

The Weight of Time: An Artistic Inquiry into the Invisibility of Incarceration

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In 2022, I began photographing the exterior walls of prisons as research for a developing body of artwork. I wanted to document what was visible to the public in these frequently hidden and ignored places. This process sparked an interest in the institution's ability to control what is seen and how the invisibility of systems of punishment contributes to and compounds their oppressive nature.

My first visit was to HMP Brixton, a prison located in the south of London, England. Thick brick walls enclosed the site entirely, with only the tops of a few buildings visible through coils of barbed wire. I pulled out my Pentax Spotmatic and started photographing the intimidating architecture.

While I walked around the prison, I was approached by three security guards. "What are you doing?" one asked sharply. I explained that I was an artist working on a project and was photographing the prison walls. Despite remaining on a public road, I was told to leave the area immediately. As they escorted me away, the guards said repeatedly: "Do *not* take pictures of the prison."

There were two things that struck me about this experience. First, despite never having been to a prison, I was not surprised by what I saw when I arrived. I already had a clear image of what a prison looked like—an image given to me by films, news media, and popular culture. My expectations were formed entirely through mediated representations. Second, despite remaining entirely on publicly accessible roads and walkways, I was not allowed to document what I saw. The prison was somehow threatened by being seen. This experience revealed to me the complex ways visibility functions within our systems of punishment and how prisons, and the people warehoused in them, are simultaneously seen and unseen.

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Visuality refers to the ways in which seeing and being seen are shaped by power (Mirzoeff, 2006). It operates through the management of what is made visible, what is hidden, and who is given the right to look. Thus, it is never neutral. Managing visibility is a strategy used to maintain global frameworks of power such as colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy (Creech, 2020). This controlled visuality is utilized in media, archives, museums, and, in a particularly effective and complex way, in carceral institutions (Wilkinson, 2015).

In dominant Western regimes of punishment, visibility is controlled through apprehension, concealment, surveillance, and representation (Brown, 2009). These strategies construct powerful narratives about criminality, justice, and state power. Not only does this contribute to the oppressive nature of incarceration, but it additionally affects the public and political realm through the wide reach of the Prison Industrial Complex. The prison relies on both hypervisibility and invisibility: incarcerated people are made highly visible as criminals, while the systemic violence that produces incarceration remains hidden (Ewing, 2016; Bridhenti, 2007). The result is a paradox: prisons and prisoners are simultaneously unseen yet omnipresent as stereotypes.

This tension forms the foundation of my artistic inquiry. *The Weight of Time* combines sculptural installation, photography, and drawing to examine the complex nature of controlled visuality leveraged in systems of separation and punishment. This body of work investigates how prisons operate as both highly visible and deliberately invisible institutions. By engaging with these visual strategies, the work aims to disrupt dominant narratives and invites viewers to critically examine the cultural, historical, and political systems that shape what we see and how we see it.

The Weight of Time uses original photographs as well as the digital archives of Google as source images to engage with how photography is embedded in the discourse of criminalization and imprisonment. Through meticulously rendering the perimeters of prisons around Canada and the U.K., the work exposes the institution's ability to control perception and erase individuality. The act of drawing and photographing these sites became a slow, deliberate counterpoint

to the dominance of biased media and the invisibility of incarceration.

The images are characterized by gaps and deliberate omissions, communicating through what is hidden, rather than through what is depicted. The viewer is limited to a glimpse, a small aperture, or an object without context. Through these strategies of fragmenting and combining, cropping and concealing, the attention of the viewer is directed, emphasizing that sometimes what cannot be seen is more powerful than what is.

Central to the body of work is a sculptural piece made by filling fluorescent light tubes with concrete and removing the glass exterior. This gesture transforms a ubiquitous institutional object into something opaque and oppressive. Light, often used to make seeing possible, is also used in practices of surveillance, hypervisibility, and regulation. The manipulation of this object references how visibility is utilized in carceral spaces to assert rigid control over bodies, time, and movement.

This sculptural piece is exhibited alongside works on paper that combine images of prison architecture with fragments of text extracted from standardized prison documents. A three-foot stack of office paper reads: “Under the Volumetric Control Policy, stored property will be reduced to the bare minimum”. The bureaucratic language exposes the contradictory nature of administrative procedure and human experience.

Attentiveness, in my practice, functions as an act of care and resistance. By paying close attention to the overlooked and ignored, I challenge existing hierarchies and reveal the violence embedded in these everyday systems. The act of looking, facilitated through both detailed drawings and camera lens, becomes a mode of ethical engagement. To look is to refuse erasure.

Through both representational and conceptual approaches, this work interrogates the mechanisms of exclusion and control that operate within punitive justice frameworks. The resulting constellation of artworks invites a critical reimagining of justice systems—one shaped by attentiveness and care.

As a partnering artist of A.R.T. Justice, I currently facilitate weekly art classes for men incarcerated at William Head Institution in Victoria, British Columbia. A.R.T. Justice is a Participatory Action Research project led by researchers at the University of British Columbia. This collaborative initiative supports the holistic health, well being, and dignity of currently and formerly incarcerated people in B.C. through Indigenous-guided and trauma-informed approaches. The relationships formed through this work profoundly influence my practice and shape my ongoing inquiry into this complex part of contemporary life.

References

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Biography

Chantal New is a conceptual artist based on traditional territories of the ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples, colonially known as Victoria, B.C.. Her work combines drawing, photography, and sculptural installation to explore themes of longing, grief, and injustice. Chantal holds an MFA from West Dean College of Art in Chichester, U.K. and is a partnering artist of the A.R.T. Justice program at William Head Institution.

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Image 1: *His Majesty's Prisons*, 2023, Ink jet print on paper, 84x400cm



Image 2: *How Heavy is Light?*, 2023, Concrete, steel, electrical plugs, 35x35x183cm.



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Image 3: *How Heavy is Light?*, 2023, Detail, Concrete, steel, electrical plugs, 35x35x183cm



Image 4: *Brixton CCTV*, 2022, Graphite on paper, 56x76cm.



Image 5: *No Parking*, 2022, Graphite on paper, 56x76cm.



Image 6: *Volumetric Control Policy, 2023 (and No Parking, 2022)*, Laser print on paper, 23x30x100cm.



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Image 7: *Volumetric Control Policy*, 2023, Detail, Laser print on paper, 23x30x100cm.



Image 8: *Freedom I*, 2023, Acrylic on board, 50x70cm



Image 9: *Grate*, 2023, Acrylic on paper, 40x60cm



Image 10: *Stoney Mountain Institute, 2021*, Graphite on concrete, steel wall mount, 38x48x1.5cm



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Image 11: *Stoney Mountain Institute, 2021*, Detail, Graphite on concrete, steel wall mount, 38x48x1.5cm



Image 12: *British Prison Reform Trust Prison Guidebook Excerpts, 2024*, Laser print on paper, 30x40cm



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Image 13: *HMP Coldingley*, 2022, Graphite on mylar, 28x35.5cm



Image 14: *HMP Maidstone, 2022, Graphite on mylar, 28x35.5cm*



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Image 15: *HMP Thameside*, 2021, Graphite on mylar, 28x35.5cm

