

Gary Tyler art exhibit in Detroit: “Everyone should see Gary’s work and learn about his case”

Nancy Hanover, James Brewer
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Socialist Equality Party Assistant National Secretary Larry Porter conducted an interview with Gary Tyler on the occasion of his exhibition opening. See, “Video: Gary Tyler reflects on his frame up and the fight for his freedom, at solo art exhibition in Detroit”

An extraordinary event was held in Detroit on Saturday, July 8—the first solo gallery showing of the artworks of Gary Tyler. The exhibit entitled *We Are the Willing* was hosted by the downtown Detroit gallery Library Street Collective (LSC) and curated by Allison Glenn. It will be on display through September 6.

As a 16-year-old high school youth, Tyler was framed, convicted and sentenced to die in the electric chair in Louisiana for a crime he did not commit. After the Supreme Court ruled that Louisiana’s death penalty law was unconstitutional, Tyler spent almost 42 years behind bars in the notorious Angola State Penitentiary. He became a national and international symbol of the brutal injustice of the American government, winning support from tens of thousands worldwide.

The Workers League (WL) and Young Socialists (YS), forerunners of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), organized a national and international campaign for his release. They made repeated visits to Tyler in prison and his family in Destrehan, Louisiana.

The WL/YS demanded “Labor must free Gary Tyler” and won wide support at factory gates and in working class neighborhoods in Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and across the US. Gary’s mother, Juanita Tyler, and his brother, Terry, spoke at a YS conference in 1976 in Detroit. They lent their support to a nationwide petition campaign and a march through Harlem, which mobilized hundreds later that year. A young leader of the Workers League, Tom Henehan, was assassinated in 1977 at a fundraising event for Gary Tyler.

Because of the tremendous support Tyler received in Detroit, he and others described the exhibit opening as a “homecoming.” Indeed, the warmth and enthusiasm with which he was greeted by so many who participated in the fight for his freedom made the gathering both celebratory and inspiring.

The Library Street Collective venue was overflowing, as dozens waited in line due to occupancy limits. Detroit fiber artist Carole

Harris joined Tyler for an artists’ talk before the opening. Both discussed their quilting and aesthetic techniques with moderator Allison Glenn.

Tyler explained to the audience that quilting ran in his family, but at Angola he completed a diploma program in graphic arts. He then learned to sew applique and volunteered for the Angola Prison Hospice program. There he and other inmates created quilts to support men with terminal conditions. “These men had become family,” he said, and the group “wanted them to die in comfort.” After the men passed, the quilts were given to the families in remembrance.

Allison asked Tyler about the change in his artistic work after his release from prison. She explained to the audience that Gary Tyler had created all of the quilts on display from photographs taken of him while incarcerated. He explained the complex challenges he faced reintegrating into society, paying tribute to the help of fellow artist Robert Moreland and Moreland’s wife, who supported him. Only in the past year did he begin to create representational work from his time in Angola.

Allison also asked Tyler about his Detroit connection. He said, “When I arrived on death row in 1975, some of the guys asked if I had support. They asked what organizations supported me, ‘Do you have support from the people?’ I didn’t know what they meant at the time.

“The inmates told me to write letters, which I did by hand, over and over again. The men gave me stamps and gave me what I needed. Within three or four weeks, I started getting support from all over. People begun visiting my mother.

“My mother had the opportunity to come to Detroit [for the 1976 Young Socialists conference], and it was one of the best things that happened to her. She realized she wasn’t the only one fighting the cause to free her son. Detroit had become the hub of support. It resonated. It kept my family going.

“Until she died, she spoke highly of the trip to Detroit. It was an honor to meet [Socialist Equality Party Assistant National Secretary] Larry Porter and his wife yesterday, who picked my mother up from the airport. These were young people saying, ‘Enough is enough.’ They gave my family hope; they fought that battle along with them. I know others in this room were part of that fight.” Among those in attendance who embraced Gary Tyler warmly were the former Young Socialists National Secretary

D'Artagnan Collier, WSWS Labor Editor Jerry White and Workers League/SEP leader Helen Halyard—all of whom had traveled to Louisiana at various points to support Tyler and his family.

Tyler concluded, “Although it took 40 years, those years were not wasted. It took 40 years to change the hearts and minds of those responsible for sending me prison. Even though they didn’t have the courage to undo the wrong they did to me, their sons and daughters have,” he said to enthusiastic applause.

Leah Rutt, Director of Operations at the LSC, told the WSWS, “The weekend was truly a celebration of his life and this new phase of his art practice. It was wonderful to see how many traveled in for the exhibition. It was certainly one of the most well-attended artist talks we have hosted at our gallery.

“The attendees spanned generations, many of whom were involved in the case as well as friends and co-workers who flew in from across the country. His wide network really speaks to his authenticity and impact as a person and an artist.

“From a technical standpoint, Gary is incredibly skilled. The quilting technique of applique is something I personally see being embraced by younger quilters, so it’s very interesting seeing him utilizing that technique as well. His use of linework, texture, pattern of fabric to achieve a sense of depth, movement and emotion in the imagery is remarkable.

“Gary’s work is quite painterly actually. I know he grew up with quilting in his life, and he learned many skills while in Angola, but this [artistic skill] is clearly just within him. I also think it’s interesting to see the change in his practice over the years. When he was incarcerated, his work mostly represented butterflies, birds or other organic shapes. Only since his release has he made work that depicts images of himself. This is a reflection, I think, of where Gary is at with processing that experience.”

The WSWS also spoke with curator Allison Glenn, whose extensive work includes a groundbreaking exhibition *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* (2021) on the life of Breonna Taylor.

“At first I didn’t know what to expect when the Library Street Collective approached me [as a possible curator for his exhibit]. I didn’t know about Gary’s artwork, and I didn’t know what to expect. But hearing about his life and making sense of its connections to Detroit, it was an absolute yes for me [to curate].” Allison herself is a Detroit native and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Wayne State University.

“The experience was phenomenal. Gary has a certain perspective on life and an attitude that is contagious. It felt amazing to be in that room with so many people who had been supporting Gary and his efforts for freedom and justice for over four decades.

“His time incarcerated is longer than my lifetime. Making sense of that amount of time floors me. It’s just inconceivable. I felt, in a sense, that it was like a homecoming for him, all these intergenerational people.

“It makes me so proud to be from Detroit, part of this legacy. You can’t grow up here without family in the Big Three. It’s a city that holds high ethics, organizing beyond the plants. And not just for Gary’s freedom.”

D’Artagnan Collier traveled to Angola prison to visit Gary when he was less than 20 years old and then-national secretary of the

Young Socialists. He said, “I was excited to be able to see him for the first time in nearly 40 years. I am so glad he is alive and free after being incarcerated for so long. He worked to develop himself as a cultured human being despite the repressive, inhuman and barbaric conditions he was subject to.

“I believe he was sustained by the perspective given to him by the Workers League and the Young Socialists, as well as other anti-injustice people who fought for his freedom and opposed his frame-up. He was able to place his incarceration in a political context. We said at the time that the attack on Gary was an attack on the democratic rights of the working class.

“As Gary said, the struggle has not ended. We can see that with the attacks on Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange. People are being persecuted and hounded for standing up for human rights. There are still a lot of people who are being framed up for things they did not do.”

Among an important section of young people attending the exhibition opening were two Flint autoworkers. They expressed their deep appreciation for Gary’s artwork and his insistence that they should not back down in their fight for decent living conditions for the working class.

One of the workers sent this statement to the WSWS: “It was an amazing and important event for me meeting Gary and seeing his art. I thought it was remarkable and a testament to his character that after all that happened to him there was not any bitterness in what he had to say. Rather, in personal conversation, he was absolutely uplifting. He acknowledged what happened was a severe injustice but one that can and must be fought for, for both him and others facing the same conditions.

“Gary spoke with sincerity. He said that neither I nor anyone truly fighting against these injustices and the plight of others should feel discouraged—We should never feel hopeless or wrong. I greatly admire Gary for coming out of his circumstances such a strong fighter and who has conveyed his message and experience through his unique art that is not only aesthetically wonderful but clearly portrays deeply felt and real life experiences.

“I think everyone should try and see his artwork and learn about Gary. It is something both personally touching and broadly relevant for the world we live in today.”



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