

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### PRISON CREATIVE ARTS PROJECT: IMAGINATION IN THE FACE OF INCARCERATION

**Laura Flanders:** The imprisoned poet Richard Lovelace wrote about the power of the creative imagination in 1641. Quote, "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage. If I have freedom in my love and in my soul am free, angels alone that soar above enjoy such liberty." Lovelace's poem is quoted in the afterward to a big, beautiful book on the transformative power of art behind prison walls. That book, "Making Art in Prison, Survival and Resistance," by Janie Paul, doesn't suggest that art can somehow make mass incarceration okay. Instead, it shows how creativity and art making are survival and resistance skills, and it gathers the lessons from years spent with Janie's late husband, William Buzz Alexander, and the artists of the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan, which he began. Paul's book shows just how much creativity we've locked away with our over-incarceration system, and reveals what incarcerated artists could teach us all about why humans make art and the power it holds. Janie Paul is a landscape painter and a professor emerita at the Stamps School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan. Yusef Qualls, known as Q, is a former juvenile lifer, meaning he was imprisoned and sentenced to life at age 16. He was released just five months ago after spending 28 years inside. Danny Valentine is a formerly-incarcerated artist who credits the Prison Creative Arts Project, or PCAP, with saving his life. The book is, again, "Making Art in Prison, Survival and Resistance." It's out now from Hat and Beard Press. Welcome everybody to the conversation. Thank you so much for joining us. Let me start with you, Janie. I mean, this is not a social worker's book. It's not a prison employee's book. It's an artist's book. It's a landscape painter's book. What's your goal here? What's your project with this beautiful volume?

**Janie Paul:** I wanted to bring the artist's work really into the world and be taken seriously as part of the art world. That was one goal. The other is, in the effort to end mass incarceration and dismantle the carceral state, I believe it's really important for people to see the humanity of people who are living in prison, to see their full talent, and to see the potential that they have, and all of their gifts. And I wanted also to go beyond what people say a lot. Like, oh, "It must be a great way to pass the time," art, that is, or, "It's a great hobby to have when you're in prison." No, it's more than that. It's a form of resistance and it's a way to make meaning.

**Laura Flanders:** Now, Q what about you? How did you come into connection with these other two characters and this project itself?

**Q (Yusef Qualls):** I had been incarcerated for a few years, and my name was starting to go around the prisons that I, whatever prison I was at, as somebody who did portraits. Well, in 2006,

somebody saw my work and was like, "Hey, there's a program where you can take your artwork and submit your artwork, and they'll actually show your artwork in a gallery on the campus of the University of Michigan." So that was kind of intriguing, but at the same time, it was kind of like, you know, nobody wants to see my work. Like who wants to see my work? It was kind of unheard of. I had never imagined something like that. I listened to this guy tell me a few more times, and eventually I said, "You know what? Why not do a piece specifically to submit to PCAP and see if they understand it?" Because I have a story that I want to tell about my life, and I want to tell it, and so I did. I did a piece, specifically for PCAP, and I submitted it. The thing that impressed me the most was that there were other artists that came in to view the work to decide which work they would take and put in the show. I didn't have to explain the piece that I did, which I thought that I might have to. I didn't need to explain it because they understood it. And that was the first time that I had saw somebody get really emotional from a piece of art that I did.

**Laura Flanders:** At the heart of this book is the Prison Creative Arts Project, PCAP. What is it? How does it work? What does it look like?

**Janie Paul:** So PCAP is an organization within the University of Michigan. It was started by Buzz in 1990 when he did the first theater workshop he ever did. He started teaching classes in which his students went into prisons to do arts workshops. I joined in that effort and started teaching classes in which my students went into prisons. It grew into three basic projects. One project is the Workshop Project, which is students, faculty, and community members going into prisons in southeast Michigan to do workshops in theater, writing, visual arts, sometimes music. The second project is our big exhibition, which we are talking about here. And the third project is our Linkage Project, which is a community of artists we have worked with inside who come home and get support from us. Those are the three aspects of PCAP.

**Danny Valentine:** But it was started by a man who had a vision, who took up for the underdog. There was no funding, there was nobody putting him up to it, he wasn't doing it for accolades. I mean, this guy truly was serious about this. He felt strongly that there was something here, and yeah, it saved my life, literally, as I was getting ready to jump off of the fourth gallery during mass movement, when the doors opened after count time. That's when they pass out the mail also, and that's when Buzz's letter came to me, was while I was waiting to make my move.

**Laura Flanders:** I should say, we're talking about art and galleries, might be confusing, but you're talking about, did you say the third floor of the building, of the prison?

**Danny Valentine:** Fourth floor, I was on the fourth tier, as they call it, the gallery, which is four stories up, and it's all open. You can just dive off the railing. It's that simple.

**Laura Flanders:** And what did the letter say?

**Danny Valentine:** It was just a letter with one single paragraph. He introduced himself as who he was, what he was doing, and that he had heard that I was a really good artist, and he invited me to join that he was, he would like me to join his exhibit. I don't know, it was like, the only way I can explain it is like a divine intervention that, when his letter came in them bars that day, it really was, it stopped the momentum of death.

**Laura Flanders:** What I'm most struck by in the description of this project that you give in the book is the collectivity of it. And I just don't mean we incarcerated people. You talk about this as a collective project, inside, outside, together.

**Janie Paul:** So the project is based on the idea that we're going in to create spaces of creativity within the prisons, with us and the artists inside, whether it's a workshop that is being done, or we're selecting the art for the show. And also the public who come to the show, many of them have been coming every year. They come, they actually line up at the door at this point because they're so eager to see the work, plus the fact that they can get, they can actually buy work that's affordable. And the work is very, very intense and very excellent, as you can see by looking at the book. And so they're, and people leave, write comments in our comment book, and those comments are sent in to each person. So each person receives comments, either about their individual work or the show as a whole. The other thing we do is that we create a film that shows every single piece of art in the show, together with an introductory section that shows the opening reception and people looking at the work. And this is sent to every prison where it's shown over closed circuit TV, or in the old days, people used to sit together and watch it. And this creates a community with the public who are seen on the documentary with the people, the artists inside, and us talking at the opening reception. And it's an incredible learning experience.

**Laura Flanders:** Coming to you, Q, about your subject matter. Can you talk about your painting, "The Faces of Incarceration," and the last painting that you made before your release "Beat Down by Time"?

**Q (Yusef Qualls):** Absolutely, so "Faces of Incarceration," one of the things that you experience being in prison is you're always faced with 1,200 to 1,500 men every day. You have to navigate every day differently. No matter what it is you are going through, you have to find a way to deal with it to get you through the day. And so that piece is a person, it's my face, but I'm holding two masks. One mask is happiness and the other mask is anger. But my face in the painting was of me crying, the blue representing sadness, the yellow representing the happiness, the light, the levity, the red representing anger. These are things like, one day I might come out, and for whatever reason, I need to have some type of levity to myself. No matter what it is I'm going

through, I have to read the ethers and understand what's going on around me, and I have to wear that mask. It was a survival tactic and it pretty much took me through my journey in prison, because you have to find ways to deal with all of the things that you have to deal with. And the other piece, "Beat Down by Time," right now in the United States, slavery is still legal. People think, oh no, it's not legal. Well, in prison, slavery is still legal. They make a lot of money. They say that for each individual in prison in Michigan, they spend between \$33,000 and \$43,000 per individual. I never saw that. I never understood where that number came from because we're forced to wear prison blues. I had the same pair of prison blues for 10 years. So if the only thing that you are spending \$33,000 to \$43,000 on is when I take a shower daily and that one trip to healthcare, we have a problem. I had to work, I didn't have a choice. It was either work or be punished. You don't have an option. I was only paid 17 cents an hour. So for 28 years, this is what I experienced. It is recognized as slavery. People don't talk about that, but read the law. The law says this is the only time that slavery is legal.

**Laura Flanders:** Which takes me to the question of the materials and the conditions and how is this work actually done, physically. And that's a question for you, Danny. The piece I see of yours in the book is this extraordinary sculpture, "The Mermaid." How did you make that and under what conditions?

**Danny Valentine:** I was in the hole, segregation, punitive segregation. You don't have anything in there. You don't have any of your personal property or anything. And so I would gather up unused bars of soap from the shower to soak in water and turn into like a clay-like substance. I made paper mache by chewing toilet paper with my mouth, anything I could use to create mass, bulk, size, shape. And I just added, there's even a couple breakfast biscuits in there. I was able to finish it when I got out of segregation with stuff like cardboard, talcum powder mixed with Elmer's glue and water makes like a plaster.

**Laura Flanders:** Susan Brown, who is another participant in the Prison Creative Arts Project, she had this to say, from prison, about a piece involving a depiction of a buck deer. Here's Susan Brown.

**[Susan]:** So often the comparison of a buck to a prisoner. I was having a conversation with administration and that's where the idea of how many, specifically women, are discarded once they're placed in prison, they're just thrown away. And just like a buck when it's hunted, and shot, and killed, they think of it as a trophy. That's what it feels like they think of us when we're incarcerated. And they take bucks on the outside and they mount them for the whole world to see, to show this is what I've done, see. That's just what that buck represented, was us as prisoners on the state's wall to say, "Hey, we got more prisoners incarcerated than anybody." But instead of us doing that, let's redeem these people that shouldn't be discarded and thrown away and left for nothing. We should

release them, return them to society, and let them blossom beyond the walls of incarceration, beyond the biggest mistake that they've ever made.

**Laura Flanders:** Janie, anything you want to add to that reflection from Susan about how women inmates especially are treated?

**Janie Paul:** There was a lot of sexual abuse of women in prison, and then there was a case brought up in the Michigan courts a little while ago, and men, male guards were not allowed to be in the housing unit, so that got better, but that was a serious problem. Up until recently, women were often shackled while they were giving birth. There isn't always the products that you need for your menstrual cycle available. For a long time, women actually didn't have the same educational programs that men did. And quite a number of years ago that case came up and women were also allowed those. So there's been some progress, but we only have one women's prison in Michigan, and it is very crowded, and it was very, very difficult during COVID, and many women got sick.

**Laura Flanders:** Can we talk a little about this country's incarceration problem? You've just pointed to it in your answer there, Janie. But I don't want it to go uncommented on, Q, that you were sentenced as a minor. As far as I can see, the US is alone in developed nations, sentencing minors to life sentences. How old were you and how did you, in the end, get free just these five months ago?

**Q (Yusef Qualls):** The one thing that I still have a problem with is calling what I was given a life sentence, because it is effectively a death sentence, only slower and without a needle. They tell you you'll never leave alive. That's the same thing they tell somebody on death row. It's only slower. I was 16 years old when I was convicted. I wasn't actually the person who pulled the trigger and killed somebody, and yet and still I was sentenced in the same way that the, I actually was sentenced to more time, chronologically, than the person who actually did the shooting. In Miller versus Alabama, they challenged it. They said, "Well listen, it should be unconstitutional to automatically sentence a juvenile to prison without some type of mitigation hearing, without seeing what this individual would or could be capable of in the future." In my case, my judge actually struggled between offering me until I was 21 and a life sentence. So if there had been a middle ground, she could've told me, "Okay, 20 years and then you'll be able to go home." But there wasn't a middle ground. The law was what it was and she didn't have an option. She either sentenced me as a juvenile, which would've meant I would've got out when I was 21, or life in prison. Well, I was sentenced in an election year. What do you think made more sense for her career? This is at the time when they were calling us super predators. I ended up getting sentenced to life in prison. The law changed, and 28 years later, I was able to be re-sentenced, and I came home. It was one of those situations where they recognized that I was no longer the 16 year old who made the bad decision to be with somebody who committed murder. I had

grown into a man; I had become responsible and accountable for my own actions. They were able to look at my record and look at who, the things that I had accomplished, even without their help.

**Laura Flanders:** What I was alluding to in the introduction is that this book is not, and the work of PCAP, as I understand it, is not about making incarceration kinder, gentler, more enjoyable, it's about something else. And you're kind of putting your finger on it, Q. Janie, would you just like to see more arts programs in prisons? Would that be a good outcome?

**Janie Paul:** Over the last few decades, there have been a growing number of people, organizations, who are really concerned about mass incarceration, and who know that arts programming is very significant for people in prison, but there's never enough money. We need more resources. When we started this 28 years ago, nobody was even talking about incarceration on television, I mean, in the public. We felt like outliers. And at least now it is in the public dialogue. I also feel that we have to talk about art in schools. I mean, if we had a society in which art was, art making, art appreciation was an integral part of all education and not just private elite schools, our whole society would be in much better shape. I mean, art is a basic human need. It's a basic human right. It's relegated, as I said before, to something that's just considered a hobby or a pastime when it's actually a way of becoming more fully human.

**Laura Flanders:** Danny, was it just a pastime for you?

**Danny Valentine:** The creative spirit lives in me, and that's why you got "The Mermaid" in the hole. I had to produce something. It's just, it's gotta come out. Everything that we see in this world is all a product of the creative mind. It's all art. It all starts with art.

**Q (Yusef Qualls):** Art was cathartic for me. Inside, you didn't have the ability to go and get therapy because you are going through the fact that I lost my mother, I lost my sister, I lost my brother, I lost uncles, and aunts, and cousins, and my son's mother, girlfriends, best friends. I've lost these people and I still had to deal with that. Now, out here, you can go to therapy. You can deal with depression and anxiety. Inside, you don't have that. Art was my way of going inside myself and talking about these things non-verbally.

**Janie Paul:** People in prison are treated as objects. They are given a number. They're moved around. They suddenly move from one cage to another, from one prison to another. In the art process, the artist becomes the subject and their art piece becomes a cherished object. And in that process of making art, I also wanna say that it's an intimate process. Even though the piece you're making is inanimate, you're having a relationship with it, you're having an intimate back and forth. And so in a place where you're not supposed to have intimacy and relations, relationships, you're having this back and forth with your piece of work.

**Laura Flanders:** The book is "Making Art in Prisons, Survival and Resistance." Thank you all very much for being with us.

**Q (Yusef Qualls) & Danny Valentine:** Thank you.

**Janie Paul:** Thank you.

**Laura Flanders:** Richard Lovelace, the poet I quoted at the beginning of today's program, was imprisoned, it turns out, because in an anti-royalist era, he was a supporter of the king. Nor was Richard Lovelace related to Ada Lovelace, the woman whose mathematical insights brought us the know-how on which today's computer technology is based. The two Lovelaces aren't related, and you can find out why if you look it up, because we can look lots of things up. But can we actually imagine ourselves into the realities that elude us, that are beyond our own? Can we do that work of creative imagining that enables us to be curious and kind in the way that I talk about at the end of every show? Well, because of the failings of our media, and the failings of our facts, over 100 poets recently collectively imagined themselves into the Israel-Hamas conflict, and produced a poem based on their contributed lines. If you want to see this "Canto," as they're calling it, for ceasefire, we'll put a link at our website. It begins, "We all long to write the poem that will stop this death." We'll put a link to the full poem at our website. And if you want the entire conversation behind today's program, you can find that through a subscription to our free podcast. In the meantime, stay kind, stay curious. For "The Laura Flanders Show," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining me.

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