The New York Times

ART REVIEW

With Pebbles and Soap, Jesse Krimes Takes on the Prison System

The artist's works are the subject of two New York shows, at the Metropolitan Museum and the Jack Shainman Gallery.

By Arthur Lubow

Nov. 13, 2024

"Naxos," by Jesse Krimes, in his solo show, "Corrections," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The artist asked inmates around the country to find an "ideal pebble" in the prison yard and send it to him. Video by Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Jesse Krimes makes art that stems from his six years in prison on drug charges. But he isn't trying to evoke what it feels like to be jailed. Rather than portray the dehumanization of individuals in the system — as, for example, Gordon Parks did in his 1957 Life magazine photos at the San Quentin prison — Krimes marshals the strategies of conceptual and pop art. He appropriates and manipulates images he takes from the media or art history books, everything from mug shots to medieval tapestries, to recreate the fragmentary way that the world filters through to the incarcerated. The works, which are often large-scaled, aim to convey the enormity of the American penal system, which confines nearly two million people in federal and state prisons.

His art is the subject of two New York shows, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Jack Shainman Gallery. In "Jesse Krimes: Corrections" at the Met, the curator Lisa Sutcliffe cannily pairs his work with a panoply of Alphonse Bertillon's mug shots of suspected anarchists, which the Paris police assembled as part of a machinery of surveillance in the 1890s. The wall of grim standardized portraits faces off against "Purgatory" (2009), a piece that Krimes, 42, made during a year of pretrial solitary confinement.

"Purgatory," 2009, which Krimes made during a year in solitary confinement, uses playing cards, prison-issued bars of soap and mug shots drawn from a local newspaper's crime reports. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Repurposing decks of poker cards, which the prison inmates played by calling out hands from their isolated cells, Krimes glued together 21 cards with toothpaste to make a flat brick, cut out a rectangle from a face card he placed on top, and then filled the cavity with a small bar of prison-issued soap on which he had transferred a mug shot drawn from a local paper's crime reports. Eventually, he branched out to include portraits of celebrities, in the belief that anyone might become an outlaw. He constructed nearly 300 of these and mailed them out, two at a time, to a friend. "Purgatory" is now in the permanent collection of the Met.

The Met show juxtaposes Krimes's artworks with an installation, center, displaying Alphonse Bertillon's mug shots of suspected anarchists, which the Paris police assembled as part of a machinery of surveillance in the 1890s. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Before falling afoul of the law, Krimes had earned a degree in art from Millersville University in Pennsylvania in 2008. Once he was convicted and sent to a federal penitentiary, he embarked on a project even more ambitious than "Purgatory": "Apokaluptein: 16389067" (2010-13). (The title is a combination of the Greek word for "apocalypse" and the identification number he was issued in prison.)

Using hair gel, he transferred images from The New York Times and imprinted them onto 39 bedsheets. He has said that the bedsheets were designed to conceal bodies, as are prisons — which, like many of his associations, will not be apparent to most viewers.

Years later, that piece became a standout at a traveling group exhibition, "Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration," which debuted at MoMA PS1 in 2020. There it was curved like a 19th-century panoramic painting, but at the Met, where for the first time it is displayed in its entirety, it hangs flat, 15 feet high and 40 feet wide.

"Apokaluptein: 16389067" is divided horizontally into sections depicting hell, earth and the blue skies of heaven. Because the largest newspaper images appeared in full-page advertisements, fashionably dressed women loom over the smaller infernal scenes of disaster and war. With colored pencils, Krimes has drawn in other female figures, who hover in the sky balletically but awkwardly, like Vivian Girls who escaped from a Henry Darger collage. Images of famous paintings, which ran in ads for museum exhibitions, are included in the mix.

Cut off from the world, Krimes depended on newspapers to grasp what was happening outside. He chose the title “Apokaluptein” because the Greek word denotes revelation or disclosure. And while the world is mediated for all of us, for prison inmates it is drastically filtered and skewed. In “Apokaluptein: 16389067,” cultural scenes come through as dimly as light into an oubliette, exposing what is celebrated and what is devalued in our society.

The artist Jesse Krimes, with his work “Naxos” at the Met. After his release from prison, Krimes founded the Center for Art & Advocacy to support the artistic activities of former prisoners. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

After his release from custody in 2014, Krimes became an activist for reform of the penal system and a supporter of those who have passed through it. In 2022, he founded a nonprofit, the Center for Art & Advocacy, to aid the artistic activities of former inmates. This fraternal camaraderie infuses his art.

For “Naxos” (2023-24), his most recent piece in the Met show, he asked inmates around the country to find an “ideal pebble” in the prison yard and send it to him. He then inked threads to match the color sequence of “Apokaluptein: 16389067” and used them to wrap and suspend nearly 10,000 stones, each from a needle. The two artworks are installed opposite each other. In a very subtle deconstruction, the colors of the imprinted bedsheets are reprised inch by inch in the dangling strings and stones of “Naxos.”

In Greek mythology, Naxos is the island where the hero Theseus abandoned Ariadne, who had betrayed her father, King Minos of Crete, by giving Theseus a ball of thread to find his way out of the Labyrinth after killing the Minotaur. The prison system is a bewildering maze like the Labyrinth, and the story captivates Krimes.

The three-panel “Unicorn,” 2024, at Jack Shainman Gallery. Krimes transferred a detail of the medieval tapestry “Hunt of the Unicorn” at the Cloisters, and then overlaid it with embroidery he made with clothing collected from inmates and former inmates. via Jesse Krimes and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Photo by Dan Bradica Studio

In “Jesse Krimes: Cells” at Jack Shainman Gallery, which presents works he made this year, one of the most striking pieces is a sculpture, “Minos and the Minotaur.” It combines a round wooden antique mousetrap as a kind of face with a skeletal body made of a surveyor’s tripod. A pebble hangs from a thread within the legs of the tripod, above a group of red-wrapped pebbles at the bottom. As in “Naxos,” the pebbles were donated by inmates, but you don’t need to know the back story of incarceration to shudder at the sculpture’s forbidding, predatory presence.

In another composition, “Ariadne’s Dancing Ground I-XIII,” wrapped pebbles appear again, this time as flowery finials at the ends of wavy concrete filaments, rising like lotus blooms out of the ground.

Most of the works in “Jesse Krimes: Cells” are wall pieces that Krimes constructed as palimpsests. He would transfer an image from art history, such as a detail of a “Hunt of the Unicorn” medieval tapestry at the Cloisters, and then overlay it with embroidery he made with clothing collected from inmates and former inmates.

He derived the design of the embroidery from microscopic images of flesh invaded by cancer cells, creating the pattern by removing the tumors from the pictures and leaving behind only healthy tissue. In a conversation, he explained that he wanted to suggest the possibility of redemption for those enmeshed in the prison network. However, you might just as easily interpret the altered images as glorifications of a penal system that has excised malignancies from the social fabric.

Krimes's "Minos and the Minotaur," 2024, at Jack Shainman, combines a round wooden antique mousetrap as a kind of face with a skeletal body made of a surveyor's tripod. via Jesse Krimes and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Photo by Dan Bradica Studio

In "Ariadne's Dancing Ground I -XIII," wrapped pebbles appear as flowery finials at the ends of wavy concrete filaments. via Jesse Krimes and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Photo by Dan Bradica Studio

The embroidery in the wall pieces in "Cells" is so dense that the images beneath are hidden. The human beings in prisons are similarly out of sight, Krimes is saying, and so is the immense network of incarceration. But it is also the case that as Krimes's still young career advances, often his messaging is likewise hidden, obscured by elaborate symbolism.

While the reformist fervor of the artist is unquestionable, frequently his work succeeds on aesthetic principles, not political ones. Maybe that is its own kind of triumph: a testament to his deep belief that art provides a path for the human spirit to rise above the degradation of prison.

Jesse Krimes: Corrections

Through July 13, 2025. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan; 212-535-7710; metmuseum.org.

Jesse Krimes: Cells Through Dec. 21. Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, Manhattan; 212-645-1701; jackshainman.com.

COLOSSAL

Apokaluptein:16389067″ (2010–2013), cotton sheets, ink, hair gel, graphite, and gouache, 15 x 40 feet. All images courtesy of Jesse Krimes, Jack Shainman Gallery, and The Met, shared with permission

Through Monumental Installations of Soap and Stones, Jesse Krimes Interrogates the Prison System

November 21, 2024 Art Social Issues

Grace Ebert

Around 2009, Jesse Krimes was sent to solitary confinement while awaiting trial for a drug charge. He had recently graduated from Millersville University of Pennsylvania with an art degree and spent his first year inside Fairton Federal Correctional Institution making. “The one thing they could not take away or control was my ability to create,” he says.

Like many incarcerated artists, Krimes had to forgo the luxuries of a pristine canvas and set of paints. Instead, he had to be resourceful and utilize the few materials available to him. He began transferring mugshots and small photos printed in *The New York Times* onto wet remnants of soap bars. He then tucked the blurred, inverse portraits into cut-out decks of playing cards glued together with toothpaste, which created a kind of protective casing that allowed him to smuggle the works out of the facility.

Detail of “Purgatory” (2009), soap, ink, and playing cards

The 292 works became “Purgatory,” which considers how we view criminality and references the unwinnable game of living in a carceral society. Having transferred both photos of people sentenced to prison and celebrities like Naomi Campbell and David Letterman, Krimes points to the ways popularized images can exacerbate power imbalances.

“Purgatory” is currently on view at The Met in *Jesse Krimes: Corrections*, one of two New York exhibitions of the artist’s work.

Exploring the role of photography in the criminal justice system, *Correction*s brings together several of Krimes’ large-scale works, including “Apokaluptein: 16389067.” The 40-foot patchwork mural similarly features imagery taken from newspapers that the artist transferred to 39 prison-issue bedsheets using hair gel. Inverted photographic renderings piece together advertisements, snapshots of global strife, and scenes of life from 2010 to 2013, all overlaid with Krimes’ own drawings.

The root of apocalypse, *apokaluptein* is a Greek word translating to “uncover” and “revelation.” Paired with Krimes’ Bureau of Prisons ID number, the title references mass destruction and the mediated view of the world from inside the justice system.

Detail of “Apokaluptein:16389067” (2010–2013), cotton sheets, ink, hair gel, graphite, and gouache, 15 x 40 feet

Following his release, Krimes co-founded the Center for Art and Advocacy, which supports artists directly impacted by the justice system, and continues to collaborate with people who are incarcerated, often seeking help in sourcing materials for his work.

"Naxos," for example, suspends 9,000 pebbles from prison yards in a vivid installation as a parallel to "Apokaluptein: 16389067" at The Met. And at Jack Shainman Gallery, where Krimes is represented, the artist's new body of work repurposes clothing gathered from currently and formerly incarcerated people into sweeping tapestries.

Cells features three abstract works of transferred art historical imagery overlaid with sprawling, network-like embroideries. The webbed pattern is based on microscopic images of cancerous cells, which the artist excised to leave only the healthy tissue intact. By removing these malignancies, he creates an intricate metaphor for the ways the justice system extracts people from society while exploring new pathways toward care and redemption.

Part of Krimes' intent for his practice is to pay homage to those inside. "It is an absolute honor to have works that were created in such an austere and traumatic environment on display," he said about *Corrections*. "To show these works highlights much more than the work of an individual artist, namely the collective value, creativity, and dignity of the millions of people currently behind prison walls."

Cells is on view through December 21 at Jack Shainman Gallery, while *Jesse Krimes: Corrections* runs through July 13, 2025, at The Met. Find more from Krimes on his website. ◆

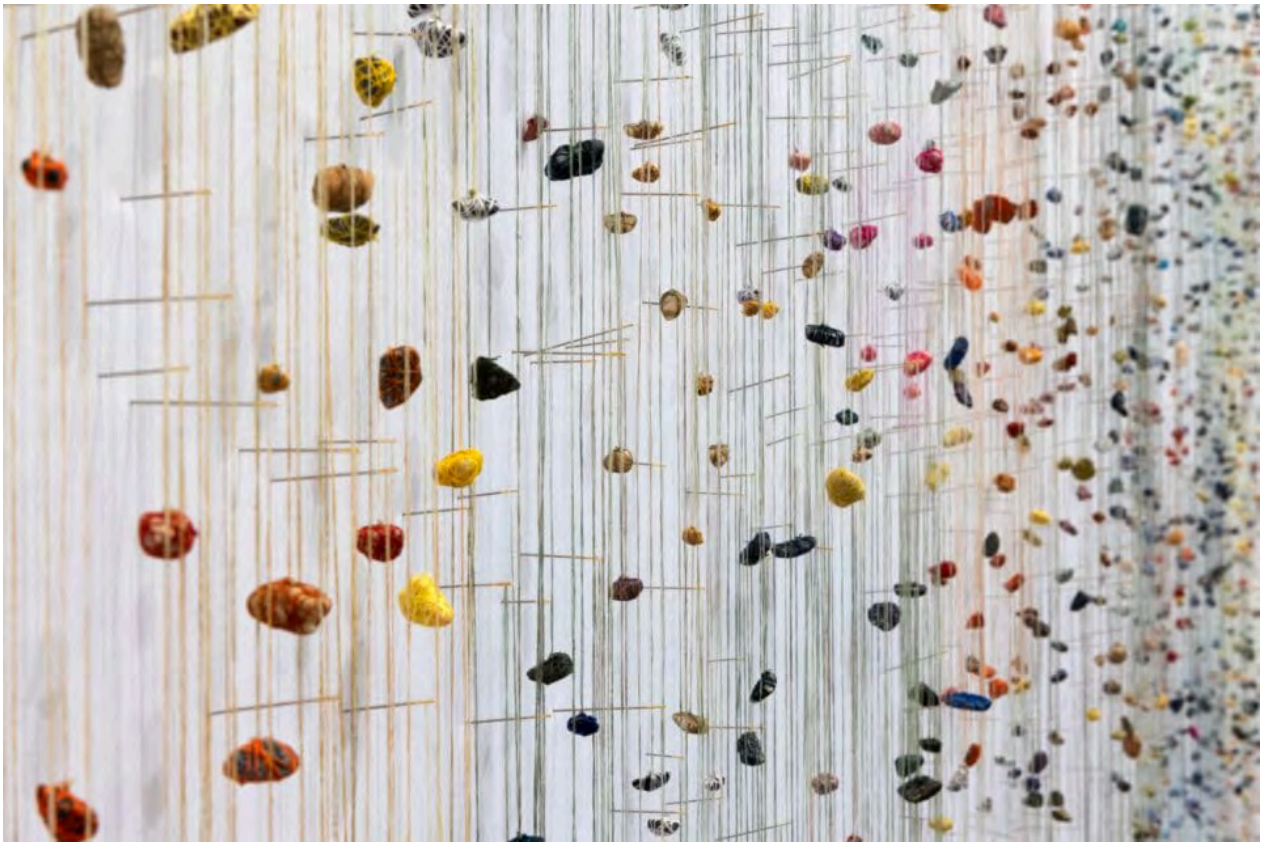
“Unicorn” (2024), used clothing collected from currently and formerly incarcerated people, assorted textiles, embroidery, and image transfer, 109 x 105 x 2 3/4 inches

Detail of “Unicorn” (2024), used clothing collected from currently and formerly incarcerated people, assorted textiles, embroidery, and image transfer, 109 x 105 x 2 3/4 inches

Detail of “Purgatory” (2009), soap, ink, and playing cards

Detail of “Purgatory” (2009), soap, ink, and playing cards

Detail of “Naxos,” installation view of ‘Jesse Krimes: Corrections’



Detail of “Naxos,” installation view of ‘Jesse Krimes: Corrections’

“Stag” (2024), used clothing collected from currently and formerly incarcerated people, assorted textiles, embroidery, image transfer, acrylic paint, 82 x 77 x 2 3/4 inches

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ARTSEEN | DEC/JAN 2024–25

Jesse Krimes: *Corrections*

By Joanna Seifter

Jesse Krimes, *Purgatory* (detail), 2009. Soap, ink, playing cards, variable dimensions. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © Jesse Krimes.

From a distance, the series of uniform eraser-sized white slabs lined up on a blue velvet-lined shelf appear to be stone sculptures stripped of their pigment and linear detail, bearing only traces of patina. Upon closer inspection, eyes, hair, and mouths emerge to form somber facial expressions. They etch themselves deeper into the viewer's vision with each passing moment, revealing their true nature: the faintly rendered images are photographs of prison inmates.

Corrections
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
October 28, 2024–July 13, 2025
New York

These spectral renditions of twenty-first-century mug shots, *Purgatory* (2009), are an installation featured in contemporary mixed-media artist Jesse Krimes's current solo show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Corrections*. The work serves as a fitting introduction to Krimes's oeuvre, much of which was either made during or was inspired by his six-year incarceration for nonviolent drug charges. Since his release from prison, Krimes has spearheaded initiatives like the Right of Return Fellowship and the Center for Arts and Advocacy, which rehabilitate and support the emerging careers of incarcerated artists.

Jesse Krimes, *Purgatory* (detail), 2009. Soap, ink, playing cards, variable dimensions. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © Jesse Krimes.

Krimes's artwork exists at the nexus of sculpture, assemblage, and printmaking, an intersection shaped by the limited materials he had access to in prison. The mugshots in *Purgatory*, for instance, were derived from newspaper clippings that Krimes painstakingly superimposed onto slivers of soap, a singular process on impermanent surfaces that counters printmaking's characteristically iterative quality and material longevity. Krimes colligates these slivers of soap with trimmed Bicycle playing cards, swapping suits and faces and occasionally inserting soap fragments, placing the beneficiaries of the prison industrial complex (the ruling class of kings, queens, and jacks) on a level playing field with its victims.

Apokaluptein:16389067 (2010–13) also incorporates artifacts of prison life, consisting of bed sheets printed with newspaper—the same technique as *Purgatory*—augmented with a few painted details. Stretching across a wall like a mural, *Apokaluptein* overwhelms the viewer with a hallucinatory amalgamation of a newspaper's dissonant sections, layering fashion advertisements over scorched land, portrait photography with modern paintings, and war photography alongside paparazzi photos. The installation calls attention to our seemingly paradoxical contemporary situation, in which an international 24/7 news cycle characterized by myopia and superficiality ultimately overwhelms viewers, rendering them unable to respond to urgent sociopolitical issues despite their state of heightened awareness.

Jesse Krimes, *Purgatory* (detail), 2009. Soap, ink, playing cards, variable dimensions. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © Jesse Krimes.

Krimes derives *Apokaluptein:16389067*'s title from his inmate number, directly incorporating the archival structure of modern disciplinary practice in his work. As *Corrections's* didactics tell us, the exhibition places Krimes's body of work "in dialogue" with a foundational example of police archivism: prison photography that reflects the methodologies of nineteenth-century criminologist Alphonse Bertillon, who pioneered what we refer to today as "mug shots." Though Krimes directly references neither Bertillon's biography nor his policework, he makes use of the visual language pioneered by his work. Bertillon's photographic conventions (frontal portraits of subjects sporting grim expressions placed against white backdrops) set a standard for mug shots, one that persists to this day, including in the mug shots that Krimes has appropriated in his work.

The exhibition rightly alludes to the function of Bertillon's work as an agent of collective scrutiny, referencing the French police's publication of mug shots in newspapers as tantamount to "inviting the public to play a role in surveillance." Although the exhibition does not do so, this analogy could be pushed further yet. One might connect Bertillon's practice of collecting biological information about inmates for police databases (known as "Bertillonage") to the now nearly ubiquitous surveillance-driven practice of collecting biometric information even in everyday life.

Installation view: *Jesse Krimes: Corrections*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2024–25. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz.

Corrections references the wide range of data Bertillon collected, from the logical (hair and eye color) to the seemingly nonsensical (middle finger measurements), and correctly notes that these prefigured the widespread adoption of fingerprinting suspects and convicted felons. Troublingly, however, the exhibition omits mention of how fallible, and indeed subject to malicious distortion, Bertillon's methods ultimately were. For example, Bertillon is known to have manipulated biometric information as evidence in the Dreyfus Affair, the 1895 conviction of French Jewish artillery officer Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935), an infamous miscarriage of justice and act of antisemitic persecution. Dreyfus's false conviction for treason was contingent upon Bertillon's untruthful testimony as a handwriting expert, during which he produced a series of arbitrary measurements to "prove" that Dreyfus produced the trial's sole piece of evidence, a forged letter detailing French military stratagem.

Corrections would have benefitted from a more robust contextualization of Bertillon's career, especially in light of the dramatic rise of antisemitic threats and violence, both here in the US and abroad. That said, juxtaposing Krimes's artwork with Bertillon's photography and thus adding a compelling historical dimension to Krimes's practice while invoking the Met's archive is an inspired curatorial choice. It also further distinguishes *Corrections* from Jack Shainman Gallery's concurrent Jesse Krimes solo exhibition *Cells,* which is dedicated to Krimes's more recent nonrepresentational output and more closely adheres to the conventions of a contemporary art gallery exhibition.

Joanna Seifter is a writer, artist, and museum professional living and working in New York City. She is a recent graduate of NYU's Museum Studies MA program.

4Columns

Visual Art

Jesse Krimes

12.13.24

Cyrus Dunham

In the artist's exhibition at the Met, a corrective to the objects and systems of the carceral state.

Jesse Krimes: Corrections, installation view. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz. © Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pictured, center, on wall: Alphonse Bertillon, *Mugshots of Suspected Anarchists, from French Police Files*, 1891–95.

Jesse Krimes: Corrections, *organized by Lisa Sutcliffe, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York City, through July 13, 2025*

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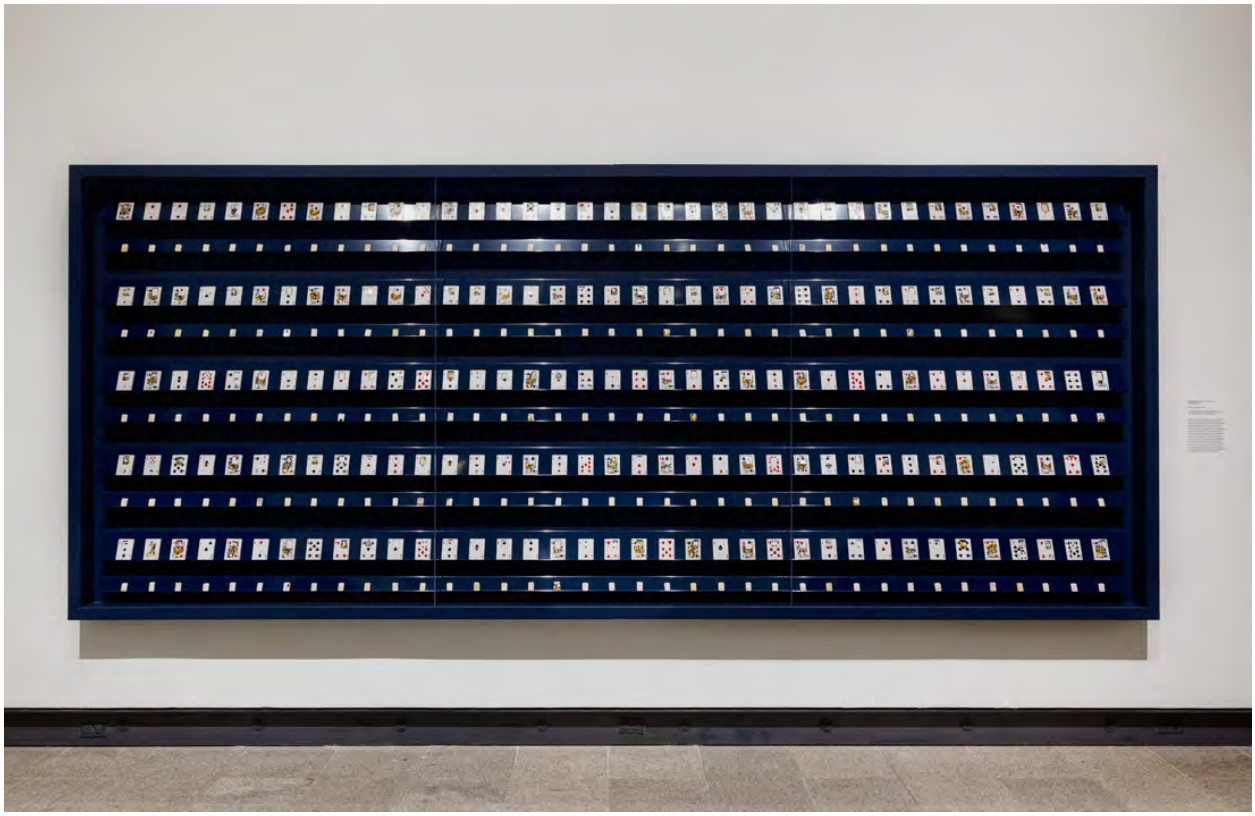
The term "House of Corrections" first appeared in writing at the end of the sixteenth century, as England began to formalize its penitentiary system. To "correct" meant to straighten out, rectify an

error, or improve upon something. “Corrections,” as an institutional prerogative, was the progression of a familiar concept: people went to the house of corrections to be fixed.

Corrections, the title of Jesse Krimes’s current exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is a double entendre: a reference to the Department(s) of Corrections that incarcerated Krimes from 2009 to 2014 (and continues to imprison millions of other Americans), as well as the physical corrections that Krimes makes on objects. Both forms of correction—capital and lowercase—create the conditions for his sculptural, pictorial, and conceptual practice.



Jesse Krimes: Corrections, installation view. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz. © Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pictured: *Purgatory,* 2009.

In *Purgatory* (2009), the earliest work on view, there are five blue-lacquered shelves, each displaying thirty-seven stacked decks of playing cards, the whole behind glass. Every deck is altered with a window-shaped cutout. Some of these windows reveal the suits, numbers, or faces of different cards; other windows reveal off-white surfaces, printed with nearly illegible pictures. In between the rows of cards, smaller shelves of the same dark blue display white domino-size rectangles. The wall text informs us that these dominos are bars of prison-issued soap, and that they serve as inserts in many of the cutouts. Laboring clandestinely in his cell, Krimes had printed images from newspapers and magazines onto the soap, beginning with mugshots from local crime sections and moving on to tabloid shots of famous

people. The soap bars invigorate the decks with further meaning: pictures of the accused replace kings and queens; supermodels and presidents animate the deck's lowest numbers. All of the portraits have faded over time, rendering the subjects—and their varying degrees of criminality and prominence—virtually indistinguishable from one another.

Jesse Krimes: Corrections, installation view. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz. © Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pictured: *Purgatory*, 2009 (detail).

Krimes made *Purgatory* during his first year of incarceration, which he spent in pretrial administrative segregation—otherwise known as solitary confinement. Studying the cards, I found myself thinking about the significance of the rectangle in the prison's architecture of control. Modern penitentiaries are generally designed in standardized grids of six-by-eight-foot cells, separated by hallways. Cells are approximately the same rectangular ratio as the standard 2.5-by-3.5-inch playing card. The window in the wall, the hole in the floor, the cut in the cards—these are pathways of escape, now mostly in folklore, as militarized security and high-tech surveillance make prison-breaks all but impossible.

Jesse Krimes: Corrections, installation view. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz. © Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pictured: *Purgatory,* 2009 (detail).

Limited by regulations on time, movement, and materials, Krimes realized he could hide the soap bars in card decks to prevent them from being ascertained by prison authorities. He mailed the decks out of the institution two at a time, in standard white envelopes. We glean, then, that *Purgatory*'s current display is a distortion of the original work, which was defined as much by temporal constraints as material ones. The original revealed itself in sequence through a process that first began with the sender, then required each letter to pass inspection by the jail's internal processing department, depended on the United States Postal Service for transportation, and finally reached completion upon delivery to the addressee. Postmarked envelopes are shown in a vitrine in the gallery. Did the museum choose to include it as an explanatory accessory, a kind of anthropological, carceral ephemera? Or is the envelope a work unto itself, a remnant of Krimes's process-based practice? This tension—between institutional contextualization and artistic agency—is a recurring problem throughout the show.

Alphonse Bertillon, *Biais. Fernand, Alphonse. 41 ans, né le 28/6/53 à Laval (Mayenne). Tourneur sur bois.*, 1894. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 4 1/8 × 2 3/4 inches.

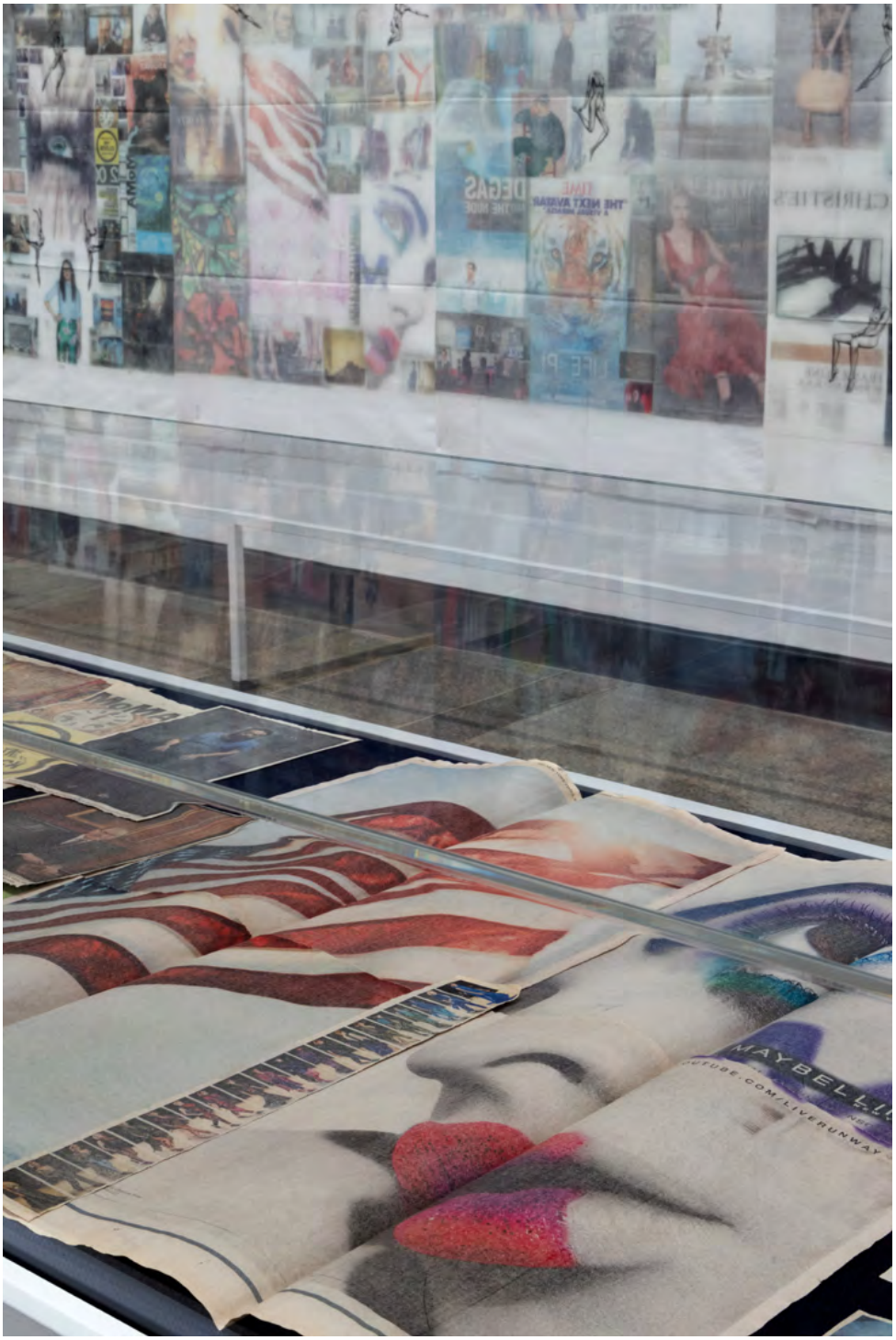
Myriad theorists have demonstrated how the warehousing of bodies and the display of precious objects are co-arising and inseparable historical phenomena. If museums developed to clarify a society's sense of what was valuable, then prisons inversely marked, and disappeared, lives seen as possessing little value.

This connection is manifest in Krimes's exhibition. *Purgatory* shares a room with numerous images from the Met's photography collection, mostly by Alphonse Bertillon, the nineteenth-century French criminologist widely credited with inventing, and standardizing, the mugshot. *Mugshots of Suspected Anarchists* (1891–95) arranges card-size gelatin silver portraits in a grid similar to that of *Purgatory*. Some of the suspected anarchists look directly into the camera, while others stare blankly toward a sideways or diagonal horizon. Although these men and women appear strikingly modern, they were participating in a genre still creating itself. Bertillon's anarchists might never have otherwise posed for a photograph of any kind. Did they understand, as we do now, that this moment of exposure—both photographic and regulatory—was unlikely to be erased?

Jesse Krimes: Corrections, installation view. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz. © Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pictured, left, on wall: *Apokaluptein:16389067*, 2010–13.

In the second gallery, Krimes's largest work, *Apokaluptein:16389067* (2010–13), is almost medieval in scale and theme. Divided into three horizontal realms—heaven, earth, and hell—*Apokaluptein* depicts a world in which diplomats and actresses are subsumed by faceless throngs of refugees displaced by environmental disasters. The exhibition's wall texts repeatedly mention that many of the artist's materials are "prison-issued," and *Apokaluptein* is no exception. He constructed the massive piece by using hair gel to transfer images from the *New York Times* onto prison-issued white cotton sheets,

sending each out upon completion. In *Apokaluptein*'s blue sky, there are a few giants: svelte, sinewy, and perfectly proportioned naked white women pirouetting and flying across the clouds. These looming female figures unmistakably invoke the hand-drawn porn that often circulates in prisons. Except many of the women possess the heads of world leaders, sewing a Frankenstein eroticism out of contraband porn and political gatekeeping.



Jesse Krimes: Corrections, installation view. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz. © Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pictured: *Apokaluptein:16389067,* 2010–13 (detail).

Like the playing-card envelope, Krimes's pencil-on-paper blueprint of *Apokaluptein* is displayed in a glass box next to sample newspaper clippings. I got the sense the Met was engaged in an evidentiary practice. Hesitant to let the art speak for itself, vitrines and didactics offer proof of Krimes's carceral conditions. There is, for me, a palpable disjunction between the artwork and its display, between the artist and the museum. The former: an agent of subtle, conceptual work, wherein process, constraint, and material are inseparable, imagery illustrative without being allegorical. The latter: an institution engaged in a practice of apologetics, hyper-literal in its interpretations of incarceration and its creative delimitations.

Jesse Krimes: Corrections, installation view. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz. © Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pictured: *Naxos,* 2023–24.

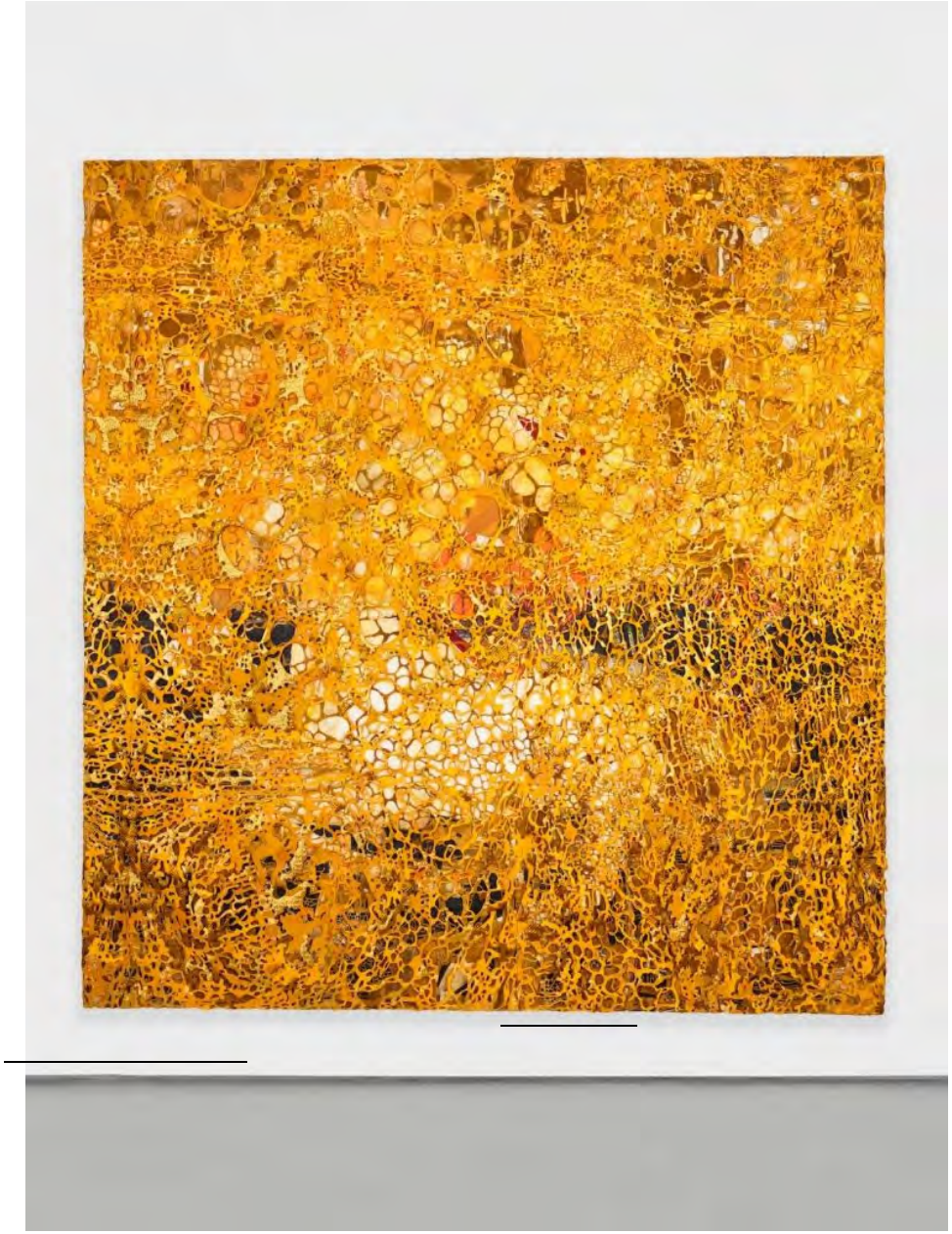
In *Naxos* (2023–24), nearly ten-thousand pebbles dangle from pins on a massive white canvas. From afar, the rocks look like brightly colored crystals. Up close, they reveal themselves as more proletarian gray and brown granite, even chunks of concrete. Each is suspended by a colored string, wrapped

around it like a corset. Again, the work's narrative force is explained by the wall text. Krimes created *Naxos* after his release, asking thousands of incarcerated people to select "the ideal pebble" in their prison yards and to send them to him by mail. This piece gestures toward collective authorship (each rock is unique, as is each individual), and yet the pebbles, like their selectors—like Bertillon's suspected anarchists—remain anonymous.

Jesse Krimes: Corrections, installation view. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz. © Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pictured: *Naxos,* 2023–24 (detail).

While incarcerated, Krimes covertly made *Purgatory* and *Apokaluptein:16389067*, sending them "outside" to be assembled in their totality. After his release, he reached back "inside" to assemble *Naxos*. Every artwork in *Corrections* breaches the wall between inside and outside, prison and freedom, rendering a carceral landscape both vast and permeable. Now, Krimes's work is on display in a different kind of institution—one with its own subtle history of capture, constraint, and regulation.

Cyrus Dunham is the author of A Year Without a Name, *a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award. His writing has appeared in publications including the* New Yorker, Granta, *and the* Intercept, *among others. He is a Dornsife Fellow in Nonfiction at the University of Southern California.*



Jesse Krimes. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

ARTIST STATEMENT

At Art Basel Miami Beach and Beyond, Jesse Krimes Ascends

On the heels of a monumental solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jesse Krimes makes a major showing at Art Basel Miami Beach with Jack Shainman Gallery, where he directs a defiant gaze onto the carceral system. Here, the artist reflects on Stag, a work currently on view at Jack Shainman's Chelsea gallery.

BY JENNA ADRIAN-DIAZ
December 05, 2024

Here, we ask an artist to frame the essential details behind one of their latest works.

Bio: Jesse Krimes, 42, Pennsylvania and New York

Title of work: *Stag*

Where to see it: "Cells," Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Jesse Krimes. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

Three words to describe it: Social, fabric, cells.

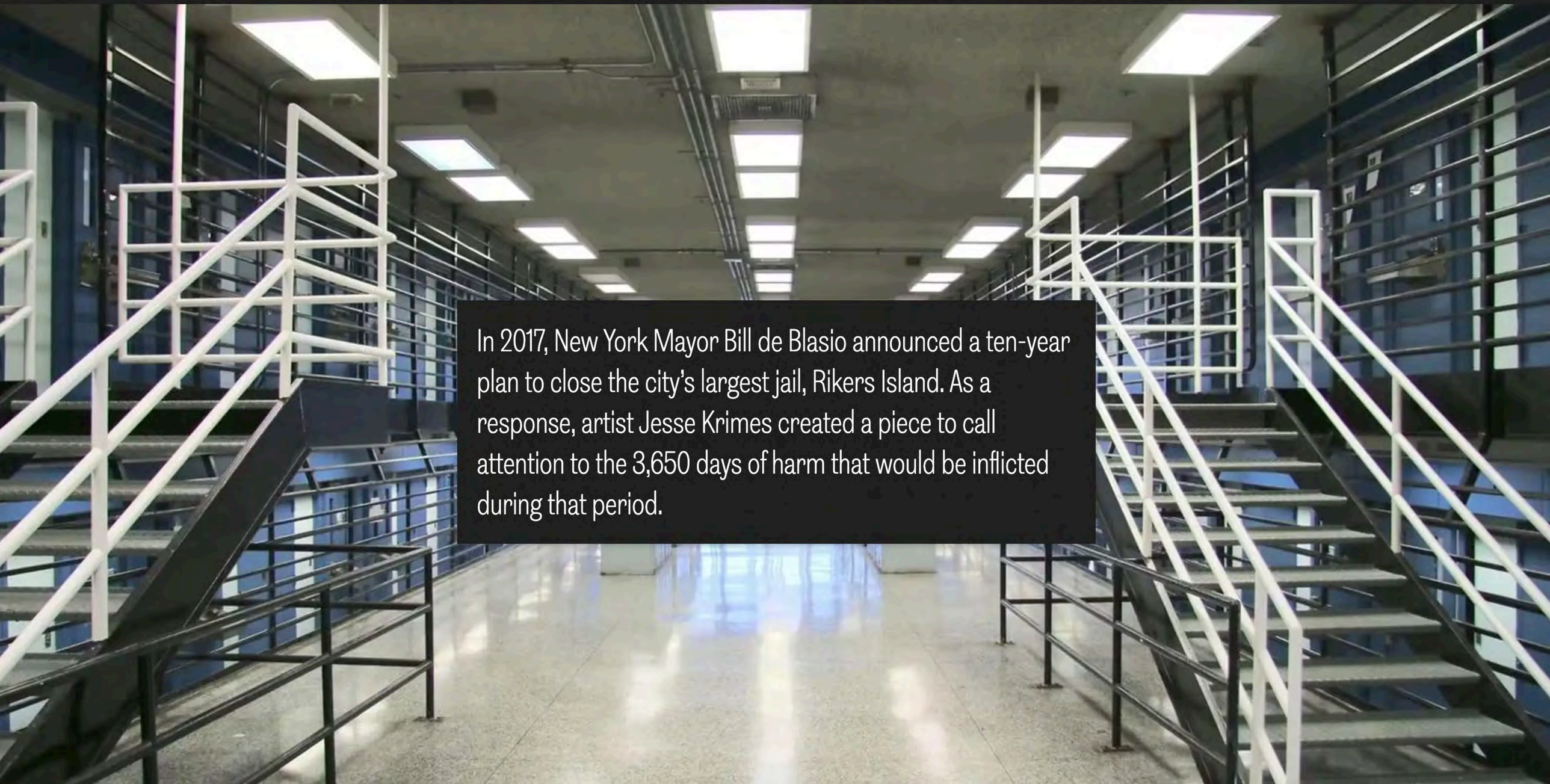
What was on your mind at the time: I was thinking about the *Elegy Quilts* I had been making previously and how people in prison were selecting animals as symbolic representations of themselves. In my search to find visual images of their respective animals, I kept coming across art historical depictions of animals being caged, controlled, or hunted. This made me reflect on the history of punitive ideologies and how they show up in the art historical canon. Simultaneously, I was also thinking about the prison as a microcosm of our increasingly globalized world that is shaped by myriad systems of capture, containment, and control. The fragmented ways in which we experience images, bodies, objects, and artworks are determined by what such systems conceal or reveal and ultimately shape what we view as valuable or disposable.

An interesting feature that's not immediately noticeable: In *Stag*, like the rest of the works in exhibition, the piece features an animal hidden beneath the intricate layers of embroidery which are drawn directly from microscopic images of cancerous cells. Through my process of removing diseased cells from these images to reveal only healthy tissue, it allows me to make visible their defiant gazes emphasizing resilience and the possibility of transcendence. Additionally, among the textiles I use as my substrate are pieces of clothing and other textiles given to me by currently and formerly incarcerated, evoking the body and presence of the millions of people who have been "disappeared" by the carceral system.

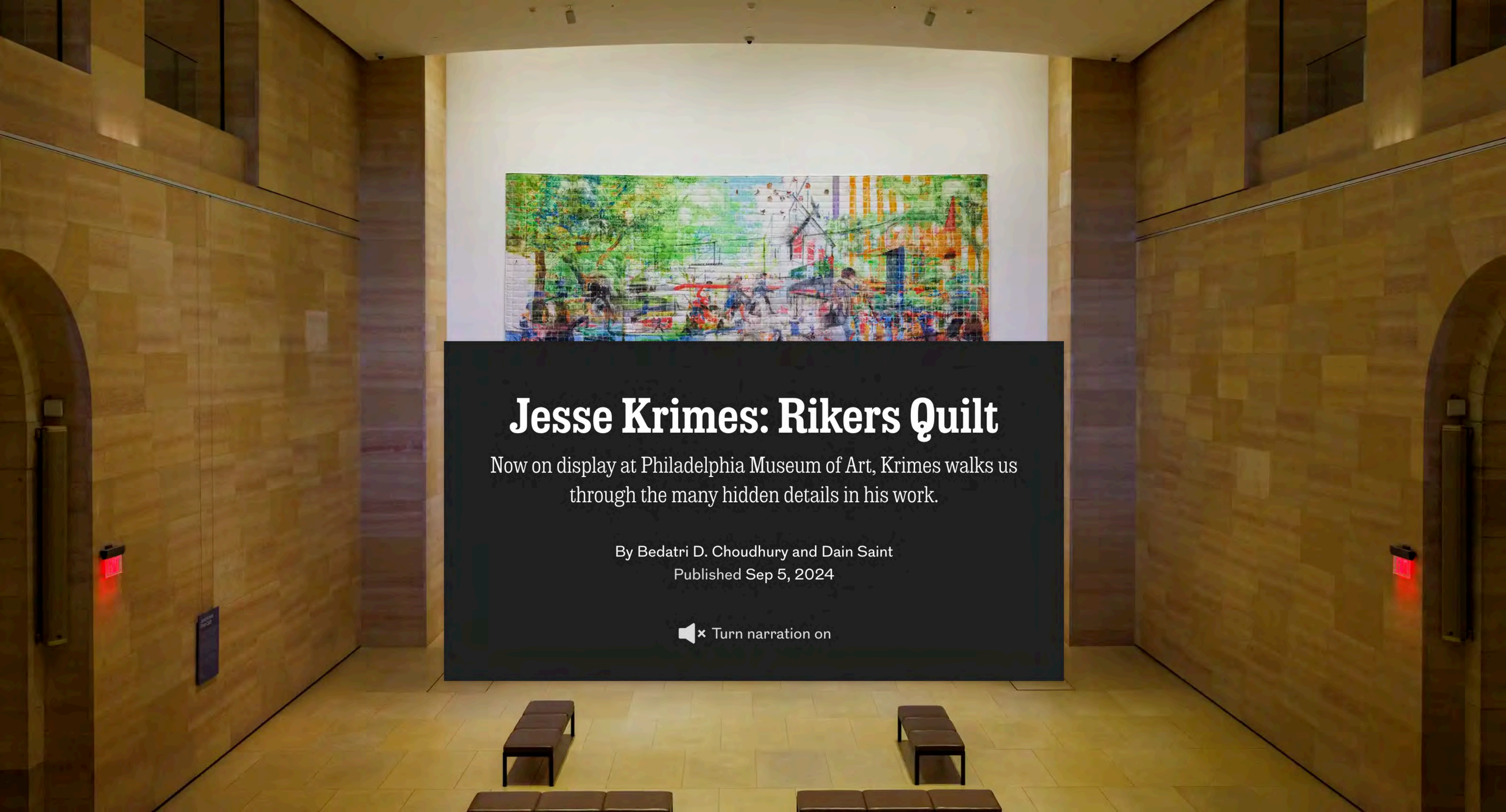
How it reflects your practice as a whole: These new large-scale embroidered abstractions expand upon the work I was making during and after my incarceration and serve as tools for disentangling the complex value systems and hierarchies that shape how we see and understand information. I create work that explores media and social mechanisms of power and control, with a particular focus on criminal and racial justice. It is informed by more than eight years I spent in state and federal prisons, an experience that radically altered my perspective of society.

My work frequently addresses the personal and societal impacts and context of mass incarceration, including the ways in which media representations of punitive ideologies undergird our notions of worth and disposability. The sociopolitical elements of my work often derive from materiality and aesthetic dimensions, where I utilize conventional aesthetic tropes of beauty—through exploration of form, color, texture, and process—to draw viewers into an intimate examination of more brutal, visceral or challenging content. I use visual language in this way to sensitive people to the cruelty of mass incarceration, and believe that perhaps the most powerful way to challenge the ethos of disposability underlying mass incarceration is to make the full humanity of incarcerated people and the broader systems that sustain it more visible to the public. My personal practice probes and reveals these systems, while the artistic organization I founded, The Center for Art & Advocacy seeks to create alternative structures that facilitate creativity and liberation.

One song that captures its essence: "Chimes of Freedom," by Bob Dylan.



In 2017, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a ten-year plan to close the city's largest jail, Rikers Island. As a response, artist Jesse Krimes created a piece to call attention to the 3,650 days of harm that would be inflicted during that period.



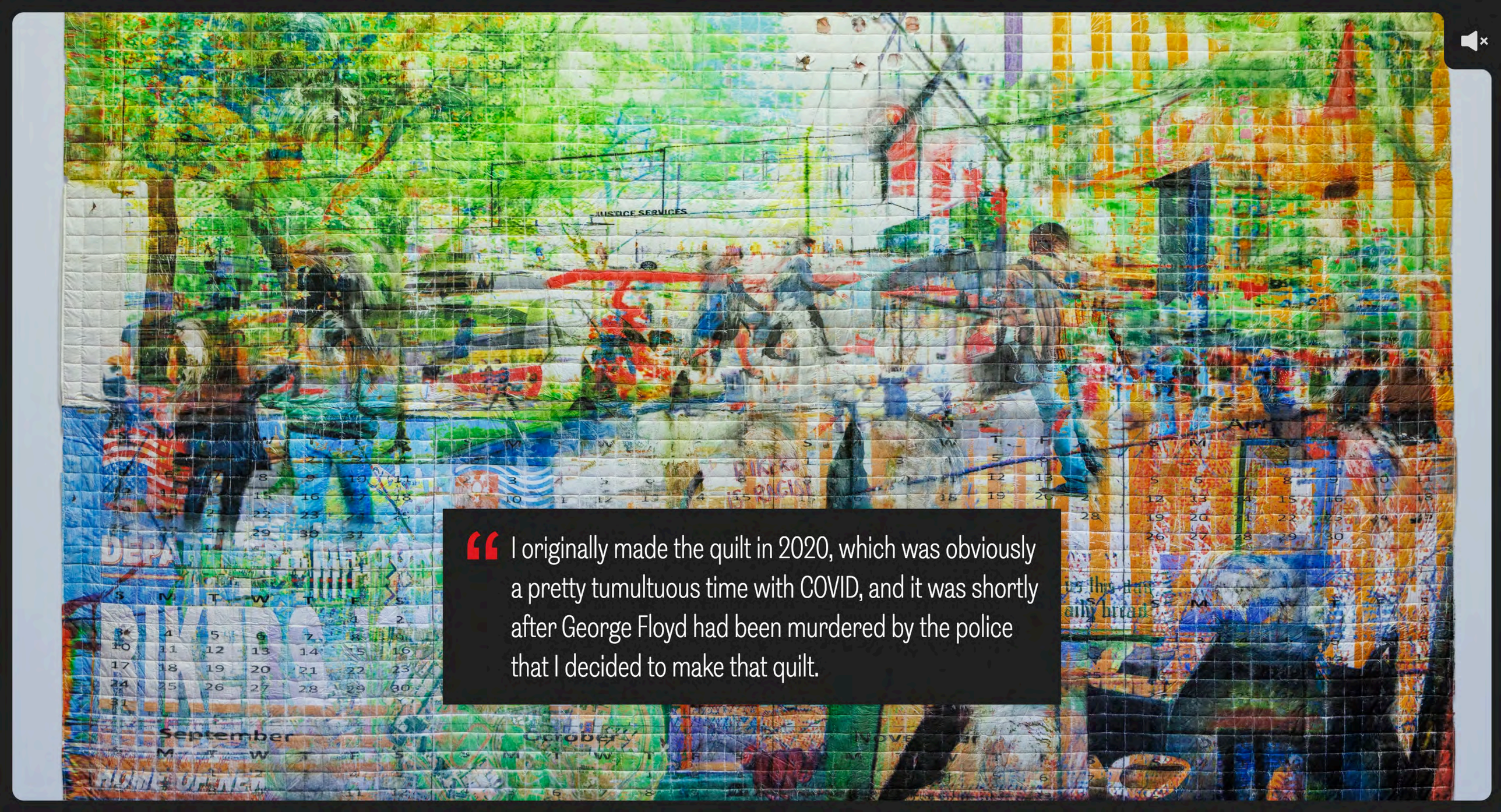
Jesse Krimes: Rikers Quilt

Now on display at Philadelphia Museum of Art, Krimes walks us through the many hidden details in his work.

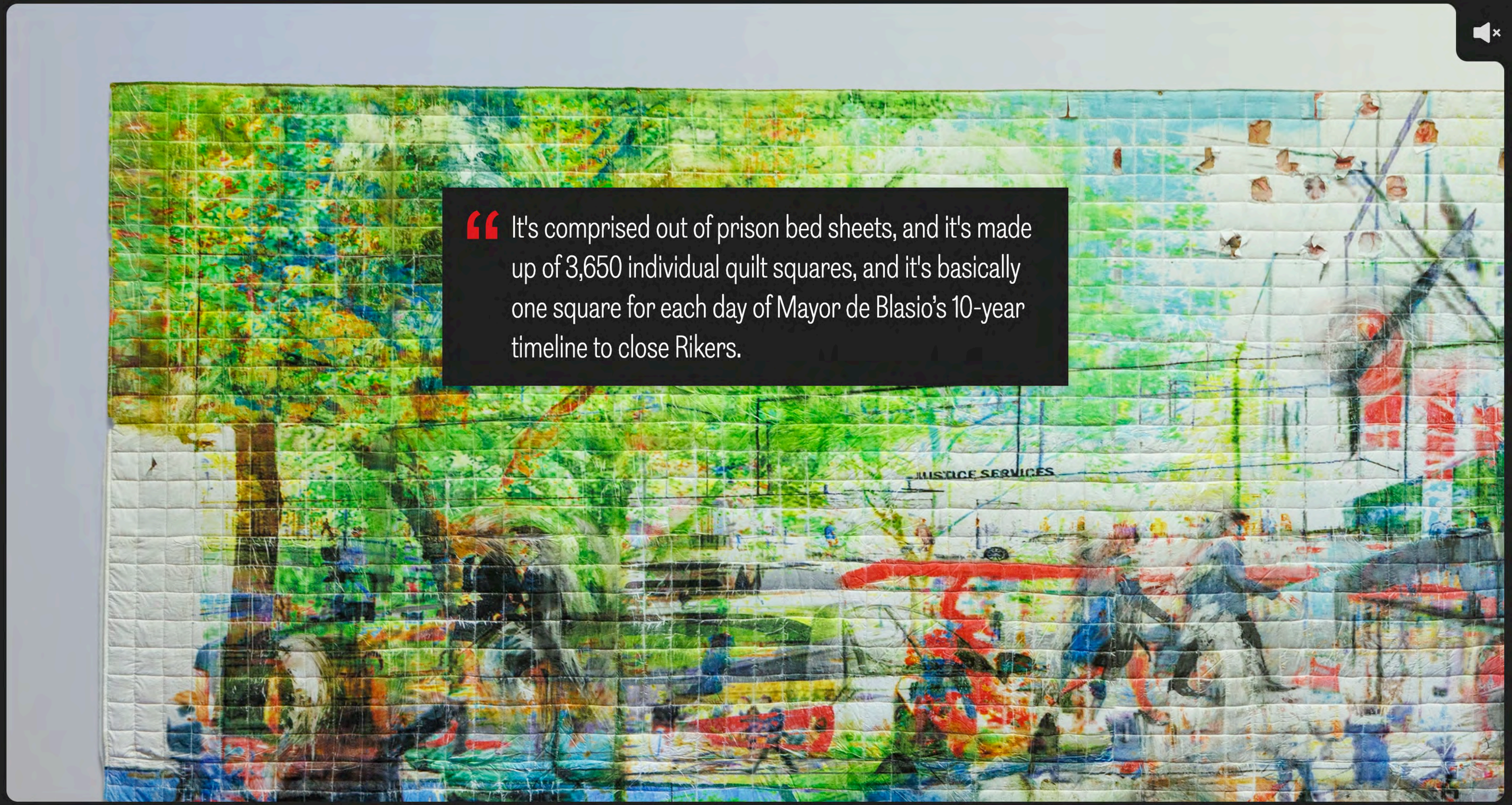
By Bedatri D. Choudhury and Dain Saint
Published Sep 5, 2024

Turn narration on

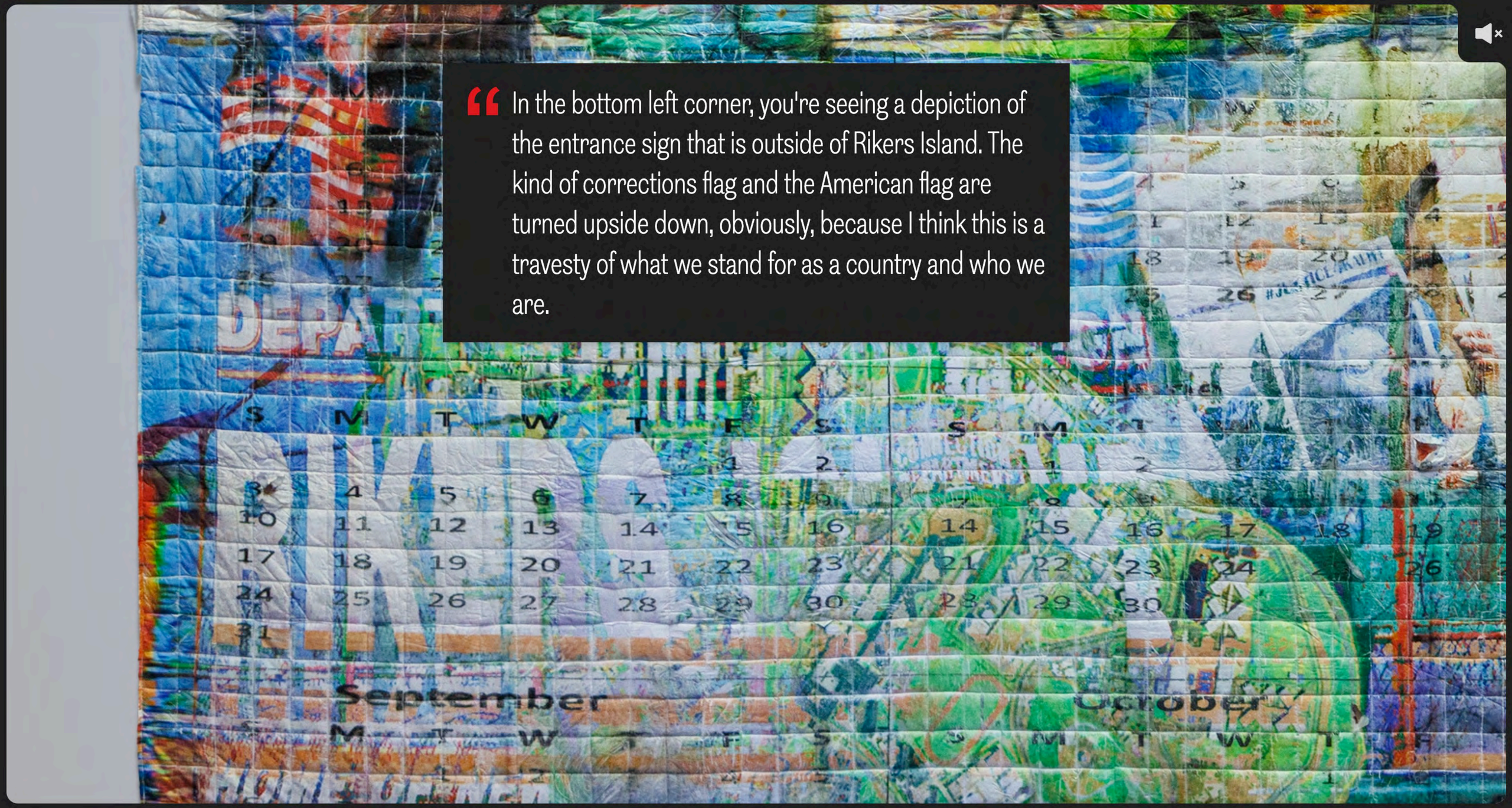
“While I was in solitary confinement awaiting sentencing, where I eventually went into the federal prison system, I had very limited access to materials. I wanted to like, very specifically, use the materials of the prison against itself.

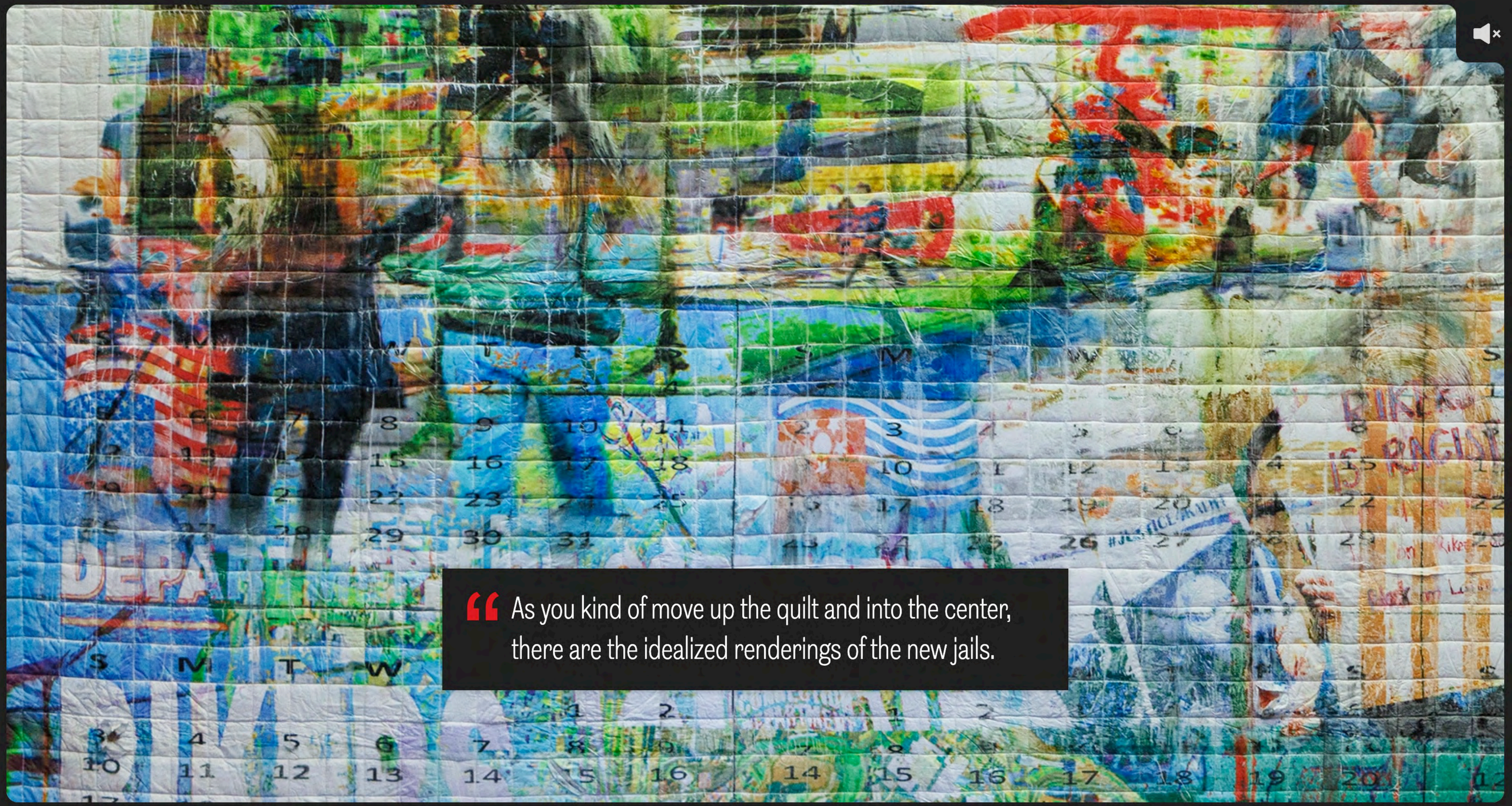


> I originally made the quilt in 2020, which was obviously a pretty tumultuous time with COVID, and it was shortly after George Floyd had been murdered by the police that I decided to make that quilt.

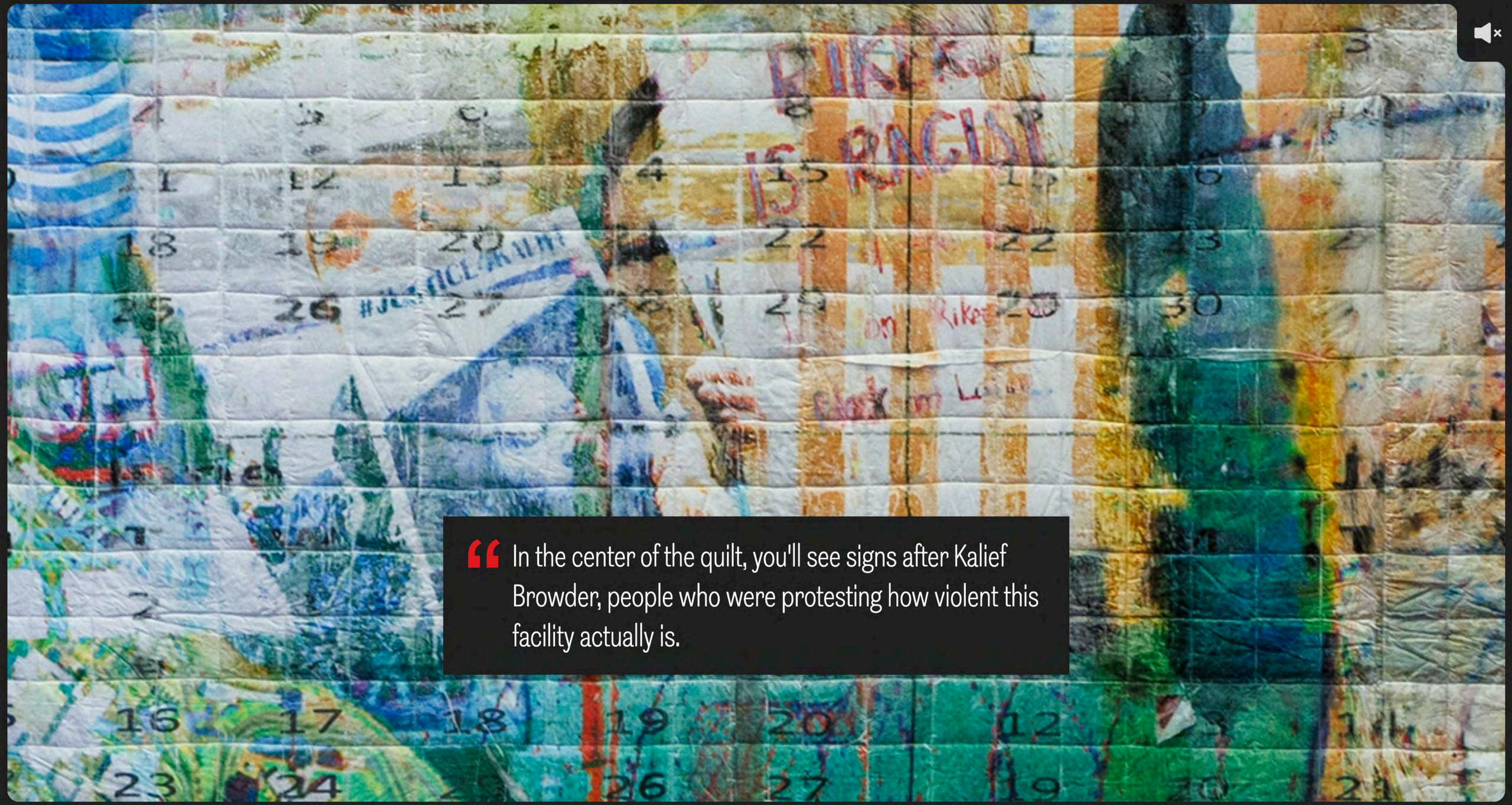


> It's comprised out of prison bed sheets, and it's made up of 3,650 individual quilt squares, and it's basically one square for each day of Mayor de Blasio's 10-year timeline to close Rikers.

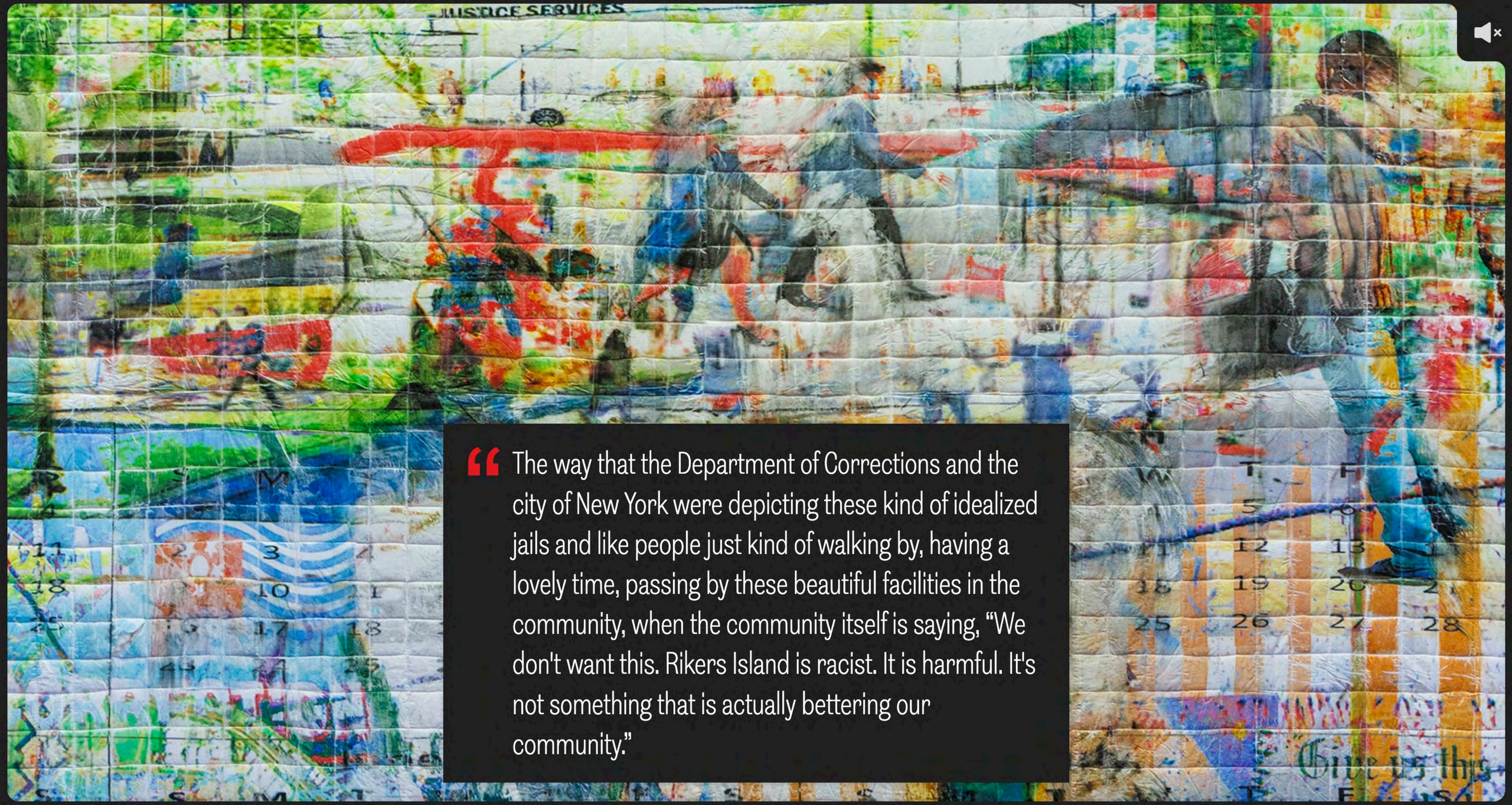

“ In the bottom left corner, you're seeing a depiction of the entrance sign that is outside of Rikers Island. The kind of corrections flag and the American flag are turned upside down, obviously, because I think this is a travesty of what we stand for as a country and who we are.
September
October



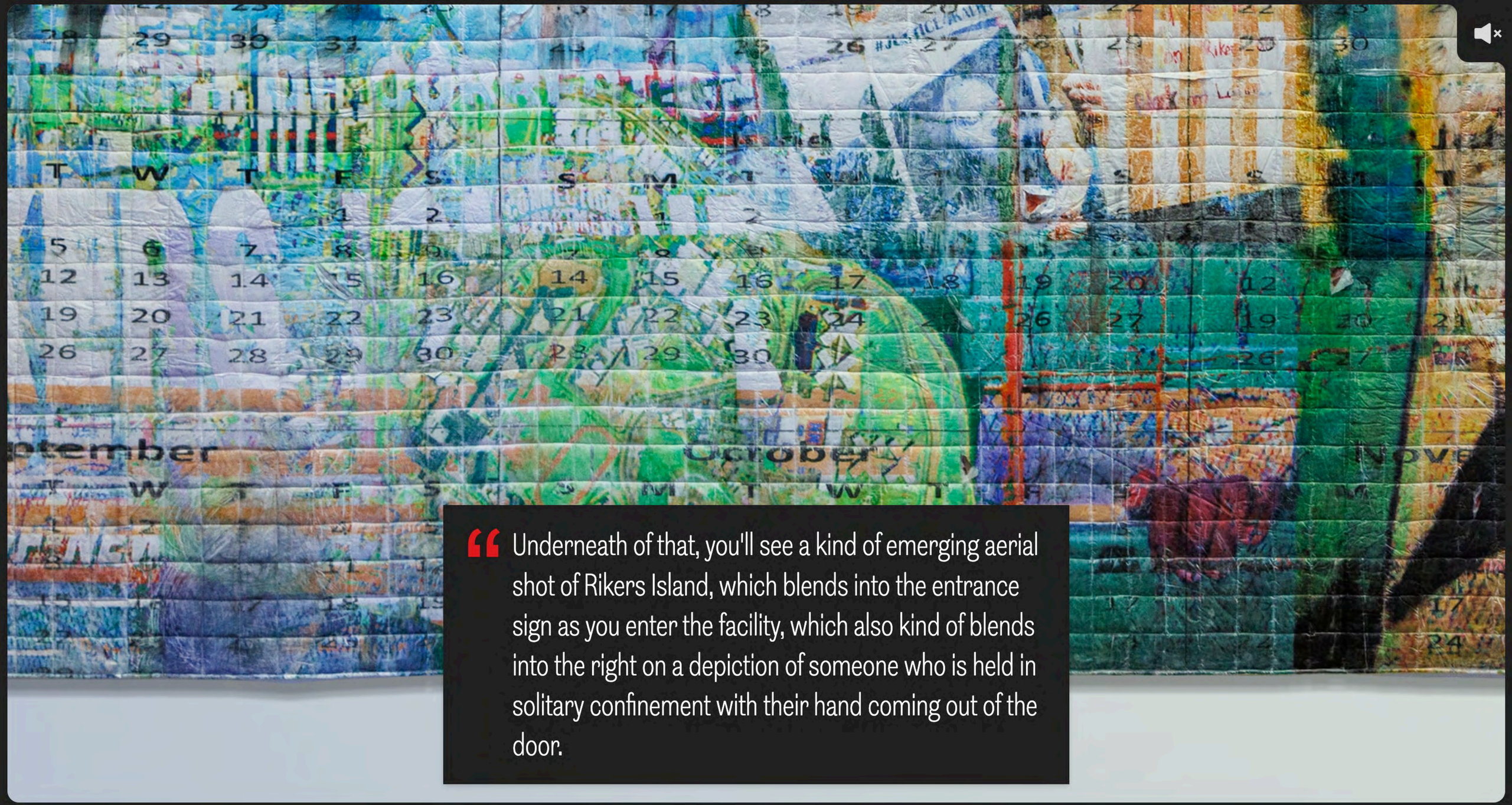
> As you kind of move up the quilt and into the center, there are the idealized renderings of the new jails.



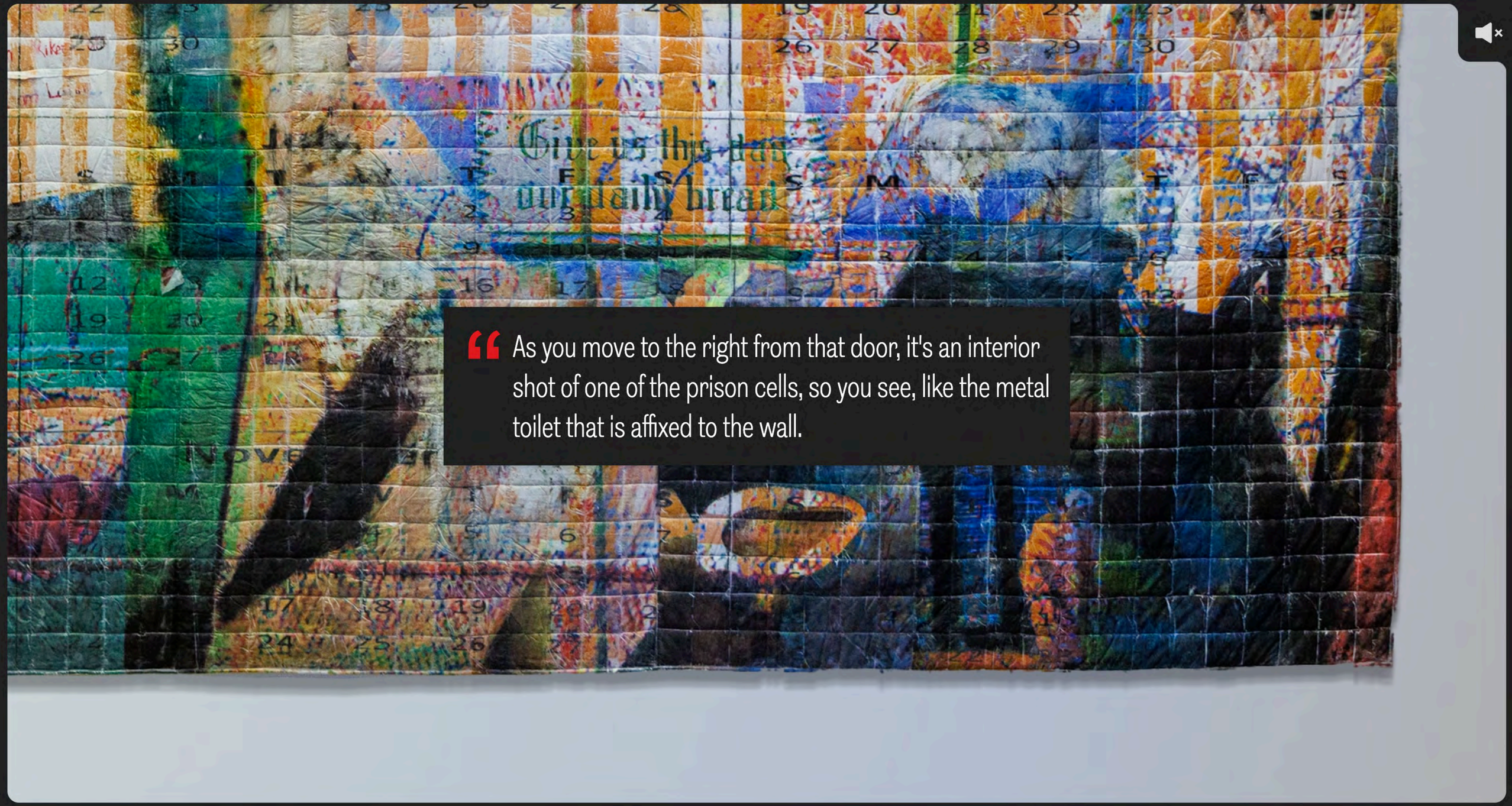
> In the center of the quilt, you'll see signs after Kalief Browder, people who were protesting how violent this facility actually is.



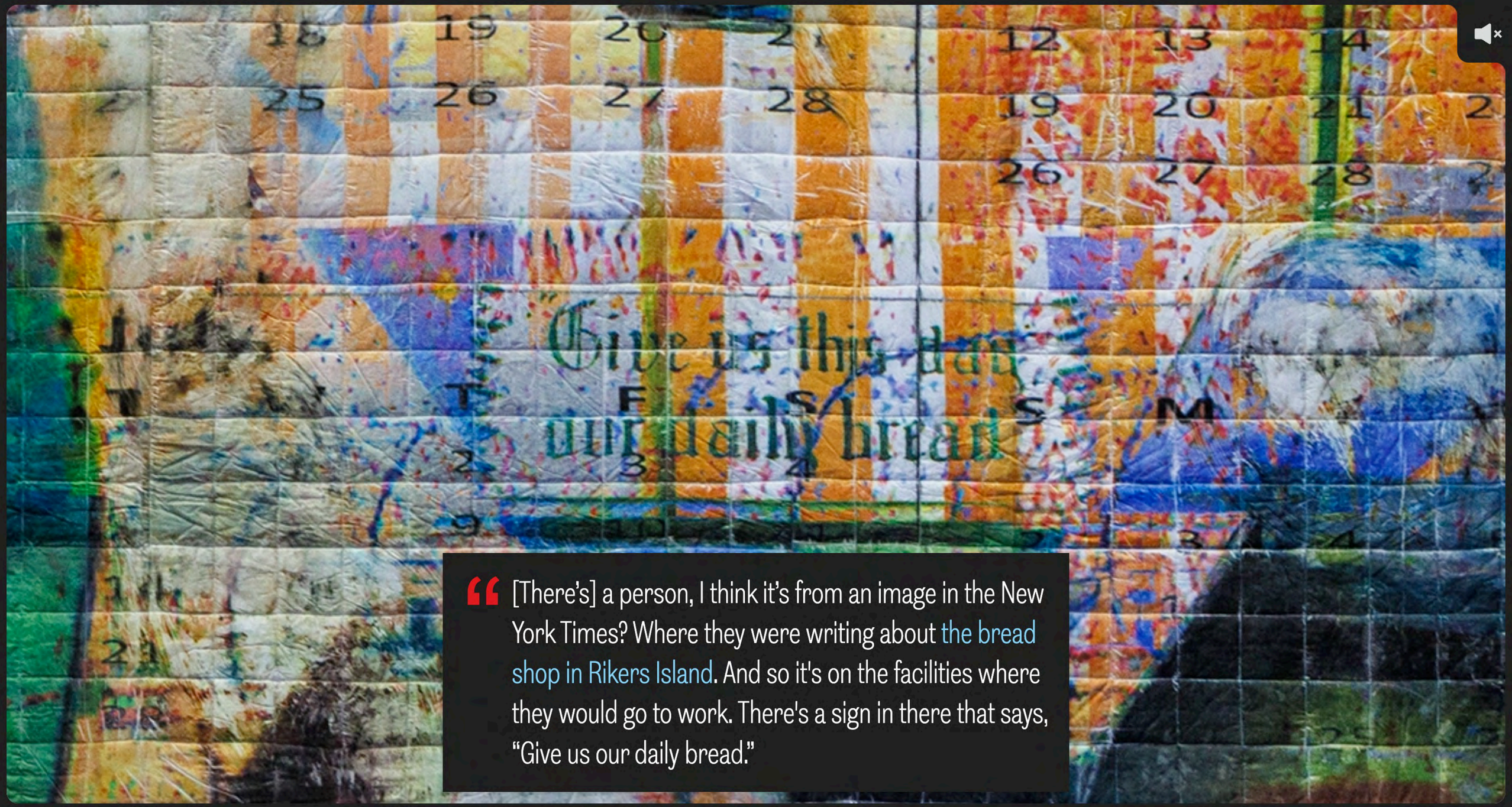
> The way that the Department of Corrections and the city of New York were depicting these kind of idealized jails and like people just kind of walking by, having a lovely time, passing by these beautiful facilities in the community, when the community itself is saying, "We don't want this. Rikers Island is racist. It is harmful. It's not something that is actually bettering our community."



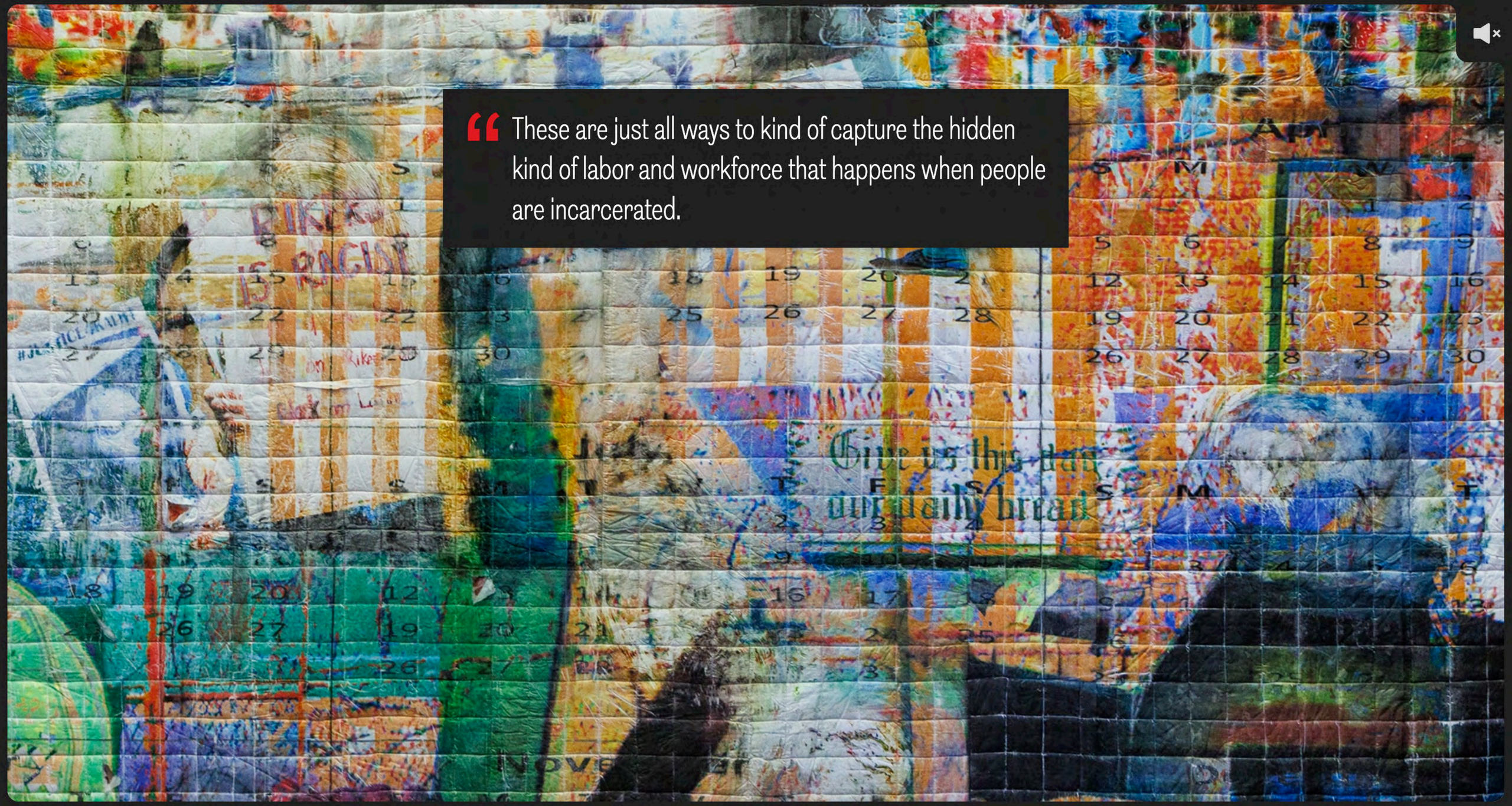
> Underneath of that, you'll see a kind of emerging aerial shot of Rikers Island, which blends into the entrance sign as you enter the facility, which also kind of blends into the right on a depiction of someone who is held in solitary confinement with their hand coming out of the door.

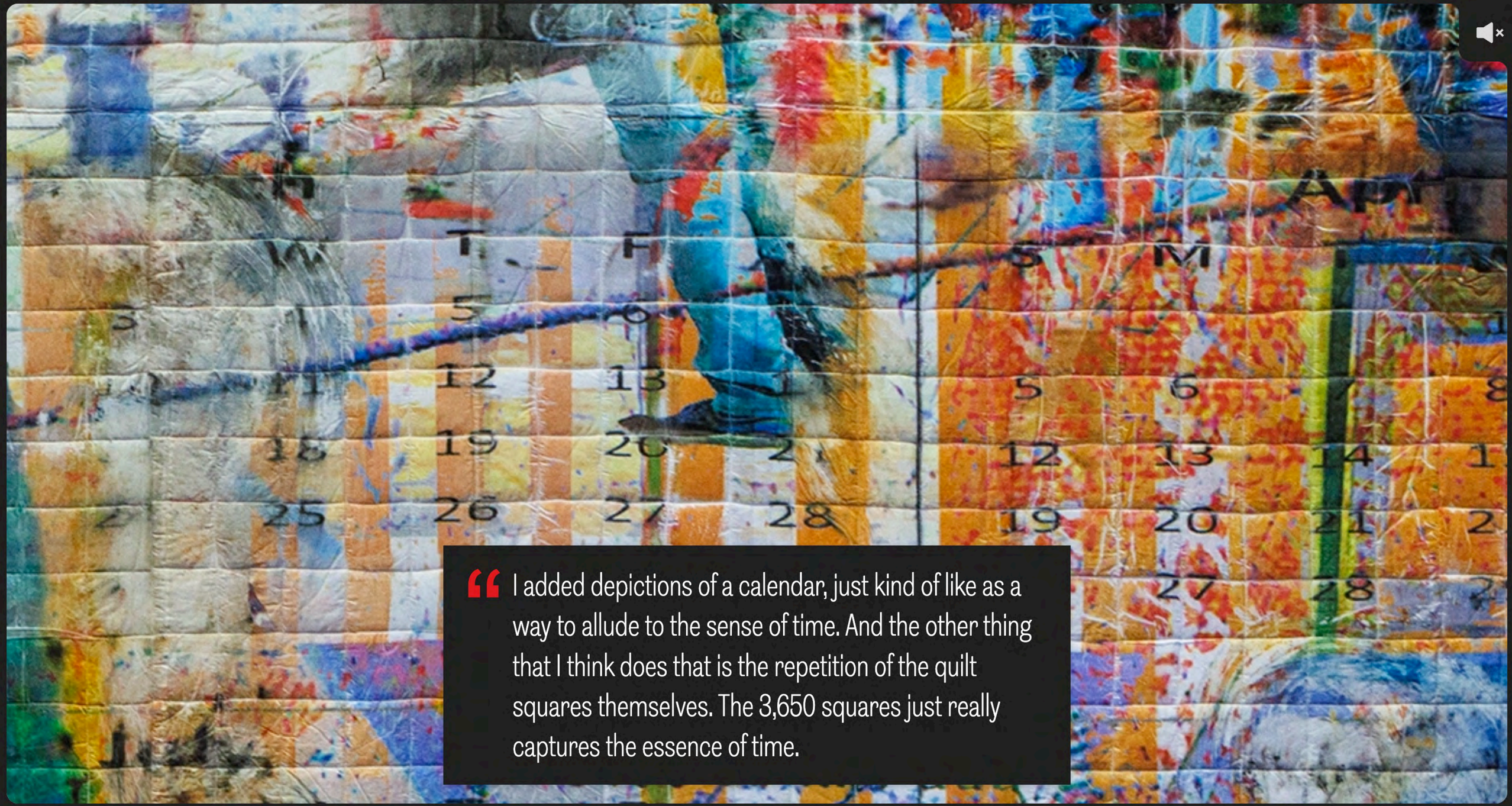


> As you move to the right from that door, it's an interior shot of one of the prison cells, so you see, like the metal toilet that is affixed to the wall.

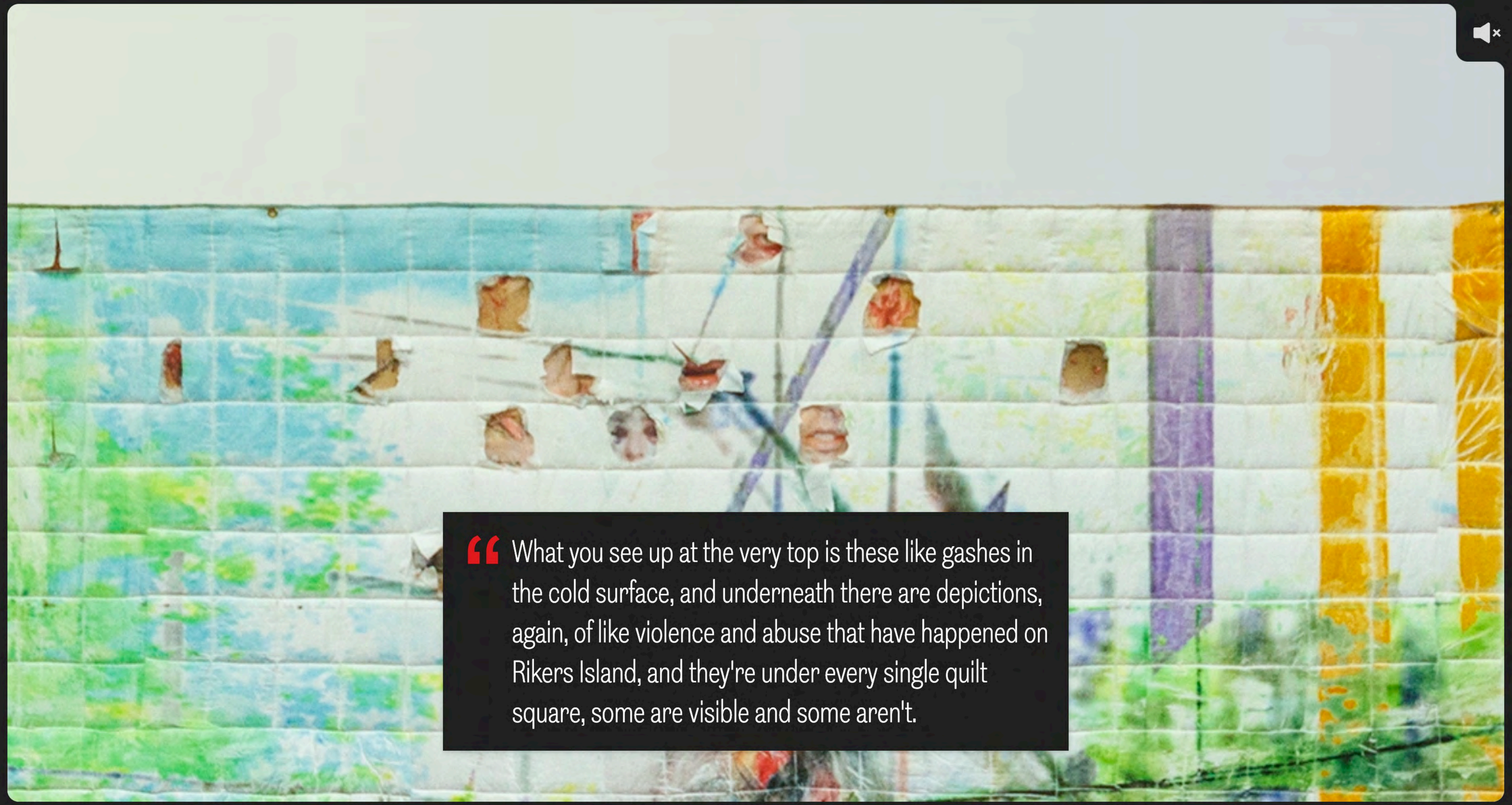


> [There's] a person, I think it's from an image in the New York Times? Where they were writing about the bread shop in Rikers Island. And so it's on the facilities where they would go to work. There's a sign in there that says, "Give us our daily bread."

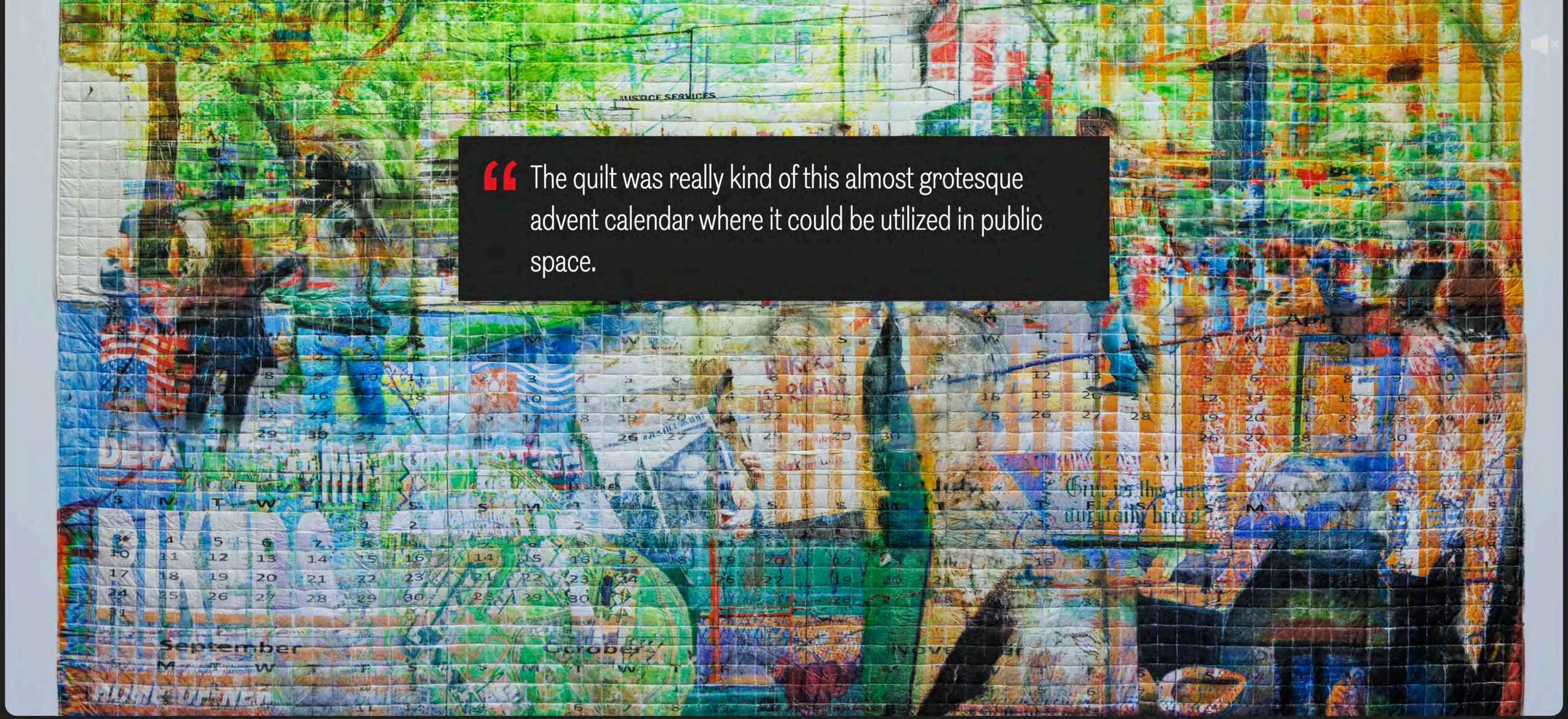

These are just all ways to kind of capture the hidden kind of labor and workforce that happens when people are incarcerated.
Give us this day
our daily bread



> I added depictions of a calendar, just kind of like as a way to allude to the sense of time. And the other thing that I think does that is the repetition of the quilt squares themselves. The 3,650 squares just really captures the essence of time.



> What you see up at the very top is these like gashes in the cold surface, and underneath there are depictions, again, of like violence and abuse that have happened on Rikers Island, and they're under every single quilt square, some are visible and some aren't.



> The quilt was really kind of this almost grotesque advent calendar where it could be utilized in public space.

Jesse Krimes' *Rikers Quilt* will be on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through Sept. 15.

artnet news

Galleries

Artist and Activist Jesse Krimes, Whose Work Reflects His Experience While Incarcerated, Has Joined Jack Shainman

Krimes also heads the Center for Art and Advocacy, a new non-profit dedicated to mentoring justice-impacted creatives.

Taylor Dafoe, July 28, 2023

Artist Jesse Krimes. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

artnet news

Artist Jesse Krimes, whose multidisciplinary practice deals with themes of carcerality and criminal justice, has joined Jack Shainman's roster, the gallery announced today.

Krimes's textiles, sculptures, drawings, and other works have been shaped by his own encounters with the prison system, having served a multi-year sentence for drug possession after graduating from art school in 2009. The experience, he said in a statement, "radically altered my perception of society."

While incarcerated, Krimes continued to make art. He encouraged others to do so too, securing art supplies, holding workshops, and forming collectives. His efforts continued after his release, and today his practice encompasses both art and activism.

In May, Krimes was named the inaugural executive director of the Center for Art and Advocacy, a new nonprofit dedicated to mentoring justice-impacted creatives. The organization, which was established with a major grant from Agnes Gund's Art for Justice Fund, is an outgrowth of the Right of Return Fellowship, which Krimes cofounded in 2017.

"My work explores social mechanisms of power and control, informed by more than eight years I spent in state and federal prisons, an experience that radically altered my perception of society," Krimes explained. "I am particularly interested in employing latent material language and critically recontextualizing idealized beauty to draw viewers into an intimate examination of more visceral or challenging content, interrogate value systems, and sensitize people to the cruelty of mass criminalization and incarceration."

Installation view of Jesse Krimes, *Apokaluptein 16389067* (2010–2013) in the exhibition "Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration." Courtesy of MoMA PS1. Photo: Matthew Septimus.

Shainman said his introduction to his newest artist's work came through a 2020 *New York Times* review of the Nicole R. Fleetwood-curated exhibition "Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration" at MoMA PS1. The article made special mention of Krimes's monumental landscape, *Apokaluptein 16389067*, which the then-incarcerated artist made by transfer-printing magazine and newspaper images onto more than three dozen prison-issued bedsheets.

With the help of fellow inmates, the sheets were mailed out one-by-one. Only after his release in 2014 was Krimes able to assemble them into the continuous, 40-foot-long composition that he had envisioned behind bars.

The artwork "absolutely stunned me," Shainman said. "I knew then that his deeply personal vision was unique."

More than most gallery rosters, Shainman's has a cohesive identity. Of the 38 artists the dealer represents, many—like Kerry James Marshall, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Hank Willis Thomas—make work about the politics of identity and place.

Krimes, Shainman said, will fit right in. “Jesse’s practice is incredibly powerful and important, speaking to political issues that are especially timely. But beyond that, his work speaks of issues that are distinctly individual to him,” the dealer said.

“There are so many high-caliber artists out there, but as a gallery, we strive to seek out those with their own unique perspective. It is much rarer to find an artist who can both showcase their own unmistakable vision as well as fully master their chosen medium, and Jesse certainly fits those parameters and exceeds expectations simultaneously,” Shainman concluded.

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

At the Root of Justice Are Different Kinds of Love

The exhibition *No Justice Without Love* poses questions about the roots and limitations of our civic imagination.

Seph Rodney, 23 hours ago

Jesse Krimes, “Marion” (2021), antique quilt, used clothing collected from incarcerated people, assorted textiles, 88 × 72 inches (photo Seph Rodney/*Hyperallergic*)

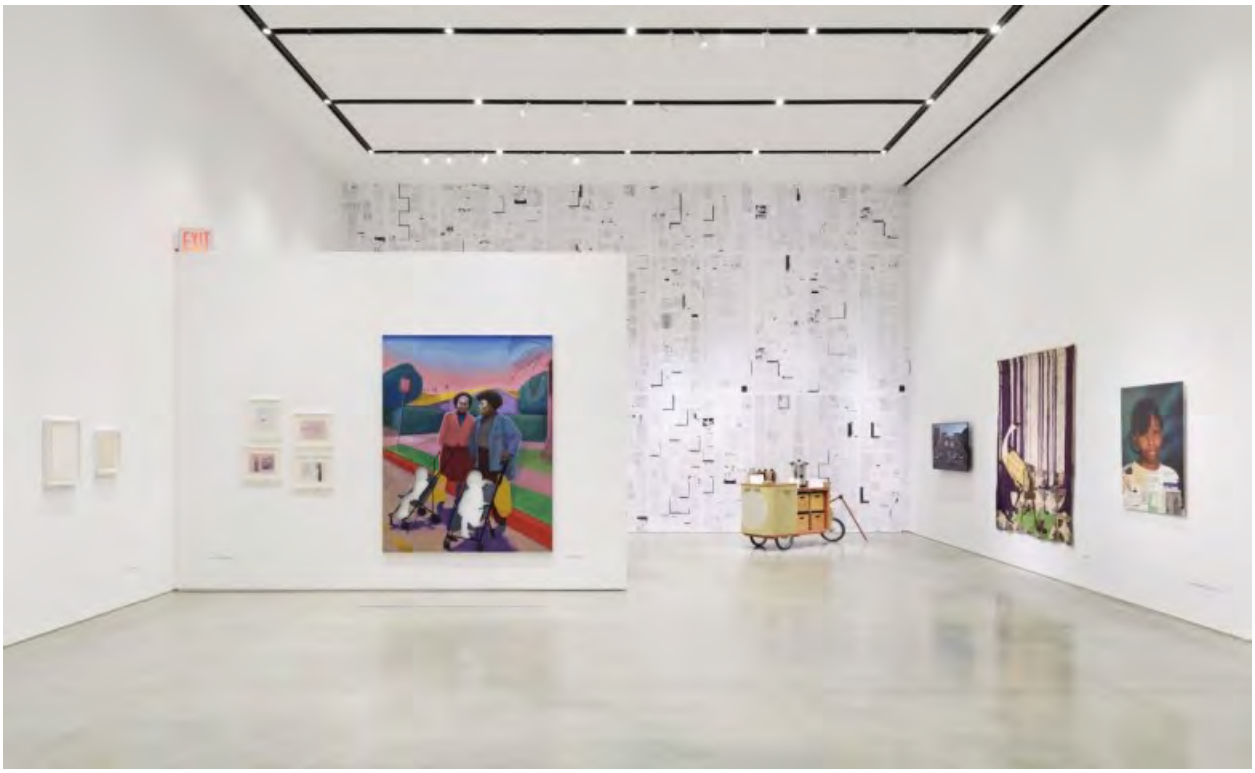
“Love is like a ghost that many people talk about, but few have actually seen” — or something like that. I read this adage in a list of quotable quotes many years ago and have held on to it because it sounds like profound truth. Thinking of this, I initially greeted the exhibition *No Justice Without Love* at the Ford Foundation with a bit of skepticism, especially because it seems that every other show or artwork has “love” in the title these days, and I often end up seeing little evidence of that in the work. In speaking to some of the artists featured in the exhibition, I realized that my key assumption — that the term means something like ardent desire for or selfless devotion to another — was my own, and this presumption did not reflect how these artists thought about the title.

Russell Craig’s work “Cognitive Thinking” (2023) consists of collaged strips of leather and painted imagery that make up a combined portrait of three men he had worked with at Mural Arts Philadelphia (all of whom have since died). I asked him in what ways the show’s title is meaningful to him. He said, “What comes to mind is, if you don’t have love for these issues, injustice and things like that, you won’t have any energy to do anything about [them], if you have no connection, no feeling, no passion.”

“Marion” by Jesse Krimes is comprised of the used clothing of incarcerated people and depicts a long-necked bird with golden plumage within a forest of denuded trees. The bird stands next to a discrete domestic setting containing a small rug, along with a wooden chair and a pair of brown boots, a surreal idyll that might only exist in dreams. His answer to the same query was even more succinct than Craig’s: “If you want actual justice in this world, you have to care.”

Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter has a dissimilar idea of what constitutes love, however. She told me, “It really was my love of self that enabled me to survive being shackled for 43 hours while in labor with my son, being sexually abused as a child. I think that has always been my North Star. For me, it’s an internal practice, and through it [I] reverberate love.” Her work in the exhibition manifests this inward gaze. Her giclée print of her head-and-shoulders self-portrait as a young girl, “A Gifted Child” (2023), is overlaid with conflicting information: Public citations by the City Council of Philadelphia, invitations to prestigious events and programs at NYU and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a diploma from the Community College of Philadelphia — but also psychological evaluations that projected her mother’s mental illness onto her. And those prestigious invitations, Baxter said, often didn’t come with the financial

support necessary for her to take advantage of the offered opportunities. One example of the acute cognitive dissonance she had to negotiate is a depiction of part of the *Philadelphia Enquirer* headline and published image that shows her standing with a smiling Van Jones underneath the banner "Jobless, homeless, convict … but now she's an award-winner." Each of these instances of misrecognition feels to Baxter like a backhanded compliment, so she uses this collaged image of herself to create what she calls a "counter-narrative." This story that she tells of herself makes her less of a ghost, subject to other people's telling, and more real, embodied.



Installation view of *No Justice Without Love*, Ford Foundation Gallery, New York (photo by Sebastian Bach)

The idea of making material, meaningful interventions in real people's lives, rooted in an ethic of care, suffuses this exhibition. This outcome is by design. *No Justice Without Love* is, after all, the artistic and historiographic culmination of the work of the Art for Justice Fund (A4J), which was initiated six years ago when (so the story told by the fund goes) noted philanthropist and MoMA trustee Agnes Gund read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* and, after watching Ava DuVernay's film *13th*, sold a painting for $100 million to seed the initiative. It needs to be said that it's a sign of both how broken and how

innovative our culture is that *one person* only had to sell *one painting* to make a substantive difference in hundreds, maybe more, people's lives.

According to Helena Huang, the fund's director, A4J used that initial investment to fundraise and has created a pot of $126 million, which, by the time it sunsets at the end of this month, will have been allocated to various organizations and individuals who "all joined in common cause around ending and wanting to disrupt the main drivers of mass incarceration." Among the causes they have supported are advocating for expungement laws, so that formerly incarcerated people have fewer barriers to reentry to society; lifting the 30-year ban on Pell Grant eligibility for those who have been imprisoned; and campaigning to end the practice of jailing for life those who committed crimes as juveniles. These campaigns are all part of a larger effort to combat what Huang points to as the three drivers of mass incarceration: policies regarding bail, overly punitive sentencing practices (such as mandatory minimums and three-strikes laws), and barriers to reentry for people who were formerly incarcerated. Among the 10 organizations that received grants from A4J this spring are The Center for Art and Advocacy, which developed from the Right of Return Fellowship founded by Craig and Krimes in 2017 (Baxter has been a fellow); Worth Rises, based in New York, whose declared mission is to dismantle the prison industry; and Returning Artists' Guild, which is based Columbus, Ohio, where it provides studios and exhibition opportunities for justice-impacted artists.

I was not previously familiar with the term "justice-system-impacted." Krimes explained to me that it refers not only to the circumstance of people who are currently or formerly incarcerated, but also to the children, parents, romantic partners, and others related to those who have been jailed. Huang also familiarized me with the notion of "civil death," which is based in the idea that part of being truly alive is having the agency to participate in civic society, by voting, for example. In introducing me to this movement to disrupt and end mass incarceration, with its associated language, allies, policies, and institutions, *No Justice Without Love* feels like it demands more from me as a viewer than a show whose primary concerns are aesthetic. It ultimately poses questions about the roots and limitations of our civic imagination. When do these issues of justice become meaningful to those of us who are not directly justice-impacted?

Our empathic impulse is excited by personal, human connection, by being able to *see* others as opposed to learning about them via theoretical, philosophical, or even moral arguments. (For

instance, the marriage equality movement was to overcome the longstanding bias against same-sex relationships for a complex of reasons, among them the heightened visibility of queer people and the personal relationships that people who were previously hostile to gay rights had with those in their own families.) While many patrons and participants in the arts perform support for social justice causes, according to Krimes, "Just five years ago, no one took any of these issues seriously, at least not in the art world. The visual art world was not paying attention to what was happening in the criminal justice space. Having a show at the Ford Foundation validates the work that people are doing in a way that translates to people in the art world." Though this isn't often said publicly, I suspect that part of Gund's motivation for creating A4J is that having Black grandchildren has led her to understand that people of color are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system at all levels. Indeed, one of the shows that Daisy Desrosiers, the curator of *No Justice Without Love*, drew inspiration from is *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (which features many of the artists included in this show), curated by Dr. Nicole R. Fleetwood. Fleetwood has written and spoken about how "Incarceration has restructured [her] family and [her] hometown of Hamilton, Ohio, in southwest Ohio."

This show is organized to explore that theme of personal connection in the work of artists who have been incarcerated as well as artists such as Benny Andrews and Faith Ringgold, who have long understood that fighting for the recognition and humane treatment of people who have been jailed is exactly the place where our ethics become meaningful. It presents views from within and outside the carceral system. Ringgold's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" (2007) uses illustrative screen prints to convey the story of the sociohistorical context within which Martin Luther King's and the larger Civil Rights Movement's activities were arbitrarily criminalized. On the other side, Sherill Roland uses his "168.803" (2021) to express the repetitive and surreal activity of tracing the spaces between cinder blocks in a prison cell. The drudgery of viewing the visual trace of this task indicates the monotony of life inside. Creating a hybrid between these perspectives, Jared Owens's "FBOP (Federal Bauhaus of Prisons)" (2022) looks at a prison complex from above, as if the viewer has transcended those circumstances, has separated themselves from the crushing conformity that this space enforces.

One of the most provocative works for me is "The Writing on the Wall" (2019), which covers the entire back wall and is made up of essays, poems, letters, stories, diagrams, and notes

written by people in prisons around the world. The piece, a collaboration between Dr. Baz Dreisinger, artist Hank Willis Thomas, and several design and production partners, was installed in the High Line years ago and there took the shape of a prison cell that was covered inside and out by the text. Here it has morphed into a text that goes on almost into infinity, saying something about the reach of incarceration. Lastly, adjacent to that is a call-and-response wall initiated by the curator to demonstrate how she started the process of organizing this show. This wall, which also has an online digital repository, started with Desrosiers calling out to artists and requesting those who are justice-system impacted to tell her their stories, and to bring others with them. She told me that the title of the show actually comes from the writer Jimmy Wu, who wrote "There is no justice without love" for a For Freedoms billboard. In partnering with these artists, organizations, initiatives, and activists, Desrosiers has discovered, along with A4J, that justice is also a struggle and this work is how social movements begin.

No Justice Without Love *continues at the Ford Foundation Gallery (320 East 43rd Street, Midtown*, Manhattan*) through June 30. The exhibition was curated by Daisy Desrosiers.*

artnet

Art World

Artist Jesse Krimes Is Heading Up a New Nonprofit to Help Formerly Incarcerated Artists Find Creative Careers

The organization was founded with a major gift from Agnes Gund's Art for Justice Fund.

Taylor Dafoe, May 26, 2023

Right of Return Fellow Victor "Marka27" Quiñonez at the 2022 Right of Return Retreat in Arizona. Photo: Maurice Sartirana. Courtesy of the Center for Art & Advocacy.

In 2017, Agnes Gund sold Roy Lichtenstein's prized *Masterpiece* (1962) painting to launch the Art for Justice Fund, a temporary fellowship supporting artists working to reform the criminal justice system. After dolling out $125 million in grants over the course of six years, the initiative is now winding down—but its mission will live on.

As a last act, Gund's fund has provided a major grant for the establishment of the Center for Art and Advocacy, a non-profit dedicated to mentoring justice-impacted

creatives. It was founded by Jesse Krimes, an artist and organizer who was himself previously incarcerated, and is an outgrowth of the Right of Return Fellowship, which he cofounded in 2017.

Moving forward, that fellowship will become one of the new organization's three central components, along with a residency in northeast Pennsylvania and an education-focused "academy." Employees will work out of the center's headquarters in Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy neighborhood, set to open this fall.

Krimes, who will lead the center as its inaugural executive director, says artists who lose access to art practices while incarcerated frequently struggle to get it back after being released.

"So much of being an artist is finding the time and space to dream and think and create. If you're constantly mired in just pure survival mode, it makes it very difficult to find that time and resources are always an issue," he said.

Russell Craig [left] and Jesse Krimes [right] at the 2022 Right of Return Retreat in Arizona. Photo: Maurice Sartirana. Courtesy of the Center for Art & Advocacy.

Krimes explained that the organization is meant for artists at every stage of their career. On offer will be space and funding, but also wraparound services like financial management and courses in website building.
The center is based on a “restorative model,” he said, and is not meant to compete with other, more established fellowship and residency programs like NXTHVN or MacDowell.

“We’re literally trying to create the space to level the playing field for our artists so that they can then go on and get gallery representation and get these amazing residencies and get these other great fellowships.”

Just how much the Art for Justice Fund gave the upstart Center for Art and Advocacy is unclear. (“Out of concern for the privacy of current and past awardees, particularly those who may be presently incarcerated,” the fund has a policy against sharing grant figures.) But Krimes hinted at the impact of the gift: It’s “basically going to allow us to go from serving six artists annually to close to 250 or 300 artists a year,” he said.

Today’s announcement marks the culmination of years of work for the new director, who served a nearly six-year sentence for cocaine possession after graduating from art school in 2009. While incarcerated, Krimes developed a system of transferring magazine images onto prison-issued bedsheets. Eventually, the scope of his practice grew and he began holding creative workshops for other inmates.

Upon being released, Krimes partnered with fellow artist Russell Craig to founded Right of Return, which provides $20,000 grants to half a dozen artists per year. Former fellows have gone on to receive Pulitzer Prizes, Guggenheim Fellowships, and MacArthur “Genius” grants.

Installation view of Jesse Krimes, *Apokaluptein 16389067* (2010–2013) in the exhibition "Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration." Courtesy of MoMA PS1. Photo: Matthew Septimus.

The Center for Art and Advocacy's board, which Krimes said is "still in development," includes a healthy mix of members from the art world and beyond. Current trustees include Craig; Kate Capshaw, an artist; Kate Fowle, a curatorial senior director at Hauser and Wirth; Stephanie Ingrassia, a collector and Brooklyn Museum trustee; Daveen Trentman, a co-founder of the Soze Agency strategy firm; and Dwayne Betts, a lawyer, poet, and one-time Right of Return fellow.

"[We're] trying to do a board differently," said Krimes, noting that he wanted a collection of people that "believe in the mission of the work that we're doing and is open to creative problem solving."

"Business as usual is not going to get us to the world that we want to live in," he continued. "We are trying to create something that is much more creative and nimble in our approach to solving some of these issues."

The New York Times

By Hilarie M. Sheets

- Sept. 22, 2022

In 2010, in the recreation center of the Fairton Federal Correctional Institution, a medium-security prison for men in South New Jersey, an art collective was born.

Five years into a 13-year sentence on drug-related charges, Jared Owens rediscovered his childhood love of ceramics and taught himself to paint. He was overseeing the art room by the time Gilberto Rivera, a graffiti artist, and Jesse Krimes, with an art degree from Millersville University in Pennsylvania, transferred to Fairton to finish their terms. They shared art magazine subscriptions, supplies, ideas and camaraderie in resistance to their circumstances.

With the help of Owens and Rivera, Krimes covertly gathered prison bedsheets that he collaged with New York Times images, using hair gel and a spoon to lift and transfer the printed ink onto his contraband canvases. He smuggled pieces out, one by one, through the prison mail room. Over three years, the subversive practice evolved into a monumental mural, a Hieronymus Bosch-like allegory of heaven, earth and hell, that he titled “Apokaluptein: 16389067” — Greek for apocalypse coupled with Krimes’s inmate number. It stretched 15 feet by 40 feet when he was finally able to assemble the 39 segments for the first time upon his release in 2013, after serving six years on drug charges.

“This isn’t about some outsider coming in and doing an arts program — it was them on their own, seizing that space, whatever dignity they could craft, and then carrying that with them when they came home,” said Alysa Nahmias, director of “Art & Krimes by Krimes,” a film that will be released in theaters on Sept. 30 by MTV Documentary Films and streamed by Paramount+ starting Nov. 22. It chronicles the making of “Apokaluptein” and Krimes’s first five years out of prison as he struggles to forge a career in the art world with the support of friends.

The New York Times

One of them is Russell Craig, who found art at age 7 while living in the foster care system. After serving 12 years on drug charges at prisons in Pennsylvania and Virginia, he met Krimes when both were newly released and working as assistants with Mural Arts Philadelphia's restorative justice program.

Installation view of Jesse Krimes's "Apokaluptein: 16389067" (2010-13) in "Marking Time" at MoMA PS1 in 2020. The canvas was made from bedsheets and smuggled out of the prison in pieces.Credit...Karsten Moran for The New York Times

The New York Times

Animation by Molly Schwartz with Jesse Krimes and Alysa Nahmias from the documentary “Art & Krimes by Krimes.” It depicts Krimes creating his “Purgatory” series in prison. The rectangles are abstractions of the prison-issued bars of soap he used to make the work.Credit...MTV Documentary Films

These artists were among several dozen in the landmark exhibition “Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” which debuted in 2020 at MoMA PS1 and has been touring since (it just opened at Brown University). Organized by Nicole Fleetwood, the MacArthur award-winning art historian, it gave new visibility to people fighting societal erasure in the U.S. carceral system, which now imprisons an estimated two million people annually — a 500 percent increase since 1970. Black people are incarcerated for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of white people despite roughly equal use, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

Now a small cadre of artists from the exhibition is gaining traction in the art world, with gallery representation, museum acquisitions, prestigious commissions, residencies and fellowships. With the aid of powerful donors, artists, arts leaders and activists, this vanguard is working structurally to pave the way for their peers. Whether museums nationwide will support such efforts has yet to be determined.

Fleetwood — who described the peer mentoring at Fairton, echoed in prisons around the country, as “inspirational” — hopes the exhibition “helps to shake up cultural institutions in terms of their gate keeping around what they typically show.”

“Marking Time” drew more than 35,000 visitors at MoMA PS1 despite Covid restrictions and won critical raves, with “Apokaluptein” hailed as a “carceral magnum opus” by Holland Cotter in The New York Times.

“‘Marking Time’ was definitely pivotal in all of our careers and pretty much legitimized folks who come from this incarcerated background,” said Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter, an artist in the exhibition who was imprisoned for eight months on charges that included felony conspiracy. She is now on staff at MoMA PS1 as a project manager for learning.

She has received multiple fellowships, including a residency to examine adultification bias against Black girls — how society tends to regard some children as older than they are, needing less protection — as a root cause of incarceration. Baxter has just been commissioned to lead workshops with women incarcerated at Rikers Island, to culminate in a community mural.

The art dealer Barry Malin has seen a huge shift in collector interest since he started representing Krimes. In 2016, the artist walked into the new Chelsea space opened by Malin, a former surgeon with a focus on social justice, and on the basis of their personal connection, the gallerist offered to show his prison works. Nothing sold from that first exhibition, but it led to a string of grants for Krimes.

“There was a challenge to getting people to appreciate it just as art,” said Malin, who also represents Craig and Owens. He says he has seen a new receptivity since “Marking Time”; the 2020 national reckoning with race and justice; and shifting sympathies toward people ensnared by drugs, in the wake of the opioid crisis.

The term “formerly incarcerated artist” has become “a favorable designation,” Malin said. Owens’s first solo exhibition of paintings and assemblage work just opened at 515 West 29th Street, through Nov. 19, with prices starting at $26,000.

The New York Times

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The studio of Jared Owens, a formerly incarcerated artist, in the Silver Art Project residency space. The nonprofit that Krimes co-founded, Right of Return USA, is supporting some of the artists.Credit...Christopher Gregory for The New York Times

The New York Times

Owens in his painting studio in 4 World Trade Center. “Society can’t really visualize prisoners as even human beings,” he says. He uses shadow figures from an 18th-century diagram of a slave ship in rows as a motif.Credit...Christopher Gregory for The New York Times

Last month, Owens was finishing the works in his studio at Silver Art Projects, on the 28th floor of 4 World Trade Center. Co-founded by Joshua Pulman and Cory Silverstein and funded in part by Silverstein Properties, which redeveloped the World Trade Center complex, the nonprofit offers free studio spaces and career opportunities to 28 emerging artists from marginalized communities.

“Society can’t really visualize prisoners as even human beings,” Owens said. “I’m going to bring your attention to that,” he added. “I’m going to keep it in your mind’s eye.”

He was using shadow figures appropriated from an 18th-century diagram of the Brookes slave ship, reproducing them in rows as a serial motif across canvases that flicker between representation and smudgy abstraction and suggest the architecture of the prison.

With a grant this year from the Art for Justice Fund, founded in 2017 by the philanthropist Agnes Gund to support activists and artists working to reduce the prison population, Silver Art is now reserving several spots in the residency annually for formerly incarcerated artists. Baxter, Krimes and Craig joined Owens in the coveted studio spaces earlier this month.

“The alchemy of art as a tool for securing justice cannot be overstated,” said Gund, who collects work by Krimes and Craig (as does the Brooklyn Museum).

In his recent first solo New York show at Malin Gallery, Craig showed autobiographical canvases often painted on leather purse fragments stitched together as a skin, referencing the Black body in the prison system.

“It took me years to decide to unpack my prison experience,” Craig said. “I didn’t want to exploit my situation or anyone else’s.” Three-quarters of the exhibition sold, with prices starting at $35,000. Among his collectors were Tim and Stephanie Ingrassia (she is vice chair of the Brooklyn Museum).
Image

The New York Times

Russell Craig, “Idol Time” (2022), oil and acrylic paint on leather and canvas, was exhibited at the Malin Gallery.Credit...Russell Craig and Malin Gallery

The New York Times

Jesse Krimes, “Wakulla” (2022), antique quilt, used clothing collected from incarcerated people, assorted textiles, at the Malin Gallery.Credit...Jesse Krimes and Malin Gallery

The New York Times

Jesse Krimes, “Fishkill” (2022), antique quilt, used clothing collected from incarcerated people, assorted textiles.Credit...Jesse Krimes and Malin Gallery

Krimes has now had five exhibitions with the gallery. “People aren’t questioning anymore, is he an artist or is he this sort of curiosity?” Malin said. Krimes’s series of “Elegy Quilts,” pieced together from the clothing of incarcerated individuals and depicting their remembrances of home, started at $25,000 and sold out quickly to collectors including Beth Rudin DeWoody.

Malin has gradually raised Krimes’s prices to $75,000. “The next hurdle to overcome,” Malin said, “is, are people going to take it seriously enough to go above this price point?”

During a recent public discussion called “Confronting Mass Incarceration” at the Anderson Ranch in Aspen, the Brooklyn Museum’s director, Anne Pasternak, who led the acquisition of works by Craig and Krimes, apologized to Krimes for an earlier comment about his work having gotten expensive.

“In retrospect, I realized that could have sounded like, because he had been incarcerated, he didn’t merit the prices of other artists, which is not what I intended,” she said in a recent interview, adding, “It requires us all to be more conscientious of our biases that we may not be aware of.”

Early on, Krimes noticed he was often the only artist included in shows about incarceration who had actually served time. “I’m a white guy from eastern Pennsylvania, I should definitely not be the only face of incarceration,” said Krimes, who grew up in a working-class community in Lancaster.

The documentary compares the lighter sentence Krimes received (six years) to that of a Black man sentenced the same day for the same crime (20 years), from the same judge, who said he saw “potential” in Krimes. The artist said he experienced how penitentiaries intentionally stoked racial divisions between rival gangs as a means of control. He pointed out that visual artists were respected prisonwide for the tangible records of humanity, such as portraits, they could provide to other inmates.

“That’s where I realized I could use artwork as a collective building tool to cross racial barriers,” Krimes said.

Krimes and Craig received a grant from Open Philanthropy to co-found the Right of Return USA in 2017, which offers $20,000 fellowships to a half dozen formerly incarcerated artists each year.

Baxter received one of these inaugural fellowships after prison, when she had less than $5 in her bank account, and described the support as life-changing. “It gave me an opportunity to find stable housing and revisit my art aspirations,” she said. The grant funded her musical film “Ain’t I a Woman,” in which Baxter told her life story, including giving birth in prison while shackled to a gurney.
Image

The New York Times

Frame from “Ain’t I a Woman” (2018) by Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter, shown in the exhibition “Marking Time.”Credit...Karsten Moran for The New York Times

The New York Times

“Locked in a Dark Calm” (2016) by Tameca Cole was shown at MoMA PS1 in “Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration.”Credit...Karsten Moran for The New York Times

(Other Right of Return fellows include the poet Reginald Dwayne Betts; the artist Sherrill Roland, represented by the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery; Gilberto Rivera; and Tameca Cole, whose 2016 collage of a face shrouded in a gray cloud, titled “Locked in a Dark Calm,” is the opening image in “Marking Time.”)

Krimes and Craig recently received $1.1 million from the Mellon Foundation, to help expand Right of Return from a fellowship to a nonprofit called the Art and Advocacy Society, which will hire staff and encompass a school and residency program.

They are working with Kate Fowle, former director of MoMA PS1, who brought “Marking Time” to the museum, on the school’s pilot program, being hosted by MoMA PS1 with $300,000 in additional funding from Gund’s Art for Justice and the Ford Foundation. A cohort of six artists — Krimes, Craig, Owens, Baxter, Cole and Rivera — are receiving professional development and one-on-one mentorship from Sterling Ruby, Hank Willis Thomas, Rashid Johnson, Lorna Simpson, Derrick Adams and Rafael Domenech.

When asked why a limited number of opportunities seem to keep going to the same handful of artists, Fowle said, “They are going to be the support structure for future artists coming through school, the mentors, the ones able to guide how these types of programs expand.” She and

Krimes envision an entry-level tier for artists getting out of prison to learn studio skills and art history. The Art and Advocacy Society would develop the core curriculum, to be implemented at museums across the country.

Whether museums broadly will fund such an initiative is an open question. MoMA PS1, for example, received the top end of what Art for Justice gives — $200,000 — but it was not enough to pay for both tiers of the school.

In November, Christie's will auction works by Johnson and Mickalene Thomas, among others, to benefit the Art and Advocacy Society and a permanent residency program. "Our goal is to create a multiracial national movement that is foundational and lasts," Krimes said. His biggest fear is that the art world's interest will move on to the next thing before anything structural has changed.

"I recognize the power of calling yourself a 'formerly incarcerated artist,'" he said. But ultimately, he added, "you want to be known as just an artist."

ARTnews Est. 1902

Artist Jesse Krimes's Struggle to Overcome Years in Prison Showcased in New Documentary

BY ALEX GREENBERGER
November 26, 2021 9:30am

Still from *Krimes* (2021).
COURTESY MTV FILMS

In the documentary *Krimes*, artist Jesse Krimes espouses a provocative theory: many of the U.S.'s greatest artists are unknown, and not simply because curators and dealers haven't taken the time to find them. "One in three people has a criminal record, so that is a clear signal to me that there is a whole pool of wasted talent, not just in the prison system, but also with the people who come home," he says. According to Krimes, some of today's finest painters and sculptors are still incarcerated. We just haven't heard about them yet.

Krimes would know a thing or two about this. Last summer, he became one of the breakout stars of Nicole Fleetwood's MoMA PS1 exhibition "**Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/prison-art-nicole-fleetwood-jesse-krimes-russell-craig-tameca-cole-1202693793/)**," where he was one of many formerly incarcerated artists with art on view. "Marking Time" was an exhibition quite unlike many others before it, and it came as part of a relatively new emphasis being placed on the U.S. prison system within the art world. Back in 2017, collector Agnes Gund sold a $160 million Roy Lichtenstein painting to launch Art for Justice, an organization dedicated toward funding projects about the carceral system; earlier this year, the memoirs of late artist Winfred Rembert, who was imprisoned for seven years, were put out by Bloomsbury, a mainstream publishing house. (Rembert is currently the subject of a career retrospective at the New York–based gallery Fort Gansevoort.)

A tide is turning, but Krimes thinks there's a lot more work to be done. Speaking of art made by formerly incarcerated artists like himself, he says in the film, "It's work that needs to be in MoMA, it's work that needs to be in the Whitney, and it's work that no one knows about."

Krimes marks one attempt to ensure that this statement starts to seem like a relic of a bygone mentality. Directed with compassion by **Alysa Nahmias (https://www.artnews.com/t/alysa-nahmias/)** (who earlier this year also released a **documentary about László Moholy-Nagy (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/moholy-nagy-new-bauhaus-documentary-review-1234599013/)**), this film offers an eye-opening look at how one artist is seeking to lift the veil on a part of American society that has been made largely invisible to the public. In the process, Nahmias considers how art can be a tool for resistance within the exploitative prison system of the U.S. One comment from Krimes, who went to art school prior to his incarceration, acts as a thesis for the film: "Art is what I know, so it was what I was making to survive."

In "Marking Time," Fleetwood often did not specify why the artists she included were imprisoned, in an attempt, she said, to avoid "categories of guilt and innocence." Nahmias's film goes in a different direction, examining his case extensively. Early on, we learn that Krimes was initially given a 70-month sentence for selling cocaine. (Krimes claims that the amount of cocaine he arrested for was deliberately overstated by authorities, which he describes as "typical practice" within the federal system.) He wound up serving five years.

Behind bars, Krimes witnessed how racism is systemic in U.S. prisons—he was one of the few white faces among a sea of Black and Brown ones. Even before he got there, he thought that his sentence was light when compared to others. "It seemed to me that race was the main driving factor in that decision," he tells Nahmias. "Honestly, it made me angry."

To "disconnect" amid a racially segregated and often tense environment, Krimes turned to art. He began drawing the heads of prisoners onto saintly figures in the mold of those rendered centuries ago by Fra Angelico and the like, effectively complicating who really counts as being innocent. "We're all some type of offender," Krimes explains.

Jesse Krimes (https://www.artnews.com/t/jesse-krimes/), *Apokaluptein 16389067*, 2010–13.
PHOTO MATTHEW SEPTIMUS

Later on, Krimes engaged in the project that has since come to be his best-known work: *Apokaluptein:16389067* (2010–13), which he produced clandestinely, to avoid the piece being confiscated. At PS1, the work filled an entire wall, though Krimes worked on it piecemeal—and had never seen it in full until he got out of prison. In it, figures culled from Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish* appear to fly above an urban landscape filled with images appropriated from notices for Christie's sales, fashion ads, and more. To make them, Krimes transferred the images from publications using hand sanitizer and bedsheets—the materials he had on hand. He mailed out the work in sections, and just barely managed to finish it before the end of the sentence.

Within prison, Krimes found unexpected community among other artists. "What are the odds of me bumping into another conceptual artist in prison?" Jared Owens recalls. Owens, Krimes, and others formed a support structure and fostered each other's practices.

Throughout *Krimes*, Nahmias finds clever ways of humanizing her subject. She portrays Krimes as a person with a tough exterior and a rich mind—the kind of person who is just as likely to be spotted poring over the latest issue of *Artforum* as he is to be found bench-pressing in a gym. In one of the documentary's best scenes, we see Krimes sparring with Owens about the merits of art-historical giants. With a kind of machismo, Krimes derisively labels Matisse "another Renoir." Owens, shocked, calls that "sacrilege."

While Krimes now lives in Philadelphia and leads an art practice that recently earned him a $50,000 United States Artist Fellowship, he also continues to face the effects of the carceral system, as this film makes clear. He may have resumed contact with his son, but the child "felt like someone else's kid," he recalls. There's also the potential to head back to prison for the smallest offenses, and the difficulty of making a living.

Nahmias dwells not on the challenges Krimes has faced, but on his resilience. To elucidate the importance of remaining strong, she enlists artist Russell Craig, a fellow inmate when Krimes was incarcerated and an artist in his own right. Speaking of the carceral system, Craig says, "It's a machine. It's a dark machine, too. That's why art became important—it was like an escape."

MTV Films recently acquired Krimes*, which debuted earlier this month at the DOC NYC festival. It plays digitally on the festival's site through Sunday.*

Art in America

The Fabric of Our Nation

By Michael McCanne

December 3, 2020 1:52pm

VIEW GALLERY
5 Images

Drive long enough on any American highway and you will pass a prison. Even at a distance, its ominous form is instantly recognizable, the telltale watchtowers and razor wire–topped fences marking it as an outpost of the United States's sprawling penal system. Millions of people are incarcerated in prisons, jails, and detention centers across the country, and tens of millions more must organize their lives around imprisoned loved ones. This web of incarceration is so large that it has its own economy, culture, and demographic trends.

In his solo show “American Rendition” at **Malin (https://www.artnews.com/t/malin/)**, **Jesse Krimes (https://www.artnews.com/t/jesse-krimes/)** explores the history of the carceral state through a quintessentially American cultural artifact: the decorative quilt. Incorporating different styles and techniques, the twelve large quilts on view feature layered motifs alluding to the modern criminal justice system and its forerunners, slavery and work farms. In *North Star* (2019), the black silhouette of a person appears atop an image of a birdcage, his body intersecting with a nineteenth- century jailhouse, all framed by a border of Ohio stars, a traditional quilt pattern. At the center of another work, *Equality Quilt* (2020), a collage of photo-transferred images of protests and phrases like black power crowds into a diamond-shaped space. Krimes surrounds these emblems with arrangements of colored blocks covered in geometric and floral stitched patterns.

Incarceration forms the heart of Krimes’s creative inquiry. He studied sculpture in college but developed his work with textiles and collage while serving a six-year prison sentence for selling cocaine. In addition to the quilts, “American Rendition” features five small pastiches that Krimes made in 2009–10, while in federal prison in North Carolina. He created them with a spoon and hair gel, transferring images from newspapers onto canvases made of stretched bed sheets. Several reinterpret famous artworks, such as Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* or Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*, replacing the heads of the paintings’ protagonists with newspaper portraits of celebrities and criminals. These smaller pieces presaged *Apokaluptein 16389067* (2010–13), currently on display in **“Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration” (https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/marking-time-art-age-mass-incarceration-nicole-r-fleetwood-prison-1202691575/)** at MoMA PS1, a prison cell–size panorama that Krimes created using the same technique.

The quilts in “American Rendition” build on the image-transfer and textile works Krimes developed in prison. Krimes made six of them for a project he organized with the Vera Institute of Justice in 2019, “Voices from the Heartland.” Developed and staged in rural Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where the artist grew up, the project was intended to draw attention to the fact that rural Americans make up the fastest growing population in jails and prisons, despite conventional notions that mass incarceration is an urban phenomenon. Krimes worked with current and former inmates and law enforcement officers to select the visual themes for the quilts and then with local Amish and Mennonite artisans to construct them. The quilts were originally exhibited in a barn at the center of a corn maze, accompanied by a slate of talks and community events.

Other works belong to a new series, “Elegy Quilts” (2020), which touches on the more personal effects of incarceration. Constructed primarily out of clothes and other textiles that the artist collected from current and former prisoners, the “Elegy Quilts” employ patchwork and appliqué techniques to depict empty chairs, inspired by conversations with several inmates about places that made them feel comfortable or at home. Set against beautiful patterns—swathes of floral print fabric or blocks of jagged cloth scraps randomly sewn together—the chairs are meant to represent both the absent prisoner and the domestic privacy and comfort they have lost.

Interest in quilting, the archetypal American folk art, declined after the advent of machined textiles in the early twentieth century but was rekindled around the 1977 bicentennial as a way to evoke cherished ideals of American exceptionalism: self-sufficiency, hard work, and thrift. Krimes’s quilts trouble this easy nostalgia. His work asks that we recognize the essentially American character of mass incarceration: from the slave plantation to the modern prison, it is woven into the fabric of the nation.

This article appears under the title “‘Jesse Krimes” in the January/February 2021 issue, pp. 69–70.

Solitary Resistance

Jesse Krimes in Conversation with Hank Willis Thomas

Jesse Krimes was an artist before he was a prisoner. But in 2009, when Krimes—who studied studio art at Millersville University and is now an activist for prison reform—was indicted by the U.S. government for a nonviolent drug offense and sentenced to seventy months, his world was dramatically altered. Confined to a cell for twenty-three hours a day during his first year in prison, Krimes turned to art to cope. Until his release, in 2013, Krimes made clandestine works of art, often with ingenious methods of transferring photographic images from newspapers onto prison-issued bars of soap or sheets using hair gel purchased from the commissary, and sent them home, piece by piece, through the mail. Krimes's monumental mural *Apokaluptein:16389067* (2010–13)—the title derives from the Greek origin of the word *apocalypse* and Krimes's Federal Bureau of Prisons identification number—considers heaven and hell through the collaged language of advertising and photojournalism.

Last fall, Krimes spoke with photographer and conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas about how art can reveal the experiences of incarceration beyond the confines of American jails and prisons.

Previous page and below:
Purgatory (details), 2009. 292 hand-printed image transfers, prison-issued soap, and playing cards. Photographs by Joseph Hu

Opposite:
Purgatory, 2009. Installation view at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2015

Page 96:
Apokaluptein:16389067 (detail), 2010–13. Hand-printed image transfers on prison-issued sheets (thirty-nine panels)
All works courtesy the artist

The prison-issued soap has this material language of purification and sanitization, which relates to ideas of the penitentiary and what it was designed to do.

Hank Willis Thomas: **Over the past several years you've used your networks to expand notions of what you, as an artist, could and should do, both through multimedia collaboratives and a very targeted practice. Where did you begin?**

Jesse Krimes: Growing up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the idea of making a career or living by being an artist was really foreign to me. As an only child, creating was always a way for me to occupy my time. But as I transitioned through life, it helped me learn about what I was interested in and led to other opportunities. And I considered myself an artist before going to prison in 2009.

HWT: **What medium did you start with?**

JK: I graduated from Millersville University, which had a phenomenal bronze-casting foundry and instructors, so most of my practice was working through metalsmithing, bronze casting, and nontraditional material explorations.

HWT: **Were painting and photography part of your practice before you went to prison?**

JK: My art history professor specialized in the media-based collective General Idea and also encouraged me to read Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980). So while I didn't practice much photography, it was conceptually influential. But it took going to prison for those concepts to manifest within my practice.

HWT: **When you went in, did you think that you were going to be making art? Or did you realize that you needed to do something with your time, that you needed to find ways to work through some of the issues that brought you there?**

JK: It was primarily an act of self-preservation and resistance against a system designed to make me conform to the idea that I'm less than others. That being said, I was also thinking about art in a critical context. I was still reading *Artforum* and other art journals, which my friends and family would send me.

HWT: **Was that common? Did you meet people who were critically thinking about being there?**

JK: In the beginning, I wasn't aware of anyone else doing that because I was in solitary confinement and locked down twenty-three hours a day. But as I transitioned through the federal system I encountered numerous individuals who were making critically rigorous works through various disciplines.

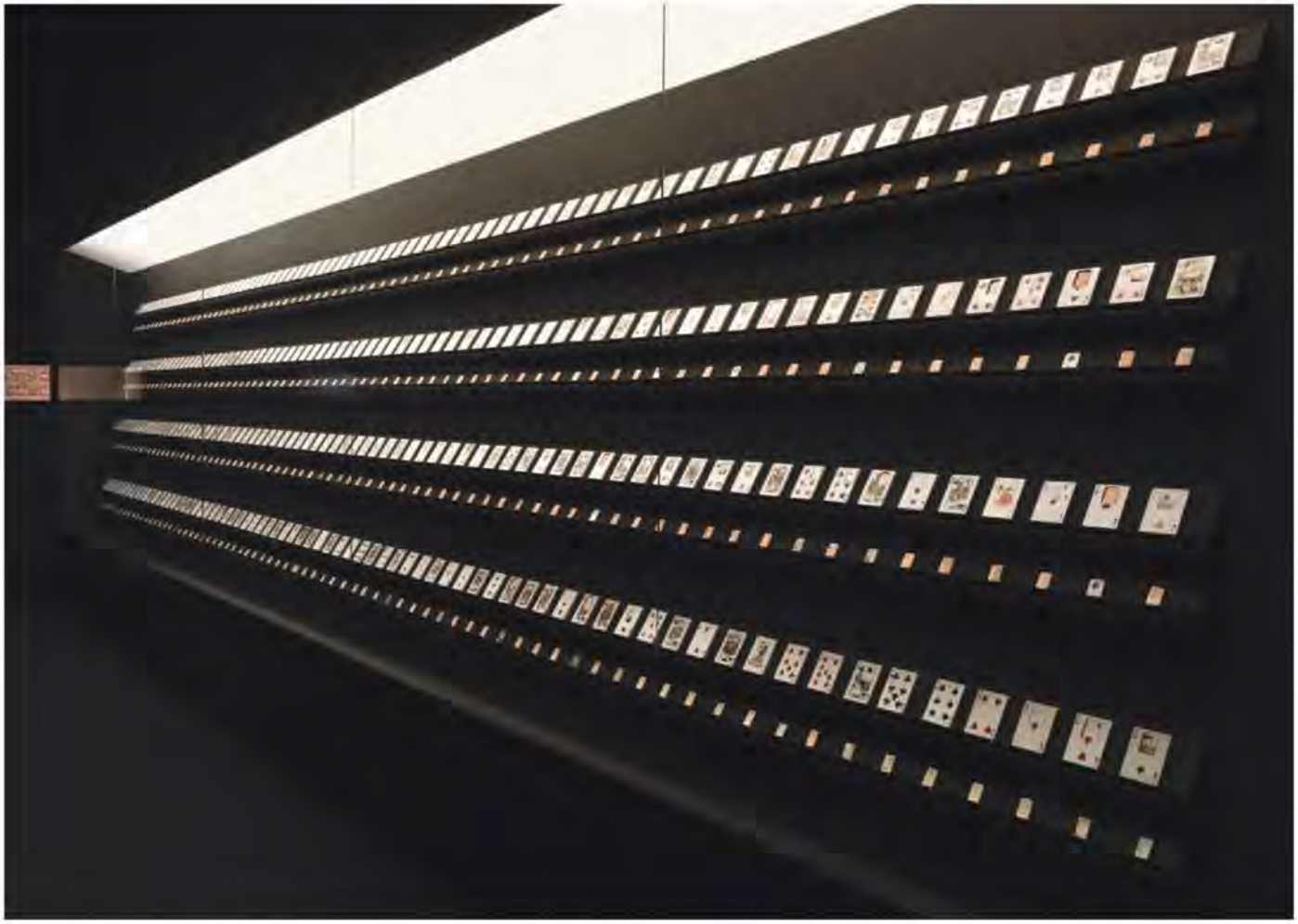
HWT: **How long were you in solitary?**

JK: I was indicted in 2009, shortly after graduating from college. I was in solitary confinement for a year, before receiving my six-year sentence in 2010. It was intense. They only placed me there because I wasn't willing to cooperate and implicate other people. Solitary is just one prosecutorial tool the government uses to get people to cooperate, or to eventually accept a plea deal, even if you're not guilty, because you just want to get out of solitary.

HWT: **This was before you were sentenced?**

JK: Yeah, before I was even found guilty.

HWT: **Is that legal?**



JK: Unfortunately. That specific solitary unit was also for high-risk violent offenders. And, even though my charges and criminal history all involved nonviolent offenses, they sent me to maximum-security federal prisons after sentencing.

HWT: **You were resolved to not cooperate, and you saw that you had tools of creative expression and time to focus in a way that you didn't before.**

JK: Absolutely. I wasn't willing to get someone else in trouble for my own decisions. I knew I needed to stay focused, whether I got five years or twenty years. Making art twelve to fourteen hours a day created a space where I had autonomy and allowed me to escape mentally and emotionally from my environment.

HWT: **What did you start with?**

JK: The first pieces I made were elements of *Purgatory* (2009). I was reading Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and daily newspapers when I started noticing paradoxes between the photographic representations in the newspaper and their textual narratives. I began thinking about being in prison and these mediated sources as the only way to experience the outside world. Considering these texts simultaneously led me to consider the ways in which prison is analogous to the inner workings of society's camera—a place where traces of our social protocols and interactions are captured, archived, and processed through a lens of cultural value. Having been arrested, my mug shot was taken and surrounded by a narrative that negatively depicted me at one specific point in time. I wanted to disrupt that, and recontextualize some of these one-dimensional depictions in the newspaper.

I began cutting out mug shots of people who were recently arrested and transferring them onto remnants of soap, leaving the inverse trace of the portrait on the surface of the soap. The prison-issued soap has this material language of purification and sanitization, which relates to ideas of the penitentiary and what it, in theory, was designed to do.

HWT: **You were in the midst of an existential crisis, and you started reading about existentialism, and then using the existing materials to create new questions. I think that's the first work of yours I saw, and I remember wondering what kind of education you had, or if this is something that people are teaching within prisons.**

Also, your last name is Krimes. There seemed like an alchemy, literally, with the mixing of the photography onto the soap, an artist named Jesse Krimes in jail for a crime that he knew he was guilty of—all of that.

JK: [*laughs*]

HWT: **Were you aware of these things? Or were you just trying to get by at the time?**

JK: The thing about being in prison is that time shifts from a linear progression—and the idea of yourself and how you exist in relation to the world—to a much more cyclical functioning where meaning and your understanding of self are rapidly constructed and


HUBLOT
MoMA

deconstructed. Every day and every minute are just spent figuring out how to get through that day.

HWT: **Looking at your work and realizing how much photography has informed it—and especially thinking about *Apokaluptein:16389067*, where you have these dancers, you have magazines, you have every element of life, you have mug shots—could you talk about that work and its relationship to where you started in photography?**

JK: I made *Apokaluptein:16389067* during the last three years of my sentence. By that time, I was in general population. I began collecting photojournalistic images almost as Duchampian readymades, without fully understanding what I was going to do with them. But in the process of compiling this large archive, I noticed patterns of paradoxes in the content of the imagery and began transferring them onto prison bedsheets with hair gel and a plastic spoon. Gradually, I came to perceive of prison as a microcosm of our globalized world that is shaped by various systems of capture, containment, and control. The ways in which we experience images, bodies, objects, and artworks are determined by what different systems conceal or reveal. Some of that goes back to *Purgatory* and these individual depictions of people.

HWT: **Can you describe *Purgatory*?**

JK: *Purgatory* is the piece I mentioned earlier where I removed photographs of offenders from the newspaper and transferred them onto pieces of soap while I was in solitary. They were fairly delicate, so I needed to find a way to sneak them out through the mail without breaking. I ended up making a cutting device out of a disassembled AAA battery to cut frames for each portrait from decks of used playing cards other guys would pass me. The cards also became integral parts of the works and vessels for concealment. I cut out the faces of kings, jacks, and queens and replaced them with the soap portraits—basically elevating the offender to that of royalty and lowering the royalty to that of the offender. While I began the series by using mug shots, I started to include images of celebrities, politicians, and other individuals based on the premise that each of us is some type of offender. By the time I left solitary, I had smuggled out 292 pieces.

HWT: **Then that set the foundation for *Apokaluptein:16389067*?**

JK: Yes. Those image transfers of portraits on soap grew into transferring events depicted in the *New York Times* onto prison-issued bedsheets. Then I would blend these different events together with colored pencils and paint to create unified landscapes. Over the course of three years, it grew into *Apokaluptein:16389067*, which is a massive piece on thirty-nine prison bedsheets measuring fifteen feet high by forty feet wide.

HWT: **Were there other people who were part of the process, who were supporters of this process?**

JK: All of this was considered against prison policy. You're not allowed to destroy or deface prison property, which could land you in solitary. So I had to do this entire project in secret. There were guys on the block who would collect newspapers for me. And if an asshole guard was making his rounds, guys would give me a signal so I'd know to hide all of my contraband materials. But over time, some of the better guards became supportive, even to the point of giving me a staff locker to store my materials and works in progress so they wouldn't get confiscated during shakedowns.

HWT: **After five years, by the time you were coming out, you had completed several bodies of work. I don't mean to make light of it, but it seems it was like a grad-school type of experience for you.**

JK: It kind of was. I make light of it sometimes, just to process it. But I often call it an intensive residency program. I was driven to come home better than when I went in—to make work all day, every day, and read about art all day, every day.

HWT: **When they were discussing your parole, was that something that was seen as a good thing on your behalf, or did it come up at all?**

JK: While I was making each body of work—*Purgatory*, the *Master Work* series (2009), *Ink Scaffolds* (2010), and *Apokaluptein: 16389067*—I mailed each element out immediately. So upon leaving the prison, I didn't have any work in my possession. The majority of the staff had no idea I was creating these works. It was something that I kept to myself.

HWT: **You made a fifteen-by-forty-foot piece that is contiguous and people didn't know?**

JK: A lot of the staff didn't know.

HWT: **Did you do it in sections? Did you sketch it out first? How did you know when it was over?**

JK: When I started *Apokaluptein:16389067*, I initially made one landscape panel that was about three by five feet. After I completed that panel, I still had three years left to serve. So, I was like, Fuck, I might as well keep making more.

I was also reading Giorgio Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011) at that time and decided to create a heaven and hell around the earth panels. I used the size of the desk to determine the horizon line on the three-by-five-feet earth panels because that was the only surface area where I could make image transfers. I didn't have an overall diagram of how the thirty-nine panels would specifically fit together because I mailed each panel out upon completion until I was released in 2013.

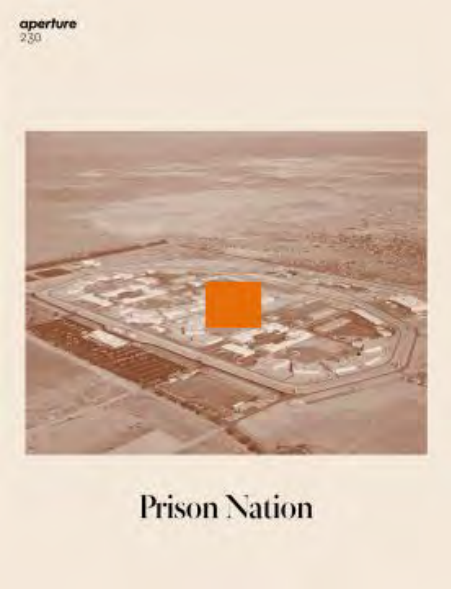
HWT: **You've been out almost as long as you were in. You're getting to the point where you have more distance to reflect about the experience. Beyond the process, you're also dealing with notions of how art can be restorative, how it can shape and effect social justice.**

JK: Yes, absolutely. All of my work is socially engaged in some way. Some of it is much more overtly engaged and process-oriented. But having gone through that experience, it's impossible for me to make art for art's sake. I try to create artwork that complicates oversimplified and harmful narratives. I don't like to say it's a way of trying to humanize people in prison because they're already human, so that's a very ridiculous thing to say. But I think art can be a way to spark empathy in people and get them to see, feel, and think differently about various issues. It can help viewers understand the space they occupy within the broader sociopolitical systems that feed into mass incarceration.

Hank Willis Thomas is an artist based in New York.

Solitary Resistance

Aperture | **Spring 2018**



Prisoner's 39-Panel Allegorical Mural Made From Bedsheets, Hair Gel and Stacks of Newspapers

March 5, 2014 in Activist Art, Amateur, Fine Art, Rehabilitative | Tags: Apokaluptein:16389067, Bureau of Prisons, Butner, Eastern State Penitentiary, federal, Jesse Krimes, New Jersey, North Carolina, Philadelphia, UNICOR

Artist Jesse Krimes stands in front of his 39-panel mural *Apokaluptein:16389067* (federal prison bed sheets, transferred New York Times images, color pencil) installed, here, at the Olivet Church Artist Studios, Philadelphia. January, 2014.

The New York Times has a track record for high quality visual journalism. From experiments in multimedia, to its magazine's double-truck features; from its backstage reportage at the swankiest fashion gigs, to their man in town Bill Cunningham. Big reputation.

NYT photographs are viewed and used in an myriad of ways. Even so, I doubt the editors ever thought their choices would be burnished from the news-pages onto prison bed-sheets with a plastic spoon. Nor that the transfer agent would be prison-issue hair gel.

In 2009, **Jesse Krimes** (yep, that's his real surname) was sentenced to 70 months in a federal penitentiary for cocaine possession and intent to distribute. He was caught with 140 grams. The charges brought were those of 50-150 kilos. Somewhere in the bargaining it was knocked down to 500 grams, and Krimes plead guilty to conspiracy. The judge recommended that Jesse be sent to a minimum security prison in New Jersey, close to support network of friends and family, but the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) opted to send him to a medium security facility in Butner, North Carolina — as far away as permitted under BOP regulations. That was the first punitive step of many in a system that Krimes says is meant first and foremost to dehumanise.

"Doing this was a way to fight back," says Krimes who believes ardently that art humanises. "The system is designed to make you into a criminal and make you conform. I beat the system."

Last month, I had the pleasure of hearing Krimes speak about his mammoth artwork ***Apokaluptein:16389067*** during an evening hosted at the the Eastern State Penitentiary and Olivet Church Artist Studios in Philadelphia.

The mural took three years to make and it is a meditation on heaven, hell, sin, redemption, celebrity worship, deprivation and the nature of perceived reality. Krimes says his "entire experience" of prison is tied up in the artwork.

In the top-left is a transferred photo of a rehearsal of the Passion play at Angola Prison, Louisiana.

Through trial and error, Krimes discovered that he could transfer images from New York Times newspapers on to prison bedsheets. At first he used water, but the colours bled. Hair gel had the requisite viscosity. As a result, all imagery is reversed, upturned. *Apokaluptein:16389067* is both destruction and creation.

"It's a depiction of represented reality as it exists in its mediated form, within the fabric of the prison," says Krimes. "It was my attempt to transfer [outside] reality into prison and then later became my escape when I sent a piece home with the hopes that it could be my voice on the outside in the event that anything bad ever happened and I never made it home."

ART AS SURVIVAL

Krimes says this long term project kept him sane, focused and disciplined.

Each transfer took 30-minutes. Thousands make up the mural. Krimes only worked on one sheet at a time, each of them matching the size of the tabletop he worked on. A notch in the table marked the horizon line for the 13 panels making up the center horizontal. He shipped them home. Not until his release did he see them together.

The enterprise was not without its risks, but Krimes found favour being a man with artistic talent. He established art classes for fellow prisoners in an institution that was devoid of meaningful programs.

"Prisoners did all the work to set up the class," says Krimes.

Once the class was in place, guards appreciated the initiative. It even changed for the better some of the relationships he had with staff.

"Some helped mail out sections," he says of the bedsheets which were, strictly-speaking, contraband.

Krimes would cut sections from the New York Times and its supplements, sometimes paying other prisoners for the privilege.

"In prison, the only experience of the outside world is through the media."

The horizon is made of images from the travel section. Beneath the horizon are transferred images of war, and man-made and natural disasters. Krimes noticed that often coverage of disasters and idealised travel destinations came from the same coasts and continents. Influenced by Dante's *Inferno* and by Giorgio Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Krimes reinvigorates notions of the Trinity within modern politics and economics. The three tiers of the mural reflect, he says heaven, earth and hell, or intellect, mind and body.

One can identify the largest victories, struggles and crimes of the contemporary world. All in perverse reverse. All in washed out collage. There's images of the passion play being rehearsed at Angola Prison from an NYT feature, of Tahrir Square and the Egyptian revolution, of children in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook School massacre, and of a submerged rollercoaster in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

The women's rights panel includes news images from reporting on the India bus rape and images of Aesha Mohammadzai who was the victim of a brutal attack by her then husband who cut off her nose. Krimes' compression of images is vertiginous and disorienting. We're reminded that the world as it appears through our newspapers sometimes is.


AMoMA
THE CLOCK
BASQUIAT

The large pictures are almost exclusively J.Crew adverts which often fill the entire rear page of the NYT. Jenna Lyons, the creative director at J.Crew is cast as a non-too-playful devil imp in the center-bottom panel.

Throughout, fairies transferred straight from ballerinas bodies as depicted in the Arts Section dance and weave. Depending on where they exist in relation to heaven and earth they are afforded heads or not — blank geometries replace faces as to comment on the treatment of women in mainstream media.

The title *Apokaluptein:16389067* derives from the Greek root 'apokalupsis.' Apokaluptein means to uncover, or reveal. 16389067 was Krimes' Federal Bureau of Prisons identification number.

"The origin [of the word] speaks to the material choice of the prison sheet as the skin of the prison, that is literally used to cover and hide the body of the prisoner. *Apokaluptein:16389067* reverses the sheet's use and opens up the ability to have a conversation about the sheet as a material which, here, serves to uncover and reveal the prison system," says Krimes who also read into the word personal meaning.

"The contemporary translation speaks to a type of personal apocalypse — the process of incarceration and the dehumanizing deterioration of ones personal identity, […] The number itself, representing the replacement of ones name."

PRISON ECONOMICS: THE HAVES & HAVE NOTS

One of the most interesting things to hear about at Krimes' presentation was the particular details about how he went about acquiring materials. In federal prison, just as on the outside, money rules.

Except inside BOP facilities the currency is stamps not dollars (something we've heard before). A $7 book of stamps on the outside, sets a prisoner back $9.

Access to money makes a huge difference in how one experiences imprisonment.

"People who have money have a much easier time living in prison but that is usually rare except for the white collar guys or the large organized crime figures," says Krimes.

"Prisoners who have money in prison gain automatic respect and power because you are able to have influence over anything really — most people without money will depend on those with cash to be the buyers of whatever products or services they need."

Without cash to hand, a rare skill comes in handy. Krimes could make art. In prison artists are afforded much respect. Ironically, free society doesn't treat artists with the same respect, but I guess we've already established that we're dealing in reversals here?!

"We had to provide some kind of skill or service in order to receive money or books of stamps. Some people cook for others, do laundry, do legal work, or artwork."

In FCI Butner, a high-quality photorealistic portrait would go for as much as $150. Or, 20 books of stamps. Krimes did portraits and tattoo designs, spending proceeds almost exclusively on hair gel and coloured pencils.

"The majority of portraits I did were for the guys who had money or else I did them for free, for friends or those going through hard times."

The prison sheets came for free. Krimes smiles at the irony that these sheets are made by UNICOR, the Federal Bureau of Prisons' factory and industries arm. UNICOR makes everything from steel frame beds to bedsheets; from U.S. military boots and helmets to plastic utensils. In 2005, UNICOR generated $765 million in sales — 74% of revenues went toward the purchase of raw material and equipment; 20% toward staff salaries; and 6% went toward inmate salaries.

I'd liken Krimes' acquisition of bed sheets to liberation more than to theft. His image transfers are appropriation more than homage. The scope of the project reflects the sheer size of American prison system. The ambition reflects that of the individual to survive, not the system to improve its wards.

That such a large statement came out of the prison sytem (in one piece!) is a feat in itself. That *Apokaluptein:16389067* is so layered and so plugged into contemporary culture is an absolute marvel. That the photographs of international media are the vehicle for that statement should be no surprise at all.

More [here](#).

All images: [Sarah Kaufman](#)

One of the cardboard boxes in which Krimes shipped out a completed panel. The boxes are made by the federal prison industries group UNICOR which employs prison labour. The box is marked with "ESCAPE PROOF GUARANTEED."

SLATE

THE EYE

The Art of Doing Time

BY KRISTIN HOHENADEL
MARCH 19, 2014

The artist in front of the wall mural he made piece by piece while serving a 70-month jail sentence and assembled after he was released in September 2013.

Courtesy of Sarah Kaufman

Designboom tipped us off to a monumental feat of ingenuity, will, and resourcefulness by Jesse Krimes, a 31-year-old artist from Philadelphia who stealthily made a 39-panel mural piece by piece using contraband prison sheets, hair gel, plastic spoons, and *New York Times* clippings while serving a 70-month jail sentence that ended last September.

Krimes was sent to federal prison in 2009 for possession of cocaine with intent to distribute, the year after he graduated with a B.A. in studio art from Millersville University of Pennsylvania. He spent his first year awaiting sentencing in a 22-hour-per-day lockdown in his cell, banned from venturing outside for fresh air or sunlight. To cope with the isolation and the shock of being a nonviolent drug offender in a medium security prison surrounded by Aryan Nations leaders,

Russian mobsters, and other violent criminals, he started making art. Fellow inmates commissioned portraits to send to loved ones on the outside, paying him in jailhouse currency (books of stamps). Soon he began teaching art classes to other inmates, who converted the old piano room into a de facto art studio.

Krimes said that carving out a singular identity as resident artist kept him out of trouble in an atmosphere charged with gang violence and allowed him to make a cross-section of allies amid racial divides. “They called me ‘the independent,’ ” Krimes told me in a phone interview. “Artwork facilitated conversation. And it humanized me to some of the guards. They saw me not as an inmate but as a person.”

The artist created the mural one panel at a time on contraband prison sheets that he mailed one by one to his girlfriend and stitched together once his sentence was over.

Courtesy of Sarah Kaufman

In prison there was no TV or Internet, but he had access to books and newspapers. He reread philosophy texts he had studied in college and started reading the *New York Times*, finding himself emotionally drawn to dreamy images of idealized vacation destinations in the travel section. But he was also struck by how often news stories of man-made and natural disasters occurring in those same places depicted an alternate reality. And again by the ubiquitous ads

for consumer goods that both entrap the masses in self-imposed symbolic prisons of their own and foster a cult of materialism he says played a role in motivating his own errant choices.

Krimes began plotting his mural, which would attempt to grapple with those contradictions. He clipped images and traced a series of naked dancing women by hand using colored pencils, based on photos of ballerinas in the arts section. He bought hair gel from the prison commissary and was allowed to order canvas from an art catalog, but he never intended to make his great prison masterwork on such a conventional material, procuring clean prison sheets from a friend who worked in the laundry room to use as his primary material instead.

The mural was made using imagery from the *New York Times*; the naked flying women were based on a photo of ballerinas in the arts section.

Courtesy of Sarah Kaufman

“Canvas is a boring material,” he said, adding that the canvas was used simply as a foil to avoid getting busted in a “shakedown” by any unsympathetic guards. “Defacing sheets is destroying federal property. But the mural is a product of its conditions,” he said, adding that appropriating sheets which he said are fabricated by prisoners at a profit to the institution, allowed him to reveal something integral about the experience. “I developed the mural as a way to transcend the conditions of prison and all the negative things that go on in that

environment on a personal level; the work is personal and autobiographical, but it also is meant to expose the system."

Krimes spent three years working on the 39-panel mural, which he mapped out in his head and worked on piece by piece. To make a panel, he would tear a prison sheet in half, dampen it with hair gel, then transfer images to the sheets using the back of a plastic spoon, a meticulous process that took about 30 minutes and required careful planning to fit in with his highly regimented prison existence. To avoid getting caught with the contraband art, he mailed panels one by one to his girlfriend, and assembled them after his release last September.

The artist superimposed images from the *New York Times* travel section with reports of man-made and natural disasters often taking place in the same zones.

Courtesy of Sarah Kaufman

When Krimes got home, he had a job waiting for him at the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, where his boss allowed him to set up studio space to work on and display the mural. The finished work is called *Apokaluptein:16389067*, after the Greek origin of the word apocalypse; the numbers reference his Federal Bureau of Prisons identification number.

Krimes said that his profoundly isolating and dehumanizing prison experience had changed him not only as a person but as an artist.

Courtesy of Sarah Kaufman

“Before I went to prison I made sculptural pieces in three dimensions with metal and bronze casting and my work was very free and expressive,” he said. “Then when I went to prison I started doing this obsessive compulsive highly detailed two-dimensional drawing and printing process.”

Courtesy of Sarah Kaufman

But he also found an artistic calling of sorts. Working in isolation for five years with limited resources and materials has created an urgent desire to create and collaborate and to help criminals who are locked up to maintain a connection to the outside world.

SLATE

Courtesy of Sarah Kaufman

“Now that I’m free and I can move and have a body and a voice I want to reach back and collect inmate’s stories,” Krimes said. He has in mind a project that would use animation and stop motion film to tell those stories and give a face to the faceless, projecting images onto the facade of the African American Museum in Philadelphia, so the inmates in the prison across the street could look out their windows and catch a glimpse of themselves on the outside.