

ANGELO

By Marc Fischer

I try to think of Angelo first as a fellow artist and a friend, but he is also an inmate in the California Prison System. The fact of his incarceration is impossible to forget. It is embedded in the form of his drawings and the meager supplies that he uses to make them. It announces itself in an official ink stamp on every letter and envelope of pictures that he sends. Angelo is 56 years old. He has been in prison for the past ten years. His tentative parole date is 2008.

Angelo and I have known each other exclusively through written correspondence for over nine years. I was introduced to him by a cellmate that had seen a fanzine I once published and encouraged Angelo to write to me. His first correspondence contained an astonishing ballpoint pen drawing titled "Roman Games" that depicted Roman soldiers torturing and murdering their Christian captives in the setting of a large arena. I was amazed by the detail, complexity, and power of the image which filled the 8 1/2 X 11" format that Angelo uses for nearly every drawing.

Angelo and I began writing to each other, and he continued to send drawings with his letters. We have never spoken on the phone, though he has my permission to call. I have never visited him in prison, and I never knew him before he was sent to prison. I don't know any people that Angelo knows, nor does he know any of my friends. My understanding of who Angelo is comes entirely from his frequent letters and the many drawings he sends me for safekeeping.

I am essentially the only person Angelo communicates with outside of prison. His parents divorced when he was three months old and his last contact with his father was at the age of one. His mother is deceased and though he has irregularly relied on an acquaintance of hers for occasional needs, their communications are rare, awkward, and impersonal. Angelo never refers to friends he might have had before he came to prison, and his mother maintained no contact with the rest of his family. Due to their relative ages, Angelo doubts that those she was closer to, an aunt and an uncle, are still alive.

Angelo does not talk about his conviction and I still don't really understand why he is in prison. He is appealing his conviction, which he has stated was "a very vicious conspiracy" that began as the result of a misunderstanding. The prisoner as innocent victim of the state is a cliché in the extreme, but I haven't pursued the matter and I won't go around him to obtain information. In a situation where nearly every aspect of his life is strictly regulated by someone else, I think it is important to let Angelo determine what he wants me to know, and what I should not be privy to. Some will argue that every fact of a person's life affects the art that they make and therefore if we are to truly understand the artist's work, their life should be an open book. Others believe that artists should have the right to control what people know and don't know. This protects

their work from interpretations that favor biographical details too heavily over the ideas that are asserted through the work itself. If Angelo desires this privilege that so many other artists enjoy - the right to control some aspects of what the viewer can know - then I believe he should be entitled to it.

Nearly all of Angelo's drawings depict a world that even when it has some basis in historical fact or a personal memory, is still largely invented from his imagination. This world is sometimes an innocent one, filled with wonder, mystery, play, and adventure. But like his prison environment, it is more often a violent and terrifying place, where people are captured, preyed upon, forced into uncompromising situations, humiliated, watched by others lurking in the background, and murdered in front of crowds of onlookers. The landscapes in these drawings are varied, but many of them can be described as battlefields.

Without question, much of Angelo's work is violent. But I don't believe Angelo's intention is to promote an agenda of violence or the violation of other people through his art. He writes:

"I'm actually quite squeamish when confronted with the results of real violence, so pathetic in fact that I can't look upon an injury without sensing the pain and nausea of the recipient. But on the totally imaginary level that compassion is outweighed by my curiosity and my creative passions so that in time I became able to picture some of the most savage and fiendish imagery possible."

In our highly sensitive current political climate, it remains too easy to confuse the violence that is acted out in creative works with the actual physical manifestation of violence that takes place in society and claims real victims. The temptation to connect imaginary and real violence is great, but there is a massive distinction between fantasy and reality. Angelo has witnessed and experienced prison violence firsthand, and I believe that he clearly understands this distinction. Angelo's drawings are created foremost for an audience of himself alone, and he almost never speaks of the effect he wishes to have on other viewers. I believe this work is created primarily in an attempt to escape the confines of his immediate situation, by making mental voyages on paper to other places and times. Angelo is also motivated by the struggle to keep his imagination and technical facility stimulated in a battle against the stagnation and monotony that all people face during long prison sentences.

In Angelo's drawings, we are being permitted to enter a rather private world of the mind. Angelo is often as generous in showing us things that we feel lucky to see, as he is in depicting subjects that we would prefer not to ever think about again. He has a rich imagination and the ability to render any thought with calm, measured clarity. Unlike most prisoner artists who favor pleasant subjects and beautiful landscapes, Angelo's work visits exotic places that seem to be filled with as much horror and turmoil as the one that he currently lives in. When his images disturb, it is perhaps because Angelo has executed his ideas with such precision that one senses he must be aware of what he was drawing and how it might be interpreted. But for Angelo, rendering his ideas

precisely is less about provoking viewers, and more part of a broader personal and technical challenge he poses to himself toward the accurate translation of abstract mental ideas into concrete physical form.

For a person that works only to satisfy and surprise himself, Angelo is extraordinarily articulate when encouraged to discuss his ideas. His extensive writings about his drawings generally deal with technical problems, the origin of his ideas, or the evolution of the details that comprise his images. When pressed for comment on a more difficult subject, he can express his views clearly and eloquently. Recently, when I reminded him of the unsettling effect his work has on some viewers, he made the following remarks:

"Having come to terms with my own unique imagination, I tend to forget how alien and disturbing some of my concepts may be to others...There is the bad tendency that most people have to attribute a correlation between an artist's choice of subject matter and their moral and emotional leanings. That is doubtless why much prison art generally has such a sterility or redundancy in the area of personal artistic statements, since those rare inmates with sufficient intelligence to actually have something important to say are completely reluctant to do so except in the most inane ways for fear of garnering the wrong persona from their peers."

Given the explicit nature of many of his drawings, I was surprised to learn just recently that Angelo has often censored his own work. While he admits to a general lack of concern for the sensibilities of people that view his drawings, he cannot forget that he is producing images under the watchful eye of prison officials who maintain real control over his personal safety, security, and future. Angelo has had past works illegally confiscated on false charges that he was in possession of "pornography." He can in fact be charged or have his sentence extended on these grounds, despite the fact that his work itself was not in violation of any penal codes. He explains:

"Because of my circumstances I don't have the luxury of visually exploring every picture concept that I'm able to envision, so instead, though it may not seem so, my works are greatly censored by me. On a positive note though, in having to work in the ever present shadow of repression and ignorance, I have developed different ways to carry across ideas that are far more effective than a more explicit rendering of the same idea. That's not to say though that I don't occasionally produce something that probes the boundaries of the neanderthal's concepts of acceptability; but largely now I'm more like a ringmaster, introducing a succession of images that tends to lead the viewer to conclusions based upon the bent or sophistication of their person."

Angelo has had literally thousands of drawings stolen or confiscated. Recently he was the victim of an enormous and emotionally devastating confiscation of work during a cell search. The search was conducted illegally by a single cop that had previously stolen an envelope filled with 40 finished drawings that were about to go in the mail. An estimated 1,500 preliminary drawings dating back two years were taken. Though few of the drawings were finished or complete, many established rough ideas that Angelo had hoped to return to. Despite their illegality, these confiscations are very difficult to

contest. Recovering the stolen work is usually impossible. Angelo's work has also been stolen by cellmates who attempt to sell his drawings or transform elements from them into tattoo designs. Angelo's insistence on sending me his work for safekeeping is an effort to guard himself against future thefts, and to keep his personal property within the legal cell storage limit.

At times Angelo appears to be making illustrations for someone else's books, or producing highly finished story board drawings, or stills from movies that exist only in his head. As Angelo implies earlier, his work is atypical among the type of art produced in prison, for it confronts violence and sexuality with an unusual openness and honesty. Most prison art that so much as touches on violence does so either in a base reflection of the outlaw mentality or macho gang culture that lands so many in prison to begin with, or by presenting a positivistic vision of anti-violence and the desire to overcome common social problems. These latter works, which usually feel like they were designed to capture the imagination only of the parole officer, rarely offer an honest reflection or an insightful critical analysis of the violent world that surrounds the artist. Sexuality is generally reduced to pin-ups that were obviously borrowed from pornography or whatever erotic scenes could be adapted from commercial advertising and mainstream magazines.

A common underlying theme in Angelo's work is surveillance and the presence of spectators. Numerous drawings, no matter what they depict, feature spectators lurking in the background, watching the action that is taking place. There are crowds of spectators watching battles and executions. There are people looking through windows and lurking in doorways. Rarely if ever does a figure appear completely isolated. Angelo does not often depict people that are behind bars in the generic image of imprisonment, but he commonly depicts people that are under the grasp of someone else's power and control. The lack of privacy, the violation of privacy, and the feeling of constant surveillance that is central to the prison experience, permeates many of his images. Conflict, fighting, sex, play, games, excursions, adventures, torture, and death always takes place in the company of others. Every event happens within the context of a larger social structure. No one is ever truly alone, except in their thoughts.

A recent development in Angelo's work is his use of dramatic shifts in scale. He makes extreme close ups of various parts of the body that radically crop the primary figures, while presenting smaller details in the background which help to create a context. Nearly all of Angelo's drawings appear to be slices in time taken from a larger event. When surveying the narrative details, one can think of what might have happened before, and one can speculate what might happen next. The drawings depict narrative fragments that seem to have been cut from complete worlds.

Angelo shows little interest in art genres like landscape, still life, or portraiture. At times he seems more like a history painter working in ballpoint pen on paper, but the works are so heavily inflected with personal idiosyncrasies, that this isn't exactly what's happening either. Though not entirely self-taught, his formal training appears to have had little impact on his art or ideas. After high school Angelo attended a two year

commercial art program at L.A. Trade Technical Junior College, which exposed him to a variety of art materials and theories about color, and encouraged him to work with greater precision. While this experience helped Angelo to refine some of his skills, it offered him little opportunity for creativity within his own rapidly developing personal concerns. He found the idea of training toward the goal of doing commercial work "morally repugnant", and writes: "...the concept of manipulating, even to the point of lying, to push products...simply repelled me." After slowly falling behind in his assignments, he was booted from the school six months before graduation.

The skills that appear to have had the greatest impact on Angelo's work, are those he developed on his own through severe regimens of constant drawing. In his youth he applied a fascinating range of strategies to develop his anatomical drawing and compositional skills. He copied sequential photos and drawings of boys exercising from Boys Life magazine. Later in his mid-teens he acquired nudist magazines like Sunshine and Health which helped him better understand adult anatomy. He drew his own body using an elaborate mirror system, and made 8mm movies in order to draw people in other positions from individual frames. At times he even arranged toy soldiers into various tableaux, in order to work out particular compositions before using his imagination to fill in specific details. Movies began to play an important role in his life and Angelo cites several dozen of personal significance including "20,000 Leagues Under The Sea", "Paths of Glory" , and "They Died With Their Boots On." Of particular significance to him was a three part 1954 Disney TV special, "The Adventures of Davy Crockett", which led him to a long-standing fascination with the Alamo and first suggested that TV could also be used as a tool toward developing his drawing. A little bit later Angelo recalls watching "Rio Grande" on TV with a sketch pad in hand, drawing portraits of each character as they appeared on the screen. Angelo continues to be fascinated with history, which first became an important area of inquiry for him at the age of ten. Historical subjects remain dominant in his art.

Though he is working from a marginalized position and seems to have always kept his art activities largely to himself, Angelo's drawings show such a thorough understanding of the classical problems of composition, perspective, anatomy, light, and space, that it is hard to associate his work with what is usually handed to us under the heading of Outsider Art. Clear and straightforward as some of his work may seem, it also does not function as illustration - for the drawings are never conceived to accompany a story or a text. Angelo certainly could not be more disconnected from the contemporary art scene. He often uses puns in his drawing titles that comment amusingly on the depicted subjects, but his overall intent is not ironic, nor is the kind of critical detachment that is found in so much contemporary art present in his work. Angelo shuns contemporary situations as subject matter. His work is rich with period detail but rarely does a modern feature more recent than the 1950's appear. His children still seem to be derived from the innocent figures that he copied from Boy's Life magazine while trying to learn anatomy. With the exception of occasional incongruous details like a television remote control, or a Rambo poster hanging in a boy's bedroom, depictions of youth seem to come from the artist's youth, rather than the amusements that preoccupy children today.

The nostalgic Norman Rockwell-esque tendencies in some of these drawings are nearly always contaminated by adult sexual tensions and Angelo's quirky sense of humor.

If some works appear to represent the time period of the artist's youth, most images step back much further to the American West, Ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, the Civil War, Aztec culture, and the Mexican Revolution. Angelo almost never references popular culture or current events. His themes are often timeless, but never set in the present. Angelo's primary resource is his memory, which sometimes allows him to remember incidents from various points in his life in photographic detail. Despite, or perhaps because of what little there is to look at in prison, Angelo is able to find additional inspiration in a number of unlikely places. He has made study drawings copied from encyclopedias, National Geographic, history books, magazines, and mail order catalogs. Recently Angelo sent me over 150 pages of these spot illustrations and all of these drawings are included in the exhibit. They are particularly revealing for the range of imagery featured that rarely if ever appears in Angelo's finished work. In addition to the expected drawings of period details, numerous pages are filled with studies of fish, various modes of transportation, animals, and home appliances. Particularly interesting are pages filled with portrait busts of famous figures as diverse as Menachem Begin, Emile Zola, and Salvador Dali.

These studies generally help to fill in small details. Only rarely will a composition or entire drawing be taken from an outside source, and even then, a number of details will be modified and changed. Books he reads sometimes suggest picture ideas as do personal experiences and memories of films seen before he came to prison. Angelo is a huge fan of early silent film, and at one point he owned over 900 comedies and feature films that had been transferred onto 8mm. Angelo does not own a TV and only occasionally watches TV when he is being celled with another inmate that has a set. He expresses no interest in current TV shows, and seems only minimally concerned about current events. From the hundreds of pages of writing Angelo has done about the evolution of individual drawings, it is clear that the act of drawing itself prods his imagination better than anything else. The details that first appear on paper often suggest the rest of the image; a narrative and sense of place emerges, and gradually the page is filled.

Angelo has noted that though he favors military subjects in his art, he actually despises the military itself. Though he has given me almost no information about what he did while serving in the Army during Vietnam, Angelo was in fact drafted, and served from July of 1965 until the summer of 1967. His stated dislike of the military is partly due to the negative effect it had on his art. He writes, "I can't say for sure why, but my enthusiasm for producing art became very erratic after I left the service." Hobbies like films, comic book collecting, model-railroading, and plastic model building, filled the void during this difficult period where he found himself unable to make art.

Angelo decided at the age of four that he wanted to be able to give physical substance to images from his imagination. He said he made this determination when he learned from his uncle, that a painting of a particularly impressive machine depicted in Popular

Science, was in fact an artist's conception and not a truthful representation of a real object. Seeing that it was possible for artists to pull images from their minds in this manner, Angelo decided that this is what he wanted to do. Though he has made art all of his life, I have never seen the work that Angelo made before he went to prison, nor has he mentioned what might have become of anything he made during this time. A watercolor he made in high school won a first place award from the Highland Park Art Guild after Angelo's art teacher entered the work into the contest without his knowledge. No other exhibitions have ever been mentioned and Angelo has always supported himself through another job rather than through any sales of his art. He figured out early on that few artists support themselves from sales of their work so he looked for a job that would require "little in the way of thought and that would allow me as much free time as possible to continue with my artistic aspirations." He followed this course of action by taking a job at the Post Office.

The work of other artists does inspire Angelo and motivate him to work. Though he likes to look at art reproductions, he rarely ever mentions other artists' work and says nothing about what, if anything, he may have seen in museums or galleries before going to prison. He has expressed an early enthusiasm for Maxfield Parrish, and once mentioned that he learned some ideas about color from watching a TV program on Jackson Pollock. Though Angelo dislikes Jacques-Louis David's body of work in general, he retains the highest admiration for his skills. Images by Bosch have provoked positive remarks, as did a postcard and article I sent him on Henry Darger. But none of these figures seem critical in any way to Angelo's ideas about art or the form of his work. Outside influences or criticisms don't ever hold very much sway. For a while Angelo studied painting in prison under the tutelage of an Art Facilitator named Pablo who put him up to making a copy of a work by El Greco. Angelo changed the lower half of that painting, and went on to make six original works (none of which I have seen). While working, Angelo prefers not to deliberately borrow concepts from other artists' work. He writes, "All art is also comprised of a degree of surprise, of accidents, and part of being an artist, I've found, is to have the flexibility to recognize and adjust one's thinking and plans to such moments..." For this reason, the appeal of other artists for Angelo is largely in how they handle compositional and technical problems, rather than how he might emulate their thinking or imagery, or contend with their place in history.

This is the first concentrated exhibit of Angelo's work. In our nine years of writing to each other, Angelo has never requested that I try to sell his work, nor has he even suggested that I try to exhibit it. As far as I know he has not sent his work out to anyone else in an attempt to seek further promotion. He does know that this exhibit is happening and it has been planned with his consideration. He has expressed guarded enthusiasm and has written a great deal of autobiographical material that he thought might be helpful. He has seen an earlier draft of this essay and has offered last-minute corrections to several statements and factual details. Otherwise, Angelo has offered little critical input and made no suggestions about which works might be included in this show. He understands that Temporary Services does not function as a commercial gallery and he has not questioned or challenged this.

Angelo appears to be most content when his head is overflowing with ideas for drawings and he has the energy and ability to realize these images without distraction or interruption. Unlike most inmates Angelo does not accept commissions for drawings or paintings from guards or other inmates. Inmate artists' skills are often desired for greeting card designs, tattoo designs, drawings on envelopes to use as stationary, and portraits of family members adapted from photographs. Angelo gets little satisfaction from these commercial projects, despite the financial rewards they offer. He always turns down these requests. Likewise, he never submits anything to sell to visitors or staff through the prison hobby shop.

This exhibit presents the drawings of a deeply engaging and challenging artist, whose work I have not felt comfortable entrusting to anyone else. The explosion of commercial interest in art world-constructed genres like Self-Taught Art, Outsider Art, and Prison Art has thrust many artists into the public eye with little regard for the instability and delicacy of their living situations. In the interest of categorizing and marketing what these people do, their ideas have often been greatly simplified and accorded minimal respect and consideration. I have tried to deal with Angelo's work on it's own terms, and to respond to the complex issues that it brings to the surface. Far too often, artists are crudely lumped together in the aforementioned categories (as though they are all doing the same thing) to illustrate a broader critical agenda or aesthetic bias, or to assist a base marketing scheme. Too often, galleries, museums, and institutions attempt to promote the "outsider" status of marginalized people, without attempting to fully integrate their work and ideas into the larger creative world in a balanced, respectful, and thoughtful manner. This show attempts to lay initial groundwork so that one can begin to approach and consider Angelo's drawings. In the future, we should start to think about how this work can be integrated into the rest of the world of ideas and images, just as Angelo will have to reintegrate himself into society upon his eventual release from prison.

Angelo doesn't say anything about his plans for the future. Surviving in prison is apparently enough of a challenge for the moment. I half expect that one day we might meet, and I might deliver nearly two decades of his work back to him in a number of large storage boxes. I don't think very much about what will happen then. I'm not sure that he does either.