



**Noyes**  
Museum of Art  
STOCKTON UNIVERSITY



Education Guide

July 1- October 2, 2022

## **Treacy Ziegler: Under a concrete sky**

### **Opening Reception:**

Second Friday,  
July 8, 2022 6 – 8 pm

For this exhibition, Treacy Ziegler created a series of bronze and paper cast animal sculptures. The paper cast sculptures are created from letters of prisoners. She began creating sculptures out of the letters in hope that art gives respect to the pain, loneliness, grief, regret, anger, and acceptance found in the prisoners' words.



Treacy Ziegler, *Beast of burden*, cast paper, 10" x 10" x 7", 2018

### **A Statement from Treacy:**

"About 12 years ago while walking on the Cornell University campus, I came upon approximately 200 mounted birds in glass cases in the atrium of a science building. It was the birds' form and how the light hit the form that commanded my fascination. If they had been living birds, I might not have felt so intrigued. It was their strange presence caught in glass cases inspiring me to draw them on a regular basis.

The process of drawing the birds forced me to create art differently. Until then I had been a printmaker and painter, confining my art to two dimensions concentrating on landscape devoid of people and creatures. The impact of drawing from life (drawing these rounded forms of birds) made the two dimensions of printmaking and painting no longer sufficient to me. Through drawing the birds, I found my hand wanting to go through the paper, moving from two to three dimensions. I wanted to hold this round form in my hands.

The other path was not so obvious, and I did not connect it to the birds until later. I did not know why but shortly after seeing the birds, I felt compelled to go into prisons. Initially, I just brought my artwork to share with the prisoners; later I started teaching art in prisons. The birds are infused with my experience of prison; not in the typical metaphor that birds are free. Flight for birds is not freedom; they fly to avoid death.

The experience of birds expanded to include other animals and the medium of bronze (with which I first worked) expanded to include paper casting the thousands of letters received from 6500 prisoners in my through-the-mail project, Prisoner Express, affiliated with Cornell University. In addition to teaching in prisons, I create projects for this large group of prisoners throughout the United States.

When I began experimenting with paper cast sculpture, using the prisoners' letters collected in numerous boxes seemed an obvious source (the letters had been historically thrown into the recycling bin after they were answered.). Creating sculpture from the letters seemed more respectful to the loneliness, hope, despair, gratefulness often reflected in the letters. Some letters are too poignant and those I have kept. However, it is important that the sculptures stand on their own artistic dimension and not dependent upon the letters to have an impact upon the viewer. Instead, I hope the letters become an unspoken presence of the commitment I have in my relationship to prisoners with whom I meet."

### **Statement for Works on Display:**

*The horizon is a distant memory-*

What is the importance of the horizon? The lack of horizon is a thing of which I am constantly reminded when teaching in prisons. I have asked the prisoners, "What do you see as the horizon?" The top of the wall, the edge of the windowsill? How is the horizon experienced within closed places with no far-seeing landscape? I created a project asking them to draw what they experienced as a horizon; some images were fantasy scenes, some were memories, some were of the wall surrounding the prison. In my own experience, I realized that I looked at the horizon constantly throughout any day. As a landscape painter, the horizon line is the first mark I create on a canvas – separating earth from sky. Then I realized that marking the horizon was the beginning in many cosmology stories. "Then the earth and sky were divided by a great god" and so on of indigenous stories, of Judeo-Christian, everyone starting at this point. Before this separation, the world was understood as chaos. Therefore, the horizon is crucial to our understanding of life and of ourselves. What happens when the horizon changes, things are turned around or are blurred?

*Why was the king thirsty; why was the donkey sad?-*

I initially wanted to create an animation with the prisoners using a donkey as the primary character. The donkey is considered the most abused animal in the world. It is the trusting nature of a donkey that makes he/she so vulnerable. However, for technical reasons, the main character of the prison animation is the naked mole rat. Yet the idea of the donkey pursued me, I went to the farm sanctuary spending time drawing them, and the prisoners continue to write to me about donkeys. Here is the over life-size paper cast donkey.

*I'm reading them again, the ones you didn't burn-*

I have received approximately 20,000 letters annually for the past 10 years from the 8500 prisoners participating in the Prisoner Express project in which I am involved. I began creating sculptures out of the letters in hope that art gives respect to the pain, loneliness, grief, regret, anger, and acceptance I find in the prisoners' words.

*Night mutiny-*

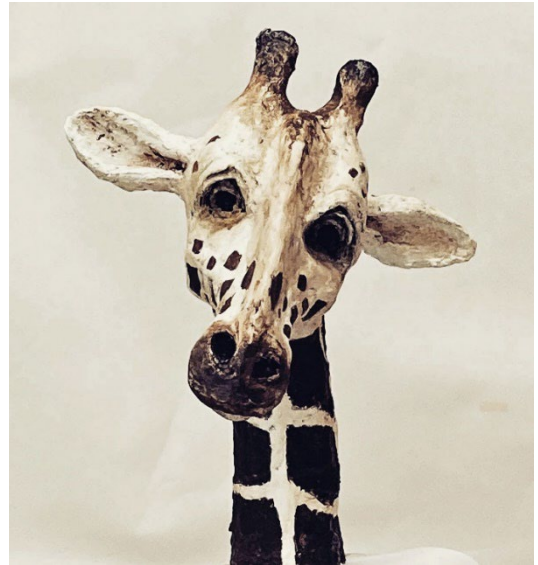
The *Night mutiny* piece is created from death row letters. I chose the title "Night Mutiny" - "Night", referring to the time of death for death penalty prisoners and "Mutiny" because the death penalty is a rebellion against the higher order of compassion. I am trying to wrap my brain around the question of what is "compassionate accountability"? What would it look like in terms of actions? Compassion is a higher level of experience than judgment and accountability is what keeps human agency and freedom fluid. I chose the water buffalo because in Nepal I was struck by the slaughter of the water buffaloes. On the shrine where I had my studio hung the intestines of a previous slaughter. My questions then become, "How does the death penalty provide a strange sanctity to our society? What does it represent in terms of our beliefs?"

*A dream is where we meet-*

While drawing the giraffes at the zoo, I get a sense of their otherworldliness and think of Clarence, a prisoner who has been writing to me for years. Likely, Clarence is diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic. The sizes of the giraffes are magical and don't fit into the normality of standard measurements. This size resistance to the mundane furthers my thinking of Clarence and lines he wrote to me:

"I once measured myself and  
I was nine distances upwards in height.  
Nine widths in full circle;  
four points in surface straight  
across the level top.  
This I will extend once freed  
And we will make a temple  
based upon you."

When I was an undergraduate student of community mental health at Hahnemann, I worked with many people who were diagnosed with schizophrenia. My supervisors criticized me for loving to hear their stories: A different Clarence would tell me stories of working on the banana boats in the Philly port, tarantulas that were probably real and other creatures maybe not. Why are we so afraid of "thought disorders"? So much fear, that prison is filled with people so diagnosed. And if the answer prison/society gives is because some individuals are violence, I wonder if that violence is a result of being rejected and undermined because their thinking does not fit our feeling of comfort.



Treacy Ziegler, *A dream is where we meet*,  
cast paper, 21" x 14" x 16", 2022

*Without want or need, I turn inward and feed on my heart-*

Paper cast from the letters of prisoners living in solitary confinement. The camel relies on its internal water source to survive the desert harshness: The prisoner in solitary confinement depends upon heart. Two sets of correspondence are from Jerome and Billy: represent different responses to solitary. Billy hung himself in his cell during the 2012 hunger strike in California and our correspondence extends from the year and half before until he hung himself. His depression could be felt in these letters. Jerome taught himself to read in solitary and writes to me, "I saw a Bright light in learning." My correspondence with Jerome extends over 8 years. There are years in which he is terribly depressed, other years not so bad. Jerome most recently asked if I could send him books on mental illness so he could understand himself better. In one letter he asks, "Tell me Mrs. Treacy, why are your animals so sad?"

*When you wake you will eat cake-*

This work is inspired from hiking the Outer Hebrides last year. While hiking the bogs I came across a dead lamb, reminding me of the lullaby song by the singer Odetta "*Way down yonder in the meadow, lies a poor little lamby, the bees and flies pickin out its eyes. Wee little lamby crying for its mama.*" It is said that the lullaby was song by a slave mother to a white baby she was caring for; her own baby died of forced neglect; the lullaby is suggestive of the continuous racism experienced in today's prisons.

*Sky becomes water and water is known by thirst-*

I read so many prisoners' letters of regret and loneliness. One man wrote about murdering his wife and of the guilt and loneliness he feels as a consequence. One might respond, "Well, what did you expect?" But

spending time in high security prisons, I learned that murder is a complex chain of events resulting in loss and regret for many individuals who commit it.

### **Artist Biography:**

Treacy Ziegler has shown her art in Canada and United States and works in the mediums of paintings, sculpture and printmaking. She is the recipient of two Puffin Foundation awards for art in social justice, the Constance Saltonstall grant, Community Art Partnership grants, New Hampshire Percent Grant for the Arts and other awards. Ziegler has had several solo museum exhibitions including the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Cornell University, Ithaca; Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, NY; Morris Graves Museum of Art, Eureka, California; Massillon Museum, Massillon, Ohio, Erie Art Museum, Erie Pennsylvania.

Ziegler is the volunteer art director for the Prisoner Express (affiliated with Cornell University), a distant learning program for prisoners in prisons throughout the United States. Through this project, Ziegler receives about 20,000 prisoner letters annually.

Ziegler is currently participating in the traveling exhibition first presented at the MoMA PS1 in New York City. This exhibition, "Marking Time, Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration," will travel to numerous venues over the next three years. Ziegler received a Certificate of Fine Art from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Phila, PA. Prior to studying at PAFA, Ziegler received a MSW from University of Pennsylvania and a BS in mental health from Drexel University, PA

For the past 20 years, Ziegler has lived in upstate New York on 85 wooded acres surrounded by nature with her husband, son, 2 parrots, and 2 dogs. Animals are a large part of her life. In addition to a taxidermy collection in her studio, she has spent hours drawing at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and various natural history museums. Drawing is crucial in the development of art – observing the world and developing a dialogue with it through art.

**For more information on Treacy Ziegler, please visit the following:**

**Artist Website: [www.treacyzieglerfineart.com](http://www.treacyzieglerfineart.com)**

**For more information on letters from prisoners, please visit the following:**

**<https://thejusticeartscoalition.org/2017/07/31/falling-leaves-letters-from-prison/>**

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