel Jones's project, *Mourning Our Losses* notes, "We believe a loss of any human life warrants mourning." Tied to that theme is a beautiful altar, decorated with streamers, candles, and flowers, paying tribute to some who lost their lives. Surrounding the altar is a plethora of hung work made by incarcerated artists, including pencil drawings, collage, and paintings in a wide range of styles, all reflecting on the experience of the pandemic.

In an adjoining gallery, an excerpt of Adamu Chan's documentary *What These Walls Won't Hold* plays, showing the organizing efforts to support people incarcerated at San Quentin Prison during the early days of COVID-19. Chan was in San Quentin when it boasted the largest COVID-19 outbreak in the country, and the film stems from his experience. Chan's work ensures the voices and lives of those directly impacted by incarceration are centered, deftly embodying the ethos of Dorothy Burge and Michelle Daniel Jones and their impactful exhibition.

📍 "Makes Me Wanna Holla: Art, Death & Imprisonment"

Through 9/10: Tue-Sun 9 AM-9 PM, Logan Center Gallery, 915 E. 60th,
loganexhibitions.uchicago.edu

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