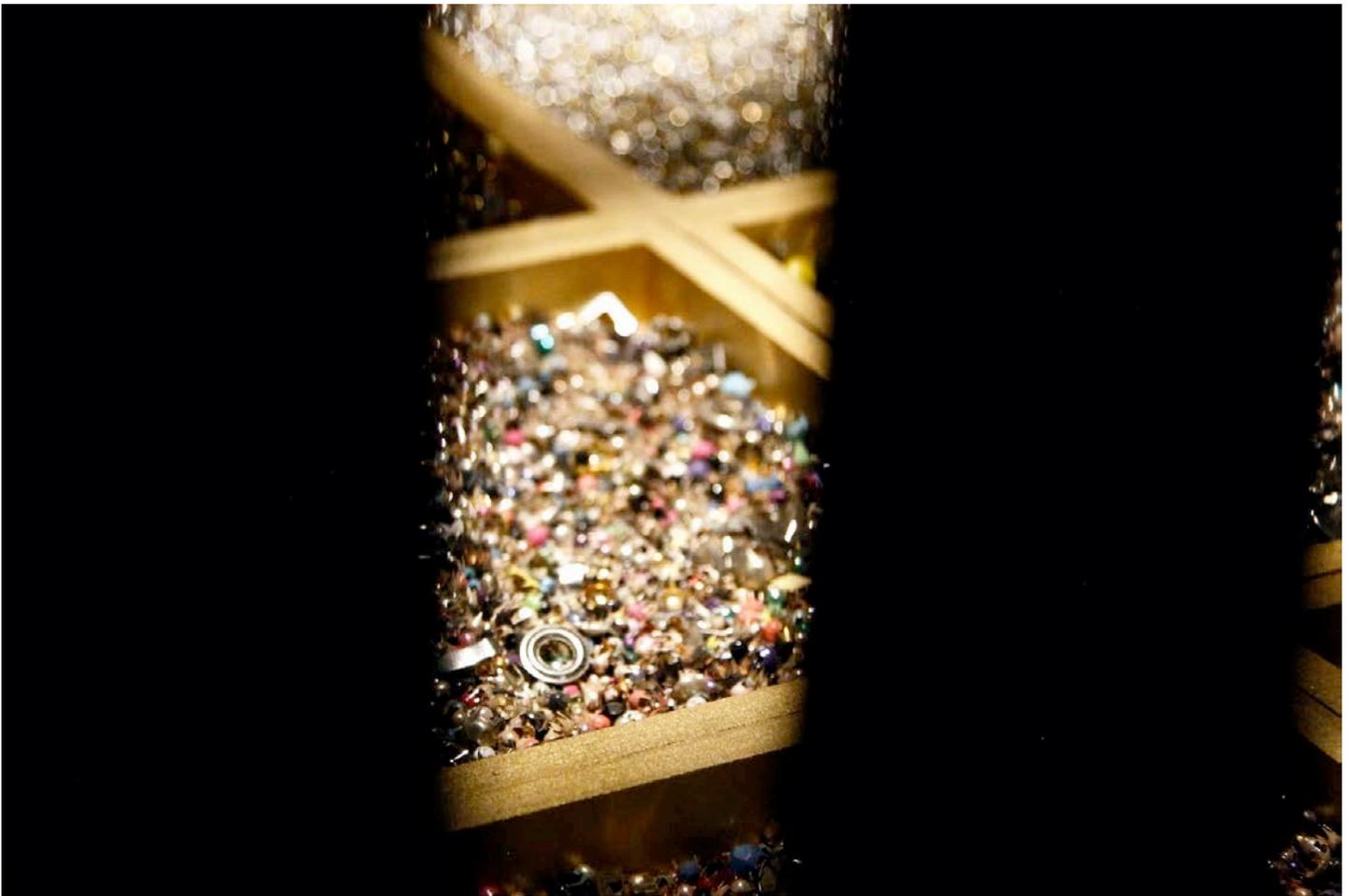


The Other Side

A new Ladd Brothers' show explores a decade-long collaboration with inmates—
and art's potential to empower

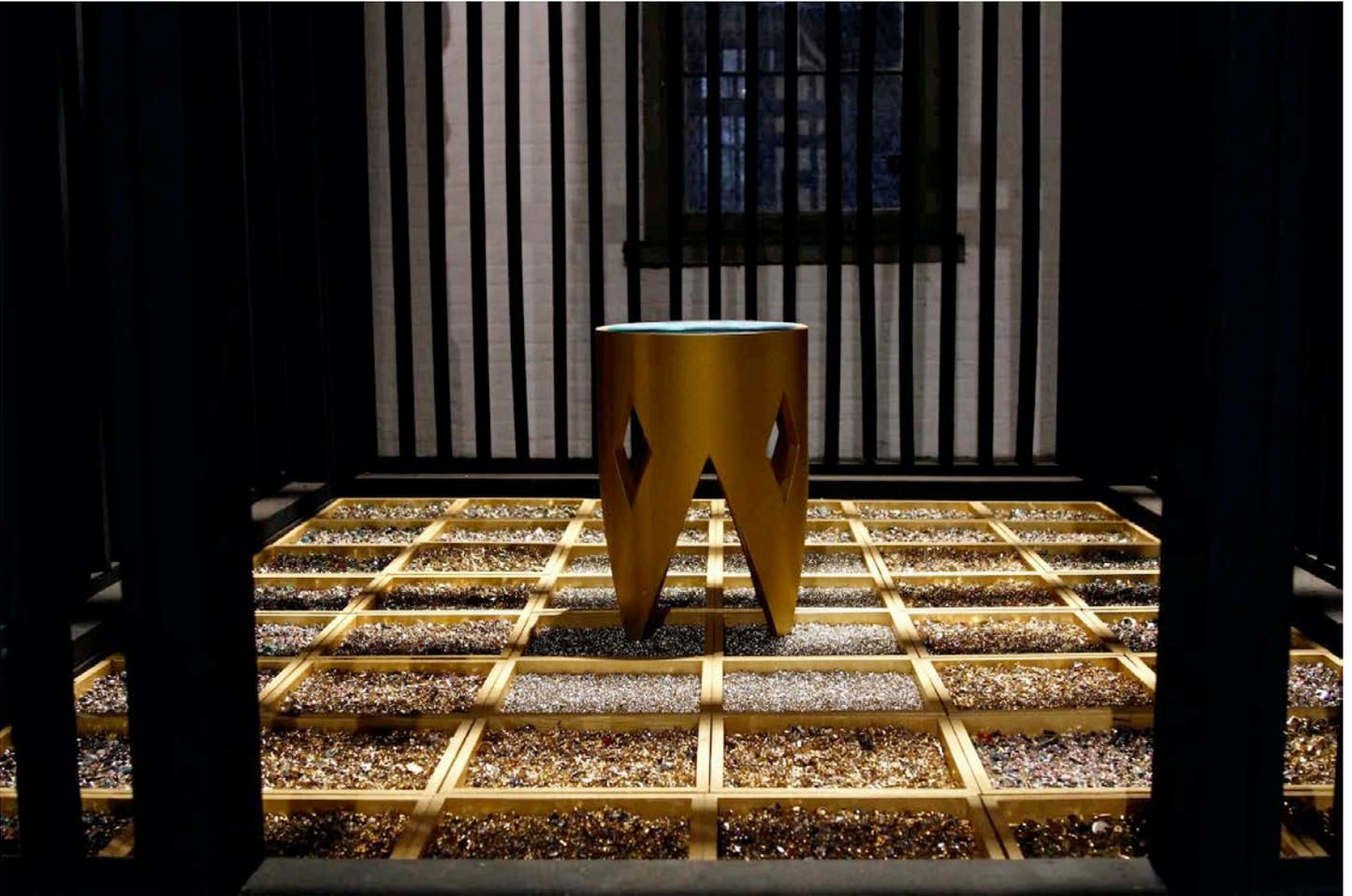
By: Anna Carnick
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Trinkets seen through the bars of Isolation, a jail cell installation in the Ladd's new exhibition, The Other Side. Image © Simon Courchel / The Invisible Dog/

For nearly a decade, brothers and artists Steven and William Ladd have worked with inmates at the NYC Department of Corrections in a series of hands-on workshops called Scrollathons, aimed at empowering the incarcerated participants through art. Now the fruits of those collaborative efforts—including the Ladd's own art and design pieces, presented alongside artworks made with prisoners and the stories behind them—are on display in a new show entitled The Other Side at Brooklyn's Invisible Dog Art Center.

CRISTINA GRAJALES GALLERY



Isolation, a constructed jail cell, features a single stool to represent solitary confinement. The floor is composed of boxes and metal trinkets, signatures of the Ladds' practice. Image © Simon Courchel / The Invisible Dog

Set against the backdrop of heightened national debate and protests over systemic racism, police violence, and entrenched inequities, the exhibition offers a timely glimpse inside the American criminal justice system—as well as the power of art to uplift and connect. As Steven Ladd tells us, “Art sets the stage for a deeper level of connection. In the context of creating works of art, people open up and share a bit about themselves and their lived experience.”

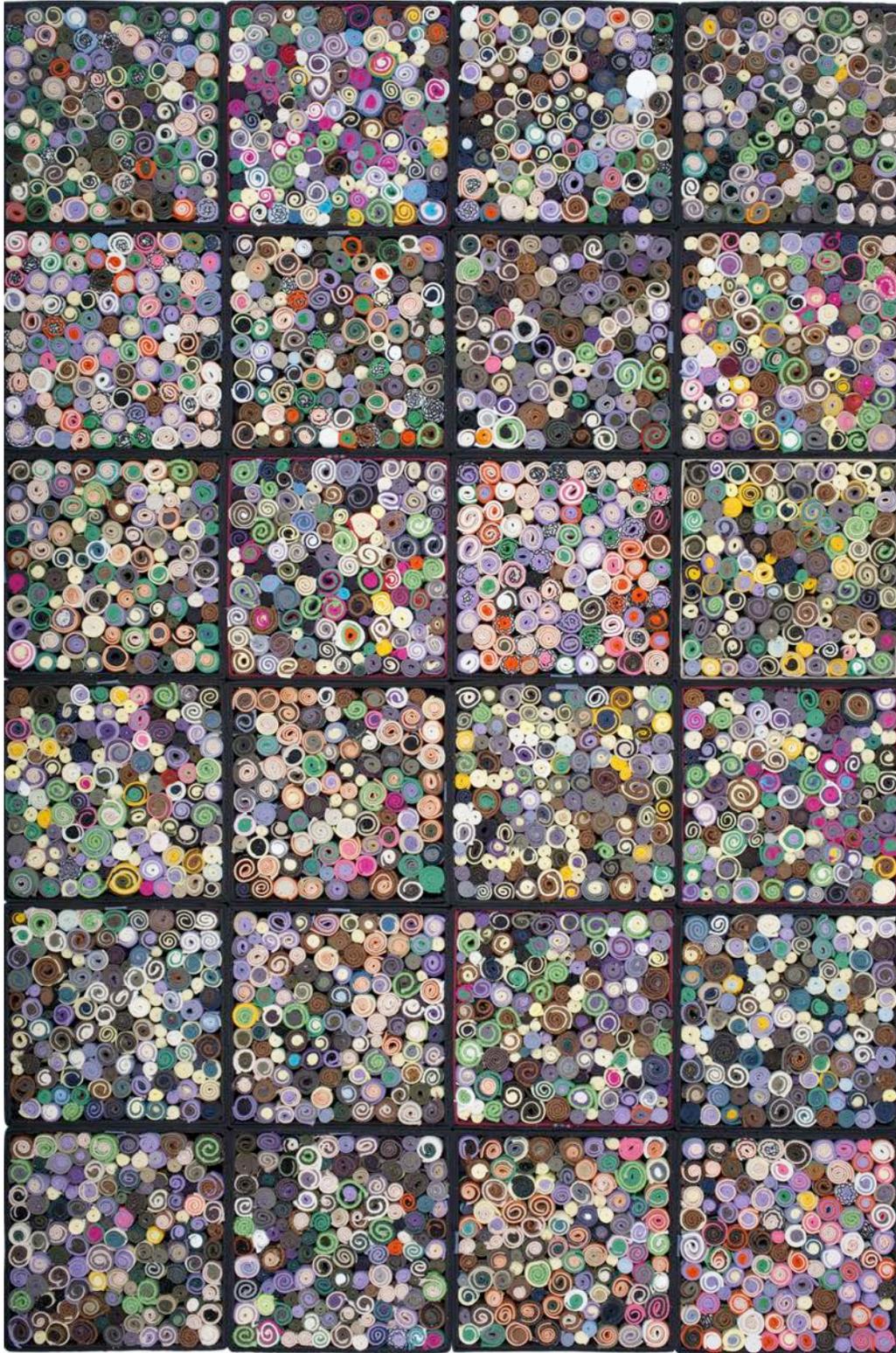


Isolation, part of The Other Side exhibition. Image © Simon Courchel / The Invisible Dog

In addition to the collaborative works, the show features figurative drawings and paintings by the Ladds. Stories behind the works are available as wall text, downloadable audio files, and a short film. The exhibition also incorporates spaces depicting a jail cell, metal detector, and a surveillance booth. The interior of the life-size jail cell is covered in words contributed by 125 inmates and other invited contributors that respond to the question: What one word describes incarceration for you?

Ladd explains: “Moving through the jail system is a highly structured event with very specific rules and regulations as well as very specific architecture. We wanted to place the viewer into a different kind of space and structure the way they experienced the show.”

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Invincible (2016), a work made in collaboration with 185 inmates in two women's housing units at Rikers Island Correctional Facility over two years. The title came from a participant who wrote: "The name of my scroll is Invincible. That is the way I see my son. He is a person that doesn't never stop going to his goals. [My scroll means] peace, stress free, doing something that will become a part of something bigger." Image © Simon Courchel / The Invisible Dog

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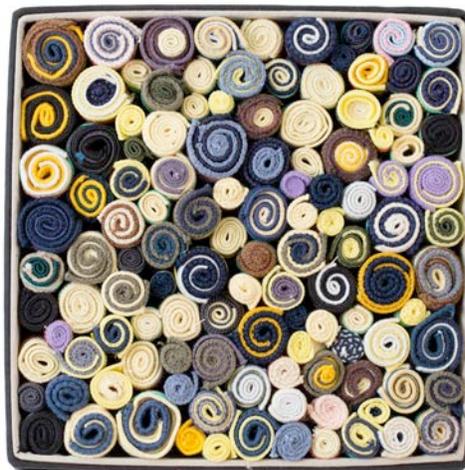
Participants title, sign, and date all works and then share the inspiration behind the titles with the group. The process is carefully documented through photos and a short film, which are shared with the group at a later date. Throughout, the Ladds encourage one-on-one and group dialogues to encourage reflection and self-expression.

As Ladd tells us, “Never underestimate the power of a single moment to transform someone’s life. Setting up an environment where people are successful creates an awesome space for sharing. Scrolling is simple and fun and can have all kinds of meanings and applications and effects... We think that one of the most powerful things is to just treat people with a very high level of respect. You can see people blossoming in front of you when you honestly care about them and give them attention.”

Or, as Terrie Sultan, Director of the Parrish Art Museum in Watermill, New York, has said, “You cannot tell me that these kids don’t walk away with a deeper sense of who they are and what they can be just by working with artists that tell them that they can.”

Since launching the NYC DOC series in 2012, Ladd says, “Over 500 inmates in seven jails on Rikers Island and the general population, as well as the (now disbanded) Transgender Housing Unit at the Manhattan Detention Complex, have participated.”

Working within the prison setting has, not surprisingly, posed some unique constraints. The Ladds had to adjust the program to meet security demands—replacing pins with rubber bands, avoiding certain colors, and the like. Further, Ladd says, “Within the jail system, there are constant challenges. Funding is basically non-existent. Time is a big challenge, as sometimes we’re there most of the day in order to have two hours of actual engagement with inmates. Documentation is a huge problem, as we never have a chance to do the very important photo or video component that is essential to our other Scrollathons. The list really just goes on and on.”



Shades of Rosies (2014); “Rosies” is the nickname for inmates in the jail on Rikers Island that houses women. Image © Steven and William Ladd

Asked how they plan to share the exhibition with those who helped create it, Ladd says, “We are hoping they can watch the video, if we can get clearance, and we’re sending them printed installation shots of the show. We also gave them all of the information so they can invite their family and friends, and we hope that they take photographs and engage with the inmates on the phone and during visiting hours.”

Asked how this experience has affected his impression of the American prison system, Ladd says bluntly, “I think that I used to think it was a bad place and now I realize it is terrifying.”



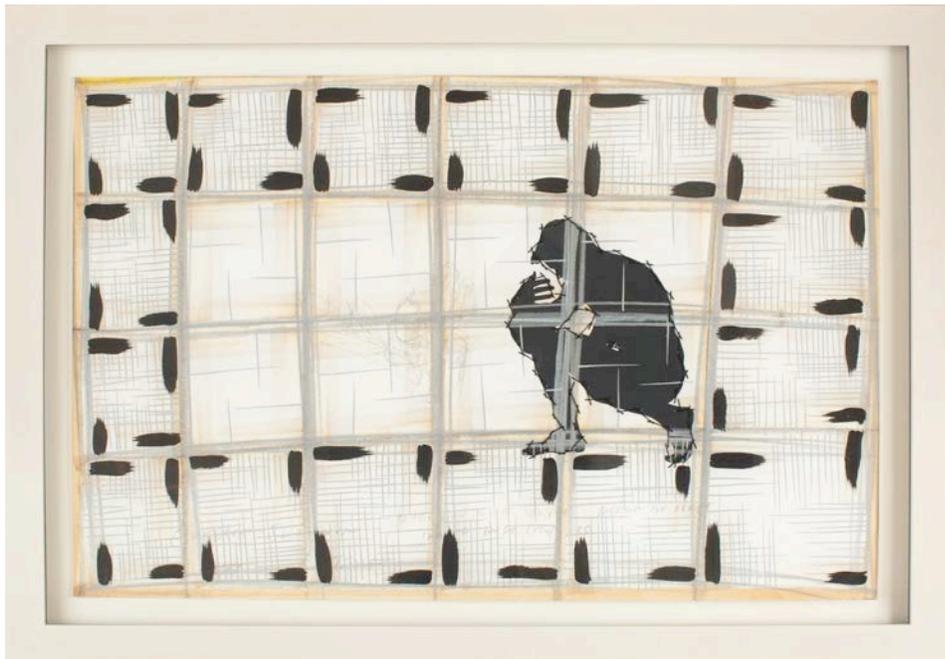
Isolation 1 and Isolation 2 (both 2020), by Steven and William Ladd. Images © Simon Courchel / The Invisible Dog

That takeaway has proven motivational, as have the Ladds’ ongoing relationships with community partners. “Conversations we have with inmates, DOC staff, mentors on the outside, and groups like Art for Justice constantly reinforce the importance of this work for us. [Over the years,] we’ve witnessed firsthand the impact artmaking has— this project just takes it a step further by using the artmaking process as a way to engage with people who are largely marginalized. When they are successful and see their contribution to a greater purpose, often they let down their guard and begin to talk and think about what means most to them. The experiences have been humbling and emotional and the impetus to expand the NYCDOC Scrollathon.”

To that end, the Ladds hope to see the project expanded within New York State and, ultimately, on a national level. “Our dream,” Ladd says, “is to continue our work in the NYCDOC

CRISTINA GRAJALES GALLERY

over the next five years. Each year we would engage with 500-1,000 inmates through Scrollathon to create a major and beautiful work of art. Ideally these works would then be installed in the public realm—potentially one in each of the five boroughs. We would like to get funding to open a paid internship program for formerly incarcerated people and young people at risk of entering the system. We would use this program to hire employees who would work directly with us over the next five years and learn everything about the way we work as artists, how we engage communities, and how we manage a small business. In terms of the Scrollathon outside the NYC DOC, we have been in talks with a major organization to take the program onto a national level.



Embrace (2018) by Steven and William Ladd. Image © Simon Courchel / The Invisible Dog

In the meantime, they're reflecting on the experience of the past ten years. And there are plenty of potent moments to choose from.

Recalling one particularly memorable experience from a decade's worth of encounters, Ladd tells us, "They called out, 'Man on Deck!' as we entered the common area of the jail on Rikers Island that houses women, nicknamed Rosies. About 25 women walked out of a barracks-like area and joined us to make art. They loved scrolling. After half an hour, a small box was filled with a field of green scrolls. The energy in the room became electrified, and everyone gathered around the table to title the piece. They started brainstorming aloud. The colors were the same tones as their uniforms, so they started there and built rapidly... 'Green, Sentenced, Prison, Incarcerated, Freedom, Freedom, Freedom!' And then everyone erupted in applause and started chanting 'FREEDOM, FREEDOM!' One woman cried out, 'Put your hands together on the work,' and 25 women of all different colors and backgrounds put their hands together on top of the box and chanted 'FREEDOM.' Everyone broke out into applause. It was powerful."

The Other Side is on display through November 7th at The Invisible Dog Art Center in Brooklyn.

The exhibition is co-presented by The Invisible Dog Art Center, the French Institute Alliance Française (FI AF), and Cristina Grajales Gallery, which represents the Ladd Brothers' work.



Freedom (2013); Image © Steven and William Ladd