

My Experience: 7 days and 16 Hours in Parchman Farm

by Jake Fernandez

I entered the cell at midnight on Sunday March 23rd. My first priority was to get acclimated to my new surroundings. I lay down on the table and stared at the ceiling with its 12 spotlights. I noticed the hum from the portable air conditioning unit and other mechanical sounds. Within an hour's time I started working on the first drawing. I drew a panoramic rectangle with a grid pattern and began in vertical rows moving from top to bottom and left to right, like a printout or a scroll. I tried not to plan or have any preconceived idea about the work produced (if any) under these conditions. I covered the finished areas as I worked to avoid being influenced by my previous marks.

At this time I was not aware of time passing. I had no clocks but found that my internal clock and some radiant heat from the sealed window gave me clues as to day and night. The empty water bottles (about 7 per day) served as my calendar.

After 3 days, I started feeling disoriented and dizzy. Then it occurred to me that I was in an hermetically sealed space and that the door frame and windows were sealed with airtight duct tape. The a/c unit was recirculating the air in the cell but no fresh air was coming in. I took a pencil and punched small holes next to the exhaust duct to be able to breathe fresh air. Via my cue cards on camera to the museum staff, I was able to ask for a small fan, which was promptly delivered. I placed the fan in front of the perforations and could draw some fresh air into the chamber. I heard sounds and was able to look through the perforations and catch a glimpse of a maintenance worker preparing to cover my air vent. I later learned that the crew was instructed to repair any flaws on the building's exterior in preparation for a scheduled museum event. I had to break my silence to warn the worker not to close the air vent. This well-intentioned attempt at covering the makeshift vent could very easily happen again, and a couple of hours later it did. I told the startled crew (this time in two languages) to refrain from blocking the perforations. I had spoken a total of 12 very necessary words in about four days.

Several times during my isolation it was necessary for the museum staff to enter the cell to deal with the video feed, etc. They were instructed to drum on the door and wait 20 seconds before entering. This allowed me time to go into the small closet to prevent any visual or verbal interaction with the staff. I also decided not to talk or sing to myself the entire time I was in isolation.

On about the third day, by my rough calculation, I finished the first drawing. I felt no psychological stress. I was intrigued by this "baseline" drawing since it graphically illustrated my changing state of mind and recorded the telemetry of the effects of gradual oxygen depletion. This was something unexpected and certainly reflects the experimental spirit of the project. The challenge was in solving these issues as they occurred without unduly compromising my intention to have no human interaction during the 184 hours I was in isolation.

My activities consisted of drawing, napping and throwing a baseball that I made out of paper towels and masking tape. I heard a dog bark a single time, and was disappointed that it didn't carry on longer. I heard the rumbling of a freight train every few hours. Although the outside world was quiet, inside it was very noisy, filled with mechanical sounds from the air conditioning echoing around the concrete

cell. It sounded like a jet engine. The lights were on for the entire duration of the performance. The twelve spotlights were constantly in my eyes, except for the time I would hunch over to draw. The afterimages from these lights produced multicolored polka dots in my field of vision. I made a visor out of a piece of cardboard and it helped to block the direct glare. Later I punched pin holes in some foil and taped them to my reading glasses to minimize the light hitting my eyes.

I started the second drawing. I was using the same format (aspect ratio) as the first, but my state of mind was very different from the first drawing. I had been in solitude for days, and to my surprise I began to reflect on the conditions people are forced to live in during solitary confinement. It was not limited to the Parchman Farm inmates, but prisoners everywhere including poor farm laborers who are in essence prisoners.

Before starting this project I was told stories about the museum being haunted. The ghost of museum founder Andre Smith was often seen walking the grounds at night and moving furniture around his studio. My cell was located within an area that used to be his workspace. I was excited at the possibility of meeting the ghost of Mr. Smith, and sharing stories about moving furniture (something I did to support myself when I first moved to New York). About four days had passed and I had not experienced anything supernatural or unusual in the cell, but the ubiquitous humming of the air conditioning became disturbingly loud. In the background I could hear a faint chant-like singing or moaning. At first I thought it was the mechanical sounds bouncing in the space along with my imagination that was creating this strange symphony, making it difficult to sleep. Later I was to discover the source of the "music": it came from the studio of a nearby artist. To make things even more interesting, the empty swivel chair I used when drawing rotated 90 degrees in my direction. So far I have no explanation for this.

While working on the second drawing, I had thoughts about innocent people in confinement and hard working farm laborers. As the drawing developed I was surprised by the colors I was using and the forms I was drawing. Neither were part of my usual vocabulary. The acrid earth tones and the shapes resembled fabric designs from the 1970's. I suspended judgment and reminded myself that this experiment had nothing to do with my personal bias, but with being present in the moment. I had made a choice not to familiarize myself with Andre Smith's art before my confinement; I wanted to enter the cell with as clean a slate as possible. After my release I was surprised to see how the geometric patterns in my drawing strongly resembled his bas-relief patterns on the museum garden walls. It was a strange coincidence.

It seemed that I had been inside the cell for several days. While working on my third drawing I was startled by loud thunder and pounding rain. The museum curator slipped a note under my door warning me about a tornado alert and severe thunderstorms in the area. She suggested I take cover in the closet. During sensory deprivation any stimuli is magnified. This includes negative thoughts and "what if" scenarios that could turn into panic. I knew it was important to see the situation in a very positive light, so instead of taking cover I decided to use the storm as a source of "inspiration": I drew a stormy sky in my imaginary vision of a Parchman Farm field.

On Sunday April 30 at 4:00 PM I heard the sounds of a guitar and the door was opened to the courtyard and freedom. The first words I spoke after days of silence were: "One small step for art.....One giant leap for God knows what".