

Art in America

CAMERON ROWLAND

Artists Space

Cameron Rowland's work combines research and strategic contractual agreements with the presentation of objects selected for their socially illuminating value. His exhibition at Artists Space, "91020000," comprised a selection of new works (all 2016) that served as a multilayered genealogical investigation into slavery and its ties to economic development and mass incarceration in the United States.

Integral to the show was a partnership established at Rowland's request between Artists Space and Corcraft, a division of the New York State Department of Correctional Services that employs inmates to produce everything from highway signs to classroom furniture. The sale of such items is mostly restricted to state entities; however, as a nonprofit with an educational mandate, Artists Space was eligible to use the service. Rowland titled his show after the eight-digit customer number Corcraft assigned to the venue. Among the inmate-constructed products on view were a steel-and-particle-board desk (*Attica Series Desk*) manufactured for government offices by prisoners at the infamous Attica Correctional Facility and a row of oak courtroom benches (*New York State Unified Court System*). Though drably matter-of-fact on the surface, these objects hint at a cruel irony. By constructing furniture for bureaucratic buildings and courthouses, inmate laborers—many working for less than a dollar an hour—help perpetuate a criminal justice system whose iniquities they continue to suffer.



In an essay penned for the exhibition, Rowland describes how the origins of present-day inmate labor are entangled with efforts to effectively re-enslave African-Americans freed by the 13th Amendment. Black Codes that criminalized vagrancy in Southern states after the Civil War converged with a convict-leasing system, resulting in many ex-slaves finding themselves leased back to their former owners. Although penal reforms eventually restricted prison labor to state use, they also led to governments adopting increasingly advanced business models to exploit inmate labor. All the while, discriminatory law enforcement has ensured that incarcerated populations remain disproportionately black.

It is against this grim historical backdrop that much of the work on view takes on its significance. A pair of aluminum rings used to level manholes harkens back to the Good Roads Movement of the early 1900s, which relied on chain-gang labor to improve Southern roadways. A fire suit worn by inmate wildland firefighters, and distributed by CALPIA, Corcraft's counterpart in the California prison system, redirects attention from the economic exploitation of inmates to the physical dangers they potentially face as employees.

Adapting a strategy he has previously used to disrupt secondary-market sales, Rowland has made the inmate-constructed works available to would-be buyers strictly on the basis of a three-year at-cost rental contract. A different sort of paperwork figures into "Insurance," a series comprising three pairs of shipping-container lashing bars, two set parallel to each other on the floor and one presented as a giant X attached to a wall. These works are accompanied by insurance certificates from Lloyd's Register, a maritime group formerly involved in the transatlantic slave trade.

Perhaps Rowland's most inventive use of contracts, however, is in a work titled *Disgorgement*. With the help of Artists Space, he purchased 90 shares in Aetna, a company that profited from issuing slave owners life-insurance policies for their slaves. These shares have been placed in a trust and will accrue value until financial reparations are made by the U.S. government, at which point they will serve as a "corporate addendum" to the payment. An act of simultaneous indictment and restitution that can only be fully realized in a more equitable future, the work provides timely affirmation of political idealism in the face of shackling historical precedent.

—David Markus