

CREATING WITHIN

Art from Rikers and the NYC Health + Hospitals Art Collection

BY NAOMI HUTH

Unveiling the Unconventional, Unearthing the Universal

In an exhibition that bridges the worlds of art and healthcare, “Creating Within” features New Yorkers living with mental health conditions while incarcerated in the city’s jails as well as artists from the NYC Health + Hospitals Arts in Medicine collection. Each piece in the presentation embodies a unique perspective and personal narrative, underscoring the human capacity to find hope in even the most difficult of circumstances. Work by artists from the Arts in Medicine collection, including Charles Abramson, Martha Boyden, Cynthia Carlson, Manuel Garcia, William Gatewood, and Lloyd McNeill, enhance the works created at Rikers Island and continue to challenge the boundaries of form and content, transcending social and geographical confines.

As you enter the exhibition space at NYC Health + Hospitals/Woodhull, a Keith Haring mural sets the tone. Haring’s artistic legacy, rooted in activism and social justice, aligns with the mission of the Arts in Medicine initiative and the Creative Arts Therapy Department of NYC Health + Hospitals/Correctional Health Services (CHS) to promote healing and wellness for patients, families, and caregivers. Created in 1986, the mural serves as a reminder of the enduring impact art can have in building community.

Mask making is a mainstay of art therapy, as the activity is often thought to prompt patients to consider the differences between their internal and external feelings, as well as the myriad of “masks” they present to the world. The warrior masks created on Rikers Island express the experiences and identities of the people who constructed them. Each mask features a unique design that—often with the ad-

dition of materials like feathers—contributes to a broader picture of the creator’s internal and external realities.

“You are just like me. The mind is the difference. The action is the outcome.”—Elvin N.

“I created this picture as a sign of an ending to my drug abuse. Struggling throughout my lifetime has been difficult with drugs. Difficult with coping, along with my family and friends.”—Eric F.

“The White represents purity almost child-like. The Horn represents desire & how blinding it is. The Black represents the sin tainting what it touches. The Red is passion and how passion has no bounds.”—Colbert

Manuel Garcia’s 1972 work *Mr. Leo Lyon*, which depicts two stacked masks, and Lloyd McNeill’s watercolor faces from the Arts in Medicine collection echo these sentiments and invite viewers to explore the psychological landscapes that underpin our personas.

Clothing-based works in the exhibition highlight the connection between dress and identity while simultaneously casting everyday articles of clothing as works of art in their own right. William Gatewood’s 1987 *October Kimono* and the hand-painted NYC Department of Correction uniform by Audencio N., a former CHS patient, alter these garments into a medium of self-expression. Gatewood uses the self-imposed structure of geometric shapes to provide a window into an evocative autumn scene, the warm and



Manuel Garcia, *Mr. Leo Lyon*, 1972



Charles Abramson, *Ain't Never Gonna Grow Old*, n.d.



Audencio N., *Untitled*, 2022



♀ Day by Day Step by Step, Make Good Decisions

♀ Quite as kept, People Make Mistakes

♀ Only God can Judge us, even though times

♀ Are rough, Stay hopeful as you must,

♀ Life goes on so don't give up yet,

♀ Day by Day

♀ Step by Step,



DaceNuke, Untitled, 2022

metallic hues nearly spilling over the clean shapes' edges. Audencio N.'s hand-painted jail uniform shirts, acquired by the Arts in Medicine collection, further accentuate this theme with the rich use of color and evocative religious imagery set against the uniform's tan background.

"The power and ability of drawing helps me to express a little of what I feel—of the loss I've had due to the mistakes I've committed and learning to value more the little that I had." —Audencio N.

The art world has always pushed boundaries, redefining what is considered "art." Artists Martha Boyden and Cynthia Carlson breathe life into discarded objects like price tags and buttons, complementing the use of materials like handmade paper and paper mâché available at Rikers. Carlson's mixed media piece elevates vintage paper price tags from mundane artifacts of commerce to art, imbuing the tags' red strings with a sense of movement that sends them dancing across the composition. By recontextualizing mundane materials, these artists give voice to a profound creative ethos that defies conventional norms.

Collaborative works from Rikers Island serve as a testimony of shared narratives, engaging multiple senses with the additions of songs and written compositions inspired by the individuals' experiences. *Step by Step*, a large painting, "symbolizes African American culture," explains Dace Nuke, one of its creators. "Still to this day Black men take up most of the population in prison in the United States, so [the painted] poem is to uplift the spirits for those in distress, of any ethnicity, incarcerated or going through life issues." From the Arts in Medicine collection, Antonio Navia's *Proyexion: paisaje vertical* employs sharply-cut rectangles of vellum as a reminder of nature and a visual constraint. His softly blurred pigments, juxtaposed with defined rectangles of vellum, invite viewers to consider the natural connections and imposed barriers between art, science, and nature.

A range of works on paper, from a superhero preparing to spring into action by Gemini to Charles Abramson's poignant *Ain't Never Gonna Grow Old*, epitomize the capacity of art to transcend boundaries and reach into the profound depths of the human psyche. In these illustrations, emotions are expressed in both frenetic lines and a vast cast of characters, engaging artist and audience in a profound dialogue.

Amidst the challenges faced by individuals within the criminal legal system, art has emerged as a guiding light, providing solace, empowerment, and connection. According to a new study conducted with the Florida Department of Corrections Art Therapy in Prisons Program, "[incarcerated] artists felt that they were being seen outside the prison. The exhibition served as a bridge between those inside and outside." A 2005 study of incarcerated persons who participated in an arts

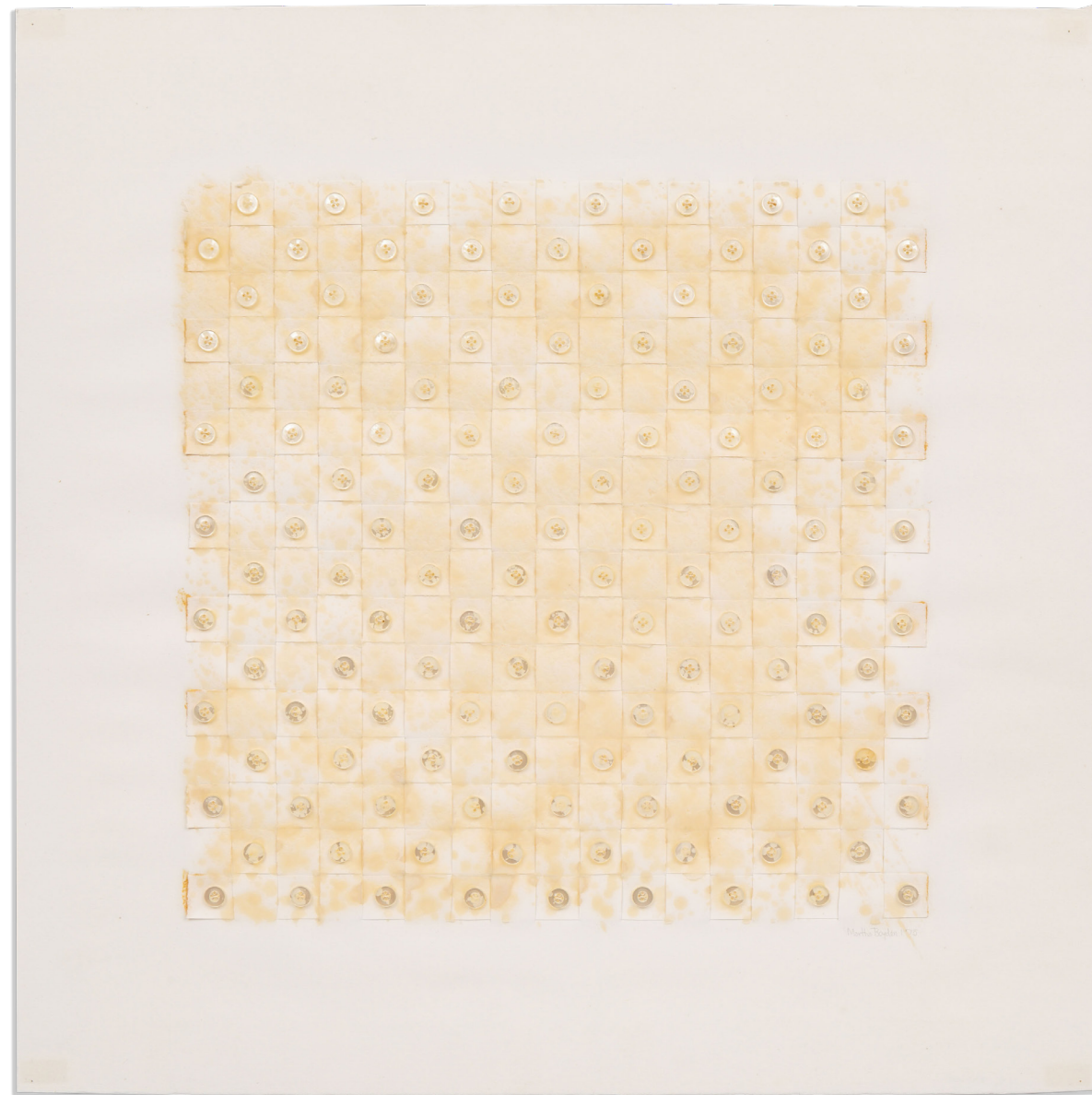
center in England showed that discipline reports of participants were reduced by 29% and staff reported improvements in incarcerated persons' attitudes to work, including an increased ability to occupy themselves in their cells." The creative freedom afforded to incarcerated individuals can be a source of empowerment; given a space for their emotions and experiences to come to life, patients can experience improved emotional stability and control, decreased anger, and higher self-esteem.

Numerous studies have highlighted the healing power of art in healthcare in addition to correctional settings. Engaging with art contributes to patients' physical, mental, and emotional recovery, leading to lowered blood pressure, decreased pain levels, and shorter recovery times. Art also has the remarkable ability to alleviate anxiety and reduce the perception of pain, offering a holistic approach to healing. As one of the largest public art collections, committed to preserving more than 7,000 works of art, the NYC Health + Hospitals Arts in Medicine collection is a testament to the organization's dedication to healing through creative means. By incorporating art into healthcare environments, the aim is to not only aid in patients' journeys but also to improve the overall well-being of families, visitors, and healthcare professionals.

"Creating Within" is organized by Naomi Huth, Director of Art Collection at NYC Health + Hospitals/Arts in Medicine in collaboration with NYC Health + Hospitals/Correctional Health Services staff including: Nicole Levy, Director, Communications & Intergovernmental Affairs; Barbara Bethea, Director, Creative Arts Therapy Department; Jeff Angell, Creative Arts Therapy Supervisor; Merrill Cox, Creative Arts Therapy Supervisor; and Danielle Weiss, Art Therapist.



Lloyd McNeil, *Untitled*, n.d.



Martha Boyden, *Buttons*, 1975



Andre A., *Untitled*, 2022