

Statement by Project Creator of *On the Inside*

The collection of work that forms *On the Inside* is the result of a multi-year open call for art. Almost 4,000 submissions were received. While the sheer number of entries is incredible in and of itself, the type of art that was submitted tells an even more important story.

Though the call for submissions did not specify guidelines for creation, it turned out a majority of the entries were portraits. This trend makes it clear: These artists, who are locked away—feel forgotten, and are invisible to society. They have a deep need to be seen. Through their art, they boldly reclaim their identity. They *proclaim* their existence. They announce their humanity.

The artists almost never depict themselves in prison uniforms, or set themselves in the context of jail. Prison is a circumstance that has little to do with how they self-identify. Instead, they draw themselves in the clothes that best represent who they are on the inside: asserting the gender with which they identify, their style, the context and setting where they would like to be, were they not in prison.

*On the Inside* makes the individual and collective statement that identity and sense of self is valuable and worth claiming. This is amplified in the context of prison, where access to identity affirming clothes, makeup, and hair is denied.

The portraits are drawn in pencil or using the soft ink-tube of a Bic pen (the hard shell deemed too dangerous). As the materials relate to the overarching theme of protest, the paper itself becomes significant. Many of the portraits are drawn on the back of forms, print outs, and scrap paper generated by the facility.

The act of taking a document covered in rules and regulations and turning it into an expression of self is a powerful act. It's a refusal to passively accept institutionalization; to defy it by imprinting it with a skillful self-expression.

I was born with a neuromuscular disease, and even though I have a visceral desire to fight injustice, I have limited energy and limited mobility. I don't have the strength to raise my voice and I certainly cannot take to the streets and march, that would be an able-bodied privilege. This is important to know because it informed the slow and steady act of protest that is *On the Inside*.

It was the artists' transmutation of circumstantial paralysis into expressions of creative protest that became a through-line of the show. It is the kindred bloodline that connected me to the artists. I relate to mobilization of one's convictions and taking action to re-calibrate justice. We must do this in every way that we can (and are able).

As an activist, my relationship with institutions has been one of mistrust. I was conflicted about taking art that narrowly escaped one institution, just to hang it on the walls of another. The act of defiance inherent in each piece, however, has the power to subvert the gallery into an active space of protest. It demands to be seen. It is my sincere hope that *you do*.

Tatiana von Furstenberg