

After the Wake Up

Sherrill Roland

Journal of Black Mountain College Studies

Volume 11: The Practice and Pedagogy of Writing at Black Mountain College (Fall 2020)

Article URL: <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/after-the-wake-up/>

Published online: October 2020

Published by:

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

Editors:

Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Carissa Pfeiffer, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Production Editor:

Kate Averett, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Note:

The *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* is a digital publication, intended to be experienced and referenced online. PDFs are made available for offline reading, but may have changes in layout or lack multimedia content (such as audio or video) as compared to the online article.

After the Wake Up

Sherrill Roland

Artist's Statement

Within my studio practice, I spend a lot of time recalling memories from the worst time of my life. The motivation for revisiting the past is for cathartic reasons. Converting the haunting nuances into drawings, sculptures, multimedia objects, performances and participatory activities. My interdisciplinary practice addresses the complex construction of these three core entities—innocence, identity, and community—and reimagines their social and political implications in the context of the American criminal justice system.

For more than three years, I was forced to relinquish control of my life to the criminal justice system due to wrongful incarceration. After spending ten months in jail for a crime I was later exonerated for, I looked to art as a vehicle for self-reflection and an outlet for emotional release. By sharing my story, and creating a space for others to share, I work to illuminate the invisible costs, damages, and burdens of incarceration.

While incarcerated, one of my responsibilities was repainting vacant cells during the overnight shift before new inmates moved in the following day. The instructions for this assignment were lax: we were not asked to wash any surfaces of the cell prior or scrape off the older paint before we began. We entered and painted a single white paint coat over the bed frames, desks, and walls. As we migrated from cell to cell, I discovered carvings on, underneath, and behind remaining surfaces. While the gestures were small, I found great significance in the carvings. They represented how we, as incarcerated individuals, needed to leave a mark in a place that was created to hide us from society. The accumulation of the layers of paint acted as historic preservation, protecting the collection of marks from inhabitants in each room. The thickened texture of the wall's surface held the most life, the most attention, cementing an existence after being removed from the outside world. It was a small gesture to leave a personal mark in a place created to hide and strip individuality. Even after the surfaces were repainted, the marks were not entirely erased.

After the Wake Up is an interactive art installation that invites viewers to physically carve into the Museum wall's surface. Through this artwork, I invite visitors to participate in leaving their marks. I wanted to invite visitors to be in the role of an inmate without feeling incarcerated. A changing question on the topic of mass incarceration is offered to museum visitors, who are invited to carve their responses directly on the wall in the exhibition space using similar tools to what one might find in prison. Every two weeks, a new question is added to the wall, and the marks are erased with a fresh new coat of paint.

The answers often are short and concise because carving takes time and energy. More exhausting than handwriting and inconvenient when compared to text messaging. It was surprising to see how answers were written because of the anonymity—many were philosophical responses. There are occurrences from participants who carve imagery instead of written language, and some deferring from acknowledging the questions. It all remains interesting, witnessing our choices as a society to remain safe and protected within our bubbles.

Visiting this artwork, how would you respond to carving? What would your answers be to my questions around innocence, imprisonment, justice, and death? How much money would you accept to forfeit a year of your life in prison? Do you have control of your innocence? Can it be taken? Can it be returned?

Photographs:

Sherrill Roland, *After the Wake Up*, installed in "Walls Turned Sideways: Artists Confront the American Justice System," CAM Houston, Houston, TX, 2018. Photo credit: Terre Garcia.





