

# Detroit arts projects highlight brutal US prison system

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*Natural Life*, on view February 6-March 28 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), calls the attention of museum-goers to the savage practice of Juvenile Life Without Parole (JLWOP) imprisonment. The three-piece installation project is comprised of a designed space, a 77-minute documentary film featuring interviews with several JLWOP inmates and an interactive web site.

The MOCAD exhibition culminated in a panel discussion following a final screening, and featured guests Donald Logan, a formerly incarcerated juvenile lifer, Deborah LaBelle, an attorney representing juvenile lifers in Michigan, and Michael Brown, an instructor with Writer's Block.

On February 28, Writer's Block, a non-profit literary arts workshop for prisoners, facilitated by members of the Hamtramck Free School, in Hamtramck, Michigan, presented poetry and visual work from 12 inmates. The presentation took place in the Rivera Court at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), where poems were read by family members and friends of the imprisoned, to an audience of 250.

WSWS reporters attended the Writer's Block event and MOCAD screening, and recently spoke to *Natural Life* creator Tirtza Even to learn more about the projects' goals.

The United States is the only country in the world that allows JLWOP sentencing. JLWOP was ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court in June 2012, as a violation of the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution's prohibition of "cruel and unusual punishments." However, the decision to apply the ruling retroactively is still determined at the state level, leaving the lives of 2,500 individuals in the balance, hundreds of whom are still imprisoned in 2015, including 365 in Michigan—the second-highest number in the nation. As of 2011-2012, there were 12 13-year-olds and 77 14-year-olds serving life sentences in the US.

The press kit for *Natural Life* points to the increasing barbarity of Michigan's laws. Prior to 1988 charges against children under 17 had to be filed in juvenile court. Prosecutors could ask judges to waive 15- and 16-year-olds to adult court. The law was then changed in favor of automatic waivers, which allowed prosecutors to charge 15- and 16-year-olds directly as adults. In 1996, "The automatic waivers from the 1988 change in the law were expanded to include 14-year-olds for homicide offenses. Once convicted in adult court of first-degree murder, the judge has no discretion but to sentence the youth to Life Without Parole."

Filmmaker Tirtza Even, the creator of *Natural Life*, holds masters degrees in telecommunications and cinema from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts; she currently teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her prior work includes pieces on Palestine as an occupied territory and an exploration of the experience of hearing impairment. Her interest in JLWOP arose when, while employed as a University of Michigan assistant professor in 2007, she took her students into a Michigan correctional facility where they produced collaborative film projects with inmates, as participants in the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP). It was there that she encountered the evocative poetry of

inmate Justin Gibson, 24 years old at the time and serving a life sentence. This encounter has informed her work focus ever since.

After collaborating with Gibson for nearly three years, she realized the project's completion would signal a change in her life, while Gibson, now a dear friend, would remain imprisoned for the entirety of his. This realization led to Even's determination to expose the inhumane practice of JLWOP, resulting in *Natural Life*, which Even describes as her first project to concern itself more with content than with craft.

The stories presented in the *Natural Life* film, culled from some 50 hours of phone interviews with five current Michigan JLWOP inmates, alongside interviews with family members and experts on JLWOP, are innately compelling for audiences. Moreover, the aesthetic choices made by Even and her team in the film production and environment design are clearly discernable and allow for those stories to be told with grace and clarity.

The installation space, conceived of by artist Ivan Martinez, includes five cast concrete and steel sculptures, one for each juvenile represented in the film, each comprised of a set of standard-issue prison bedding. The cast pillow and blanket are scaled down to child-size and each set is inscribed with the birth and arrest dates of the featured individual, directing the viewer's attention to the small span of time each prisoner lived in the outside world, free. The film itself is constructed as a diptych, with two separate images always playing side-by-side, and is projected into a corner. The audience is meant to feel boxed in by this and the two steel benches provided for viewers to watch from, purposefully placed to create the opposite boundary of the box, emulating the floor plan of a cell.

The film consists of phone interviews with the inmates, who, in accordance with state law, aren't allowed to be filmed, juxtaposed against images of the neighborhoods they came from and reenactments of prison life filmed in an inoperative jail. There are also interviews with JLWOP experts and family members; the audience becomes familiar with the attorney representing all five, Deborah Labelle, who also directs the American Civil Liberties Union's Juvenile Life Without Parole Initiative, and Donald Logan, a former lifer who was released via a rare sentence commutation from Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, after spending nearly four decades behind bars.

Family members recount the circumstances surrounding their child's or sibling's sentencing; filmed sitting on their living room couches or at back-yard picnic tables, many break down in tears. These moments help audience members from diverse backgrounds connect with the humanity that exists in neighborhoods they may have only experienced prior through mass media representations.

JLWOP sentences are overwhelmingly handed out to the economically disadvantaged. The film begins with Tammi Smith, a woman whose brother was murdered by two juveniles in the 1980s. Tammi recounts how she and her two brothers were kicked out of their abusive home when she was only 15. Coming from a background similar to that of the boys who took her brother's life eventually allowed Tammi to gain perspective. She

tells interviewers, “I wonder how many dysfunctional kids are out there who have no clue how to switch [the lifestyle they’ve inherited] around.”

Another individual discussed in the film, Barbara Hernandez, was sentenced to life at age 16 because she was present when her boyfriend murdered a man she thought they would only be robbing. She describes growing up in a trailer without electricity, using a bucket for a toilet and sleeping with shoes on at night in an attempt to get away from her father when he would come to her room to molest her. Through this emphasis on background circumstances, the film hints at the broader social issues at play, though they are not directly spoken to.

When the WSWS asked director Tirtza Even about her presentation of *Natural Life*, she referred to *Miller v. Alabama*, the 2012 case in which the Supreme Court ruled JLWOP sentencing to be cruel and unusual punishment. The court has agreed to hear a new case, *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, to determine whether a juvenile sentenced prior to June 2012 may take advantage of the *Miller v. Alabama* ruling. It is Even’s goal to help secure mandatory resentencing of juveniles as she believes that the US prison system is “less about rehabilitation than it is about containment,” and so the film portion of the project will continue to be shown throughout Michigan in the coming weeks.

Beyond the exhibition space of *Natural Life* is the ongoing work of arts programs that operate within the walls of the prisons themselves, providing a means for inmates to process their experiences and share their stories via creative writing and visual arts projects. These programs illustrate the capability of an incarcerated person to contribute their knowledge to the world around them.

Writer’s Block is one such program. Founded in Hamtramck, Michigan, in 2013 by members of the Hamtramck Free School, an educational project consisting of curriculum generated by the community members who participate, and wherein “free” means both that the school is free of charge and that it is directed toward the goal of social emancipation. Writer’s Block visits the Macomb Correctional Facility on a weekly basis.

An exhibition of work generated in a Writer’s Block classroom was recently held in the Rivera Court of the Detroit Institute of Arts, which provided the space free of charge. The exhibition featured the work of 12 current prisoners, most of whom had been sentenced as minors to life without parole.

Audience members described the event as moving and therapeutic. All the poetry was recited by friends and family of the prisoners, who expressed thanks to Writer’s Block for “giving a voice to the unheard and hidden.” Fathers, daughters, cousins, brothers, sisters and friends read their loved ones’ words.

The poetry revealed great depths of self-reflection, with a common theme, not surprisingly, being childhood. One poet wrote about his drug-addicted mother who could not provide a stable home for his siblings and himself—even so, the tone used was not one of anger, but instead, of loss and hurt. Another poet commented on the tears that came from having no money. The Detroit water shut-offs and guns were also recurring subject matter in the works. Many of the writers regretted the life that families were forced to live and spoke about the crisis of the system that created poverty, including “The Pressures of being,” by Raymond “Umar” Hall. This is an excerpt:

*Pangs*  
*Pangs*  
*Heart beats behind my cornea*  
*Standing on the northernmost peak of Michigan*  
*Deep breaths at high altitudes feels like no breath at all*  
*No space in a highly combustible canister*  
*Set over a flame*  
*Never mind the highly flammable sign*  
*Til it explodes*  
*Then everybody try to rationalize*

*Never mind the obvious signs ...*

*The stench of week old trash*

*Mildewed clothes*

*Broken glass*

*McDonald’s napkins roll like tumble weeds in the street*

*There’s no pressure if you oblivious to this scene*

*For me the pressures of being remind me of things*

*Prison yards remind me of empty fields divided by streets ...*

*The breaks between generations are just yield signs and wrong turns*

*Blood spills*

*Minor profits turned in the foyer*

*Adds to the pressures of being*

*In prison*

It was through a program like Writer’s Block that Even first encountered the practice of JLWOP. She continues to make this work a priority, facilitating filmmaking collaborations between her students at the School of the Art Institute and inmates. Each semester Even observes the empowering nature of the collaborations for inmates who find themselves not being taught but rather being treated as equals, a scenario almost unheard of for those behind bars.

Equally, she says, “My students engaging with inmates are changed to the core. A deep undoing of stigma takes place. Students overcome bias and condescension. It’s the first time they’ve come into contact with someone labeled ‘criminal,’ a label which tells you very little about the actual human being.”

The treatment of children examined by *Natural Life* in particular is a searing indictment of American capitalism. What can be said about a political and judicial system that operates with such cruelty to still developing and defenseless members of society? In that regard, one has to take note of the discrepancy between the sincere motivations and moving execution of *Natural Life*, and the brutal conditions it exposes, on the one hand, and its extremely timid political perspective, on the other. The work’s call to action is limited to a petition to Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, which is an entirely futile endeavor.

*Natural Life* will be screened in New York City at the School of Visual Arts on April 8 and at UnionDocs Center for Documentary Art in Williamsburg, Brooklyn on April 10.



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