

Glendale
News-Press

Glendale exhibit exploring nation's prisons brings visitors (virtually) behind bars



An exhibit focused on the country's prison system is running at Glendale's Downtown Central Library until Feb. 19. Work by co-curator Ara Oshagan, including this photograph of 20-year-old Liz at Chowchilla State Prison, will be on display.

By LILA SEIDMAN

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What could offer a more personal look into prison life than stepping into a cell?

A new exhibit at [Glendale's Downtown Central Library](#) invites visitors to do just that, with a virtual-reality-equipped, site-specific installation that simulates the experience of solitary confinement.

“We’re hoping people will see that maybe we need to reconsider how our money is spent — whether it’s for incarceration, education or rehabilitation,” said Anahid Oshagan, co-curator of ReflectSpace, where the show will run until Feb. 19.

“Incarceration Nation,” launched Dec. 14, unites works by contemporary artists and current and former prisoners, as well as collaborations, archives and technology, to shine an inquisitive light on the nation’s criminal justice system.

It’s a long-running passion project for Oshagan and her husband and co-curator, Ara Oshagan, according to library spokeswoman Maria Sundeen.

Several years ago, Ara Oshagan collaborated with filmmaker Leslie Neale to document juvenile offenders tried as adults.

Selections from the Ara Oshagan’s portion of the project, “A Poor Imitation of Death,” including photo portraits and the youths’ writing and drawings, are featured in the show.

“Why was the justice system so harsh on these kids who clearly have so much potential? Why were these kids being ‘discarded’ from society rather than [led] back into it?” Ara Oshagan wrote on his website about the project, adding that anger stemming from these questions led him to seek answers.

He said that in his work, created between 2000 and 2005, he aims “to show the world of incarcerated youth as it actually is: not a place of rehabilitation but a place of hopelessness and despair and where a huge injustice was being carried out with our, the public’s, tacit consent.”

Inspiration to gather and showcase work from others dedicated to similar ends came from a 2014 exhibit, “Prison Obscura,” held at Haverford College in Pennsylvania, Anahid Oshagan said.

As a result, “Incarceration Nation” includes much of the same work, including data artist Josh Begley’s aerial photos of prison facilities across the country and Alyse Emdur’s collection of portraits highlighting aspirational, painted photo backdrops offered to prisoners who want to take pictures with or for loved ones in a more imaginative setting.

RelfectSpace’s installation team heard an array of responses to the exhibit while setting up, spanning attitudes of “lock them up” to more sympathetic sentiments, according to Anahid Oshagan.

The topic “warrants discussion and education,” she said. “It’s very significant and meaningful for the space because that’s exactly what the space is about.”

A screening of “The Squires of San Quentin” (1978) and a panel led by filmmaker John McDonald will be held at the library Jan. 17 at 7 p.m. as part of the exhibition.

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