

Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison, HM Prison Reading, Reading

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Nan Goldin

← *The Boy*, 2016.

Photo : William Eckersley

Doris Salcedo

† *Plegaria Muda*, 2008–2010.

Photo : Marcus J Leith

Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison

It takes roughly three hours to fully absorb and engage with Artangel's most recent project, *Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison*. As indicated by the show's title, the UK-based institution that privileges site-specific, context-oriented exhibitions, has mounted a group exhibition inside HM Prison Reading. The prison, a classic example of Victorian penal architecture, was built in 1844 and continued to function as a working prison until it was decommissioned in 2013—by which point its capacity had, purportedly, tripled. Site, context, and—perhaps most poignantly—temporality (past and present), here weighs heavy. Looming over the prison is the shadow of its most famous inmate, Oscar Wilde, who was imprisoned from May 1985 to May 1987, on charges of sodomy and gross indecency with men. Prisoners were kept in solitary confinement and forced to wear hoods when in public; hard labour involved turning barrels of rocks with a crank, and separating the tarred fibre scraps of old navy ropes: hence the phrase, “money for old rope.”

There is a discomfiting contradiction at the heart of the show, whose works at times awkwardly straddle romantic ideologies of creative confinement and the punitive banality that resonates in the reality of the physical space. In Wilde's cell on the third floor, C33, his books are displayed alongside vases of carnations. It is here that Wilde wrote the famous prose poem to his erstwhile lover Bosie, entitled “De Profundis”—from the depths, in deep honesty. Readings of the letter in its entirety have taken place during the course of the exhibition, by guests such as Patti Smith, Ben Whishaw, and Colm Tóibín.

Works of art similarly respond to notions of *de profundis*: Vija Celmins' tender drawings of starry skies, Roni Horn's images of the coursing Thames, Wolfgang Tillmans' blurred mirror portraits. Works by Marlene Dumas, Nan Goldin, and Richard Hamilton populate some of the cells with figures

and faces. Overwhelmingly, however, the sprawling confines, once crammed with three inmates per cell, are deafening in their emptiness. It is difficult to feel that the works, though in many cases elegant reflections, are as incisive as the marks left behind by actual prisoners: graffiti, scuff marks, “room service” written above a cell's emergency call button. In other cases, works by Doris Salcedo and Robert Gober surprise with a visceral sense of vivid, if constrained life: a series of coffin-like tables sprout grass, and a wooden chest reveals a burbling stream flowing over a woman's clothed torso. A series of epistolary commissions by, amongst others, Ai Wei Wei, Deborah Levy, and Danny Morrison are a more nuanced and evocative set of tributes to lived, often personal, experiences of imprisonment.

Leaving the prison, no longer “inside,” the day is once more and immediately ordinary, spacious, and full of noise. One wonders if three hours and an admission fee is enough of an investment to purchase a piece of this place and its lived histories, and if so, why the sinking feeling of being a voyeur, why wonder if it would be as interesting to visit if you didn't have the choice to leave?

Emily LaBarge

HM Prison Reading, Reading
September 4—December 4, 2016