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## For the Incarcerated, Drawing Is a Lifeline



by Hilarie M Sheets

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An exhibition at the Drawing Center looks at how artists have used the pencil to envision their freedom during captivity.



Valentino Dixon's "Untitled," a composite image of four drawings in colored pencil on paper. "Prison is a dark place, and drawing became a survival tool," Mr. Dixon said. Credit: Valentino Dixon and Andrew Edlin Gallery

Valentino Dixon served more than 26 years in prison for a murder in Buffalo, although another man had publicly confessed to the crime. Encouraged by his uncle to use his childhood artistic talent to help cope with his incarceration, Mr. Dixon began drawing, up to 10 hours a day, for the last 20 years he spent behind bars. He used vibrantly colored pencils to create imagined golf courses, inspired by magazine pictures of a game he had never played.

“The peace and tranquility of the golf took my mind to another place,” said Mr. Dixon, who was released from Attica Correctional Facility in 2018. “Prison is a dark place and drawing became a survival tool.”

The drawings also became the pathway to his freedom. After he sent some to Golf Digest, which published an article about him, media interest led Georgetown University undergraduates to help persuade officials to reopen his case. Mr. Dixon walked out of prison with more than 900 drawings. He continues to draw 10 hours a day, and his work has sold for as much as \$30,000.

“The Pencil Is a Key,” opening on Oct. 11 at the Drawing Center in SoHo, explores the many ways that artists have used drawing to envision their freedom during periods of incarceration. It is the first exhibition conceived there by the museum’s new director, Laura Hoptman, who took the helm last fall, and sets the tone for her curatorial vision.

“This kind of exhibition cuts to the core of that connection between art and life and argues for the possibility of drawing to be a kind of lifeline and something that can help us define ourselves as human,” she said.



Mr. Dixon walking out of the courthouse in Buffalo after a hearing that cleared him of a murder charge that kept him in prison for more than 26 years. CreditCarolyn Thompson/Associated Press