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MEDIA REVIEW

Concrete, Steel & Paint

T. Heriza (Co-Director, Co-Producer) & C. L. Burstein (Co-Director, Co-Producer). (2009). *Concrete, Steel & Paint* [Documentary]. United States of America: New Day Films.
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The United States incarcerates more people than any nation on earth. We are a nation that nurtures the cycle of crime and punishment through the ongoing construction of more and more prisons. On the other side of these impenetrable walled warehouses are families, friends, communities, and victims of crime, abuse, and addiction. Each element in the cycle of crime and punishment is part of a larger complex picture filled with ambiguity, empathy, prejudice, abuse, addiction, guilt, remorse, violence, emptiness, and resilience.

The documentary *Concrete, Steel & Paint* shares a moving story about the role of murals, storytelling, image making, and the use of the arts to bear witness to humanity's capacity for resilience, forgiveness, and understanding. Produced and directed by Cindy Burstein and Tony Heriza, this film weaves all of these disparate elements together in a dramatic story about the creation of murals by the men at the State Correctional Institution in Graterford, Pennsylvania (SCI-Graterford), in collaboration with the famous Mural Arts Program of Philadelphia.

Rich and visually textured street scenes and urban vignettes of Philadelphia contrast starkly with views of the bare walls and guard towers of SCI-Graterford, cell blocks, the yard, and intimate spaces within one of the largest and oldest prisons in the United States. There are approximately 4,000 men housed at Graterford under maximum-security conditions. Graterford is a small city revolving around the economy of crime and punishment.

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Shooting documentaries about difficult subjects such as crime is hardly easy; negotiating to bring a camera into a maximum-security prison to film candid moments over months of work, meetings, and studio sessions is miraculous. Through candid interviews, the viewer is taken inside and outside the walls of the prison to see the complex relationships between people who are victims of crime and people who have perpetrated criminal acts against others. We are led to see the interior lives of men who help create the murals that are one of the subjects of the film under the direction of two talented artists: Jane Golden, founder of the Mural Arts Project, and Cesar Viveros, the lead artist for this project. The incarcerated men featured in the film openly share their crimes, histories of abuse, and family lives with viewers.

The filmmakers are invisible throughout the film; this makes viewers feel less of a sense of distance between themselves and the "subjects" of the film. Sometimes the viewer's visual space is so intimate that it is possible to count the hairs on the chin of some of the men who are interviewed in prison. Viewers see the inside of the cells in which these men spend their lives. The filmmakers portray the vulnerability of these men and the importance of art in their lives.

These intimate interviews with men who are incarcerated are balanced by equally candid interviews with victims of violent crimes and victims' advocates. One powerful character within the documentary featured at various points is Victoria Greene. Her son, Emir, was shot and killed as a young man. Her presence within the film embodies a person who is resilient and open to the possibility that people can change in unexpected ways. Viewers hear the painful details of her life and the life of her daughter after the death of her son. Through these heart-wrenching accounts, Burstein and Heriza have purposely placed viewers in an emotional quagmire. Viewers must face the question: Is it possible to have sympathy not only for the victims of violent crime but also for perpetrators?

Jane Golden, one of America's premier mural artists, is the human bridge in the film between SCI-Graterford and residents in Philadelphia. She believes creating such works of art offers people a way to sort out social and political issues. Sympathy that the film's viewers may feel for the men at SCI-Graterford is tempered by Golden's account of her first interaction with the men in prison. She confronts her stereotypes of people who are incarcerated. Not surprisingly, Golden's views change as she masterfully works elbow-to-elbow with these men painting.

The turning point for Golden came after she gave a lecture to the art class at SCI-Graterford. Afterward, she received letters from the men at SCI-Graterford asking her to consider doing a project with the art class at the prison. Golden knew that habitual incarceration played a role in the ebb and flow of many of the neighborhoods where the Mural Arts Program had worked tirelessly for years. Many of the residents of the neighborhoods of inner-city Philadelphia are affected by crime and punishment on a daily basis. It is more than an abstract concept or statistic; instead, it is a concrete part of their reality. Golden slowly transformed as a result of this project. In the film, we see men painting side-by-side in the gentle light of the auditorium at SCI-Graterford. Paintbrushes in back pockets, paint on the floor and their shoes, the scene looks more like a university art class than a prison. Later in the film, Golden no longer uses the word "prisoners," but instead refers to the art-class participants as men who relish the chance to work on a mural. She tells a touching story of how the men continuously painted over one section because they were afraid that the program would end when they finished the mural.

The men and Golden decide to create a mural that would be installed outside of the prison. The men who are incarcerated are the first to

Figure 1. The signature image for CSP. Photo by Tony Heriza.

Figure 2. The Healing Wall—Victim Journey. Photo by Jack Ramsdale.

Figure 3. Healing Wall—Prisoner journey. Photo by Jack Ramsdale.

bring up the victims of their crimes. They want to make amends. Here is where the story within the film really begins. Over the next few months, Golden brings together victims and victims' advocates with the men of SCI-Graterford. They engage in some tense, moving, and difficult conversations. While most films make viewers feel that everything is going to turn out well, it is not clear here that there will be a resolution. Viewers see Golden struggle. Within the documentary, there are moments where the men in prison and people from the outside, mostly women, emotionally address the ways in which crime has wrecked their lives. When confronted with their anger, resistance, and pain, Golden realizes what she knew when she began the project: that this undertaking is difficult and filled with ambiguity.

As Golden struggles with striking a compromise that recognizes the needs of both groups, she tries to create a safe environment within the prison and the community through painting and conversation. She successfully opens a space where both parties can paint side-by-side and have frank exchanges about their experience without feeling fear. She encounters resistance and masterfully works through it with community members, the men who are incarcerated, and the people who have survived in spite of their victimization. In the end, Golden recognizes that people embark on different journeys of healing.

What can viewers learn from this film? First and foremost, visual and time-based art can offer a powerful way to negotiate difference and represent experiences. In some instances, art can transform the way that people frame their lives and purpose. *Concrete, Steel & Paint* makes visible the stories and feelings of people who are incarcerated and their families, as well as the voices of people who have been affected by crime. The stories told within this film are rarely heard. This film also offers documentary filmmakers a model for the construction of difficult narratives through images, stories, and sound. People interested in criminal justice, social work, the arts, and education can gain valuable insight into the human heart through this documentary. It provides educators with a visually rich and morally perplexing opportunity for discussion and dialogue about justice and art. Although it purposefully leaves many questions unanswered, it gently invites viewers to embark on their own journey of interest about issues related to crime, prison, healing, and the arts.