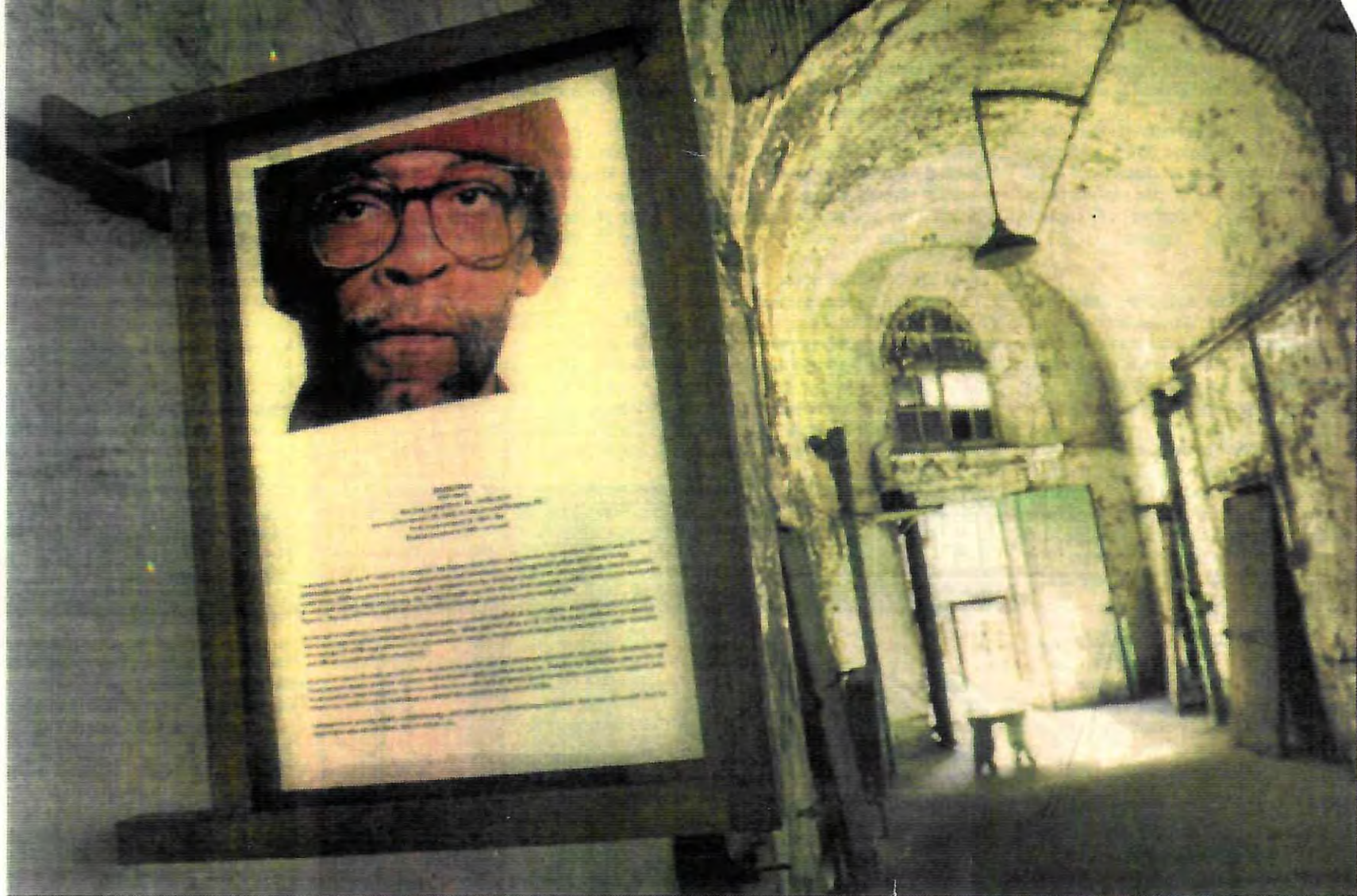


# Magazine

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## Art of survival



PETER TOBIA / Inquirer Staff Photographer

"My cell is the only world where I can escape," says Gerald Mayo, whose picture is posted at Eastern State Penitentiary, one of the four exhibition sites.

*Inmates at Graterford Prison have learned from artists how to escape into creativity. Their works, in diverse media, tell stories of "Unimaginable Isolation."*

By Stephan Salisbury  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**G**erald Mayo first entered a cell at Eastern State Penitentiary at the age of 18, shortly before the historic prison on Fairmount Avenue shut down in 1970.

Mayo freely acknowledges that he did not like being hassled — an attitude that led to numerous scrapes with police and juvenile authorities and finally landed him at Eastern with a one-to-six-year sentence for what began as a disturbing-the-peace complaint and ended with assault and resisting arrest.

Once inside, that relatively short sentence blossomed with numerous fights and acts of defiance; Mayo's one-to-six grew into a grinding 35 to 99 years, largely spent in isolation at Graterford Prison.

Now 53 and still an inmate at Graterford, Mayo has returned to Eastern, in a sense — this time through the medium of art. A group of long-time Graterford prisoners, working with artists associated with the Village of Arts and Humanities, a North Philadelphia community organization, have created self-portraits, installations, monologues, videos, story quilts and poetry. Their works are being presented at four venues throughout the city under the collective title "Unimaginable Isolation: Stories From Graterford."

An exhibition of paintings and installations at the Painted Bride Art Center, 230 Vine St., opened Friday and runs through Oct. 20; a collection of writings, masks and small drawings will be on view at the Village Gallery, 2544 Germantown Ave., from Monday to Oct. 31; an exhibition of banners and story quilts will open at the Great Hall of the University of the Arts, Broad and Pine Streets, on Saturday and will remain through Oct. 15; and a public forum, including discussion of prisons and the victims of violent crime, and featuring performances by Village young people based on material created by Graterford inmates, will be held at the University of the Arts on Sept. 25.

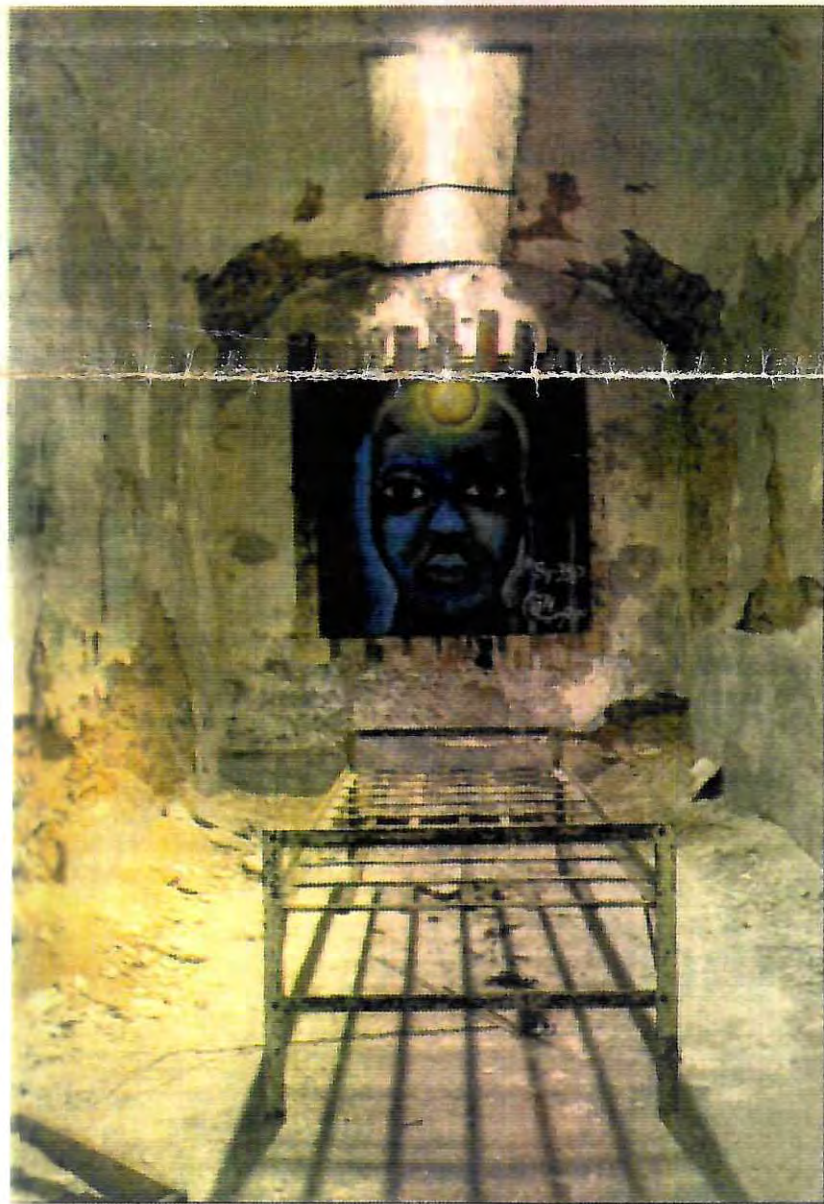
At Eastern, the show went up in May and will run through Nov. 4. (Eastern also features a separate installation, "Arrest," by Ilan Sandler, which addresses the murder of his sister.)

And Mayo is there, back after 30 years. His large collaged self-portrait — set on the back wall of a small, crumbling cell on Block Eight — features a blown-up mug shot of himself, a teenager with smooth, dark-chocolate skin, close-cropped hair, large penetrating eyes. A photograph of Mayo now, three decades of prison later, is affixed to the outside door — bespectacled, gray-flecked beard, red watch cap.

Between the contemporary photo of Mayo and the mug shot from 1968 lies the length of a cell, paint peeling and bubbling as though burned from the walls, and drifts of crumbled plaster and cement on the floor — burial mounds for the cell's stories.

"I try to tell via my poems how, for me at the age of 18 being sent first to Eastern Pen and then to Graterford, my fate was sealed," Mayo recently wrote in a letter. "For a person that never committed a robbery, rape, murder or other 'traditional crime' against society, my cell is the only world where I can escape. ... I've been painting, writing poetry, plays and other things since teenage years. It's my way of staying in touch with myself and the way I feel about things in my life."

For Lily Yeh, founder of the Village, the exhibitions represent the fruit of a feeling born years ago



In a crumbling cell at Eastern State Penitentiary is the artwork of Antonio X. Howard, a Graterford lifer. Inmate art will also be displayed at the Painted Bride Art Center, the Village Gallery, and the University of the Arts.



# Graterford inmates enter realm of art to tell their stories

**GRATERFORD** from D1  
North Philadelphia neighborhood where the Village is located.

Almost every story mentioned prison. Almost every family had someone locked up, or just let out, or just about to go in. Yet no one spoke about the link between Germantown Avenue and Graterford or Holmesburg Prison or the Youth Study Center. No one spoke about the reality of prison or the shadow prison casts over streets and homes.

"The stories were unspoken," Yeh said the other day. "It's important for us to hear their stories. The inmates are people who love. They regret or they don't regret. They feel. ... I want the story to be told. I want people to hold the story."

The connections between family, community and the world of prison can be found everywhere in the inmates' work. William "Sonny" Gravely, 55, in prison for 26 years, remembers spending long days as a child on the beach with his mother. He remembers going to the movies with her, to parks and playgrounds.

But his father is remembered as an absence. He was incarcerated. Gravely is incarcerated. Now Gravely's son is in jail, too.

"I repeated what my father did, and my son is repeating what I did," Gravely says in taped recollections that accompany his portrait at Eastern. In one vivid memory, delivered in an offhand manner, Gravely recalls being imprisoned at Holmesburg many years ago. While doing clerical work, he says, "I found my father's file."

"How to break the cycle," he wonders.

Yeh first went to Graterford in 1998 and began regular weekly workshops well over a year ago. Joining her were H. German Wilson, who oversees the Village theater program; Gerry

## If You Go

- Exhibition at Painted Bride Art Center, 230 Vine St., runs through Oct. 20. Information: 215-925-9914.

- Exhibition at the Village Gallery, 2544 Germantown Ave., is open through Oct. 31. Information: 215-225-3949.

- A show of banners and story quilts opens at the Great Hall of the University of the Arts, Broad and Pine Streets, Saturday and runs through Oct. 15. A public forum will be held at the University of the Arts on Sept. 25.

Information:  
1-800-616-2787.

- The show at Eastern State Penitentiary runs through Nov. 4. Information: 215-236-3300.

Givnish, painter and founder of the Painted Bride; and Glenn Holsten, a video artist. They worked with about a dozen inmates, mostly lifers, creating performance and visual works. (Deborah Maxton and Tom Beckett assisted in preparing the work for presentation in the exhibitions.)

"At the beginning, to the inmates, I was an odd sort of person," Yeh said. "I don't do conventional things. I don't tell them how to do pictures." She wanted them "to tell their story in a fresh way," she said. "Whatever they feel — their anger, their rage, their grief needed to be told."

She told the inmates that "the energy you use to create is already inside," and the key was to "find a way to get that energy out."

"I let myself go into the visions of Lily," inmate Trevor Mattis recently wrote in a letter. "The first project was a life-



PETER TOBIA / Inquirer Staff Photographer

"Their anger, their rage, their grief needed to be told," says Lily Yeh, founder of the Village of Arts and Humanities, shown above at the Painted Bride. Below, Clarence Odem's artwork at Eastern Pen.



size, body-outline banner. Lily gave us the concept and then told us to let your inner spirit be your guide. That was our only guidance, and that is what I did. I let my inner self create. The result was growth as a person. When I started the program, I was not an artist, and I'm still not an artist, but I grew. I incar-

nated my true being in paint, and that, my friend, is a wonderful accomplishment."

Muti Ajamu-Osagboro, 38, says that "having a voice is essential, and that's what art does — gives you a forum to be heard, seen, touched. ... This is why meeting Lily, Gerry, Glenn and German has been a god-

send."

Luis Gonzalez, who hails from the North Philadelphia neighborhood near the Village, says simply: "My life has been transformed" by the project.

"All my art and poems and video interviews are true and real about my life," wrote Jerome "Jabbaar" Boyd in a recent letter. "And the best way to learn about me is to talk to Lily and see my taped interviews. Even if I die here in prison (which is a good possibility), you can still find out about me."

Yeh believes such stories are the essence of art and humanity.

"I remember one time they asked me, 'Where are we going?'" she recalled. "I just said, 'I came here because your voice, your story beckoned to me, and I had to be here. I just hope we can travel to a place we've never been before.' And now they say, 'Yes. With Miss Lily we have traveled someplace we have never been.'"

"That's my greatest satisfaction. Not the exhibitions. It's an inner journey."

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