

Cover: *Carol*, by Persimmon Blackbridge and Michelle Kanashiro-Christiansen; photo: Susan Stewart.

Doing Time

Doing Time is a collaborative art work with sculpture by Persimmon Blackbridge and texts by Michelle Kanashiro-Christiansen, Geri Ferguson, Lyn MacDonald and Bea Walkus. The sculptures are twenty-five life-size cast paper figures on a maze of tall grey walls. The texts, which are written on the walls, are firsthand accounts of life in prison, and the conditions outside that send women to prison.

Cover: Carol

My friend Carol was a beautiful native woman. We'd both been working the street for a long time. She had a kid, living up North. She worked hard to support him and on his birthday, she'd work extra hard, and she'd buy him all these presents. Then she was killed by a trick.

When they found her dead, I was out of town at my mom's. Someone phoned and told me and I just cried. When I lost my kids, I swore I'd never let anybody make me cry again and they didn't for 7 years. But when Carol died, I broke down and cried. My mother was gonna give me valiums, here take a valium, it'll make you feel better. But I just cried harder. My mother couldn't understand. To her, hookers aren't real people. It's like they're disposable. I told her, look mom, I'm a prostitute too but if I died, you'd mourn. But she didn't want to hear it. It was too scary for her to think about.

Michelle Kanashiro-Christiansen



Occupational Hazard (close-up), by Persimmon Blackbridge and Michelle Kanashiro-Christiansen; photo: Susan Stewart.

1. Occupational Hazard

We're not out to hurt anybody. We're just making our money and doing our business. When I was on the street, I could watch a soap opera and turn a trick at the same time. I remember before, the cops didn't harass you as much and you had more rights. But with this new law, everybody's all moralistic. Like my friend Cat, when she tried to report a bad trick, the prosecutor told her it was just an occupational hazard. She was sexually assaulted with a crow bar. But it's just an occupational hazard. Sure, tell me about it. And Carol, my best friend Carol. She was killed. They kicked us out of the West End, out to where there's not so many lights and people. We're out of sight, now, nice and tidy. 21 of us have been killed in this town since then, 21 women in 3 years. They're never going to find Carol's murderer. They never found Nicky's murderer. They never found the Green River murderer. These men are killing my friends. But who cares, you know, they're only prostitutes.

Michelle Kanashiro-Christiansen



Time (close-up), by Persimmon Blackbridge and Geri Ferguson;
photo: Susan Stewart.

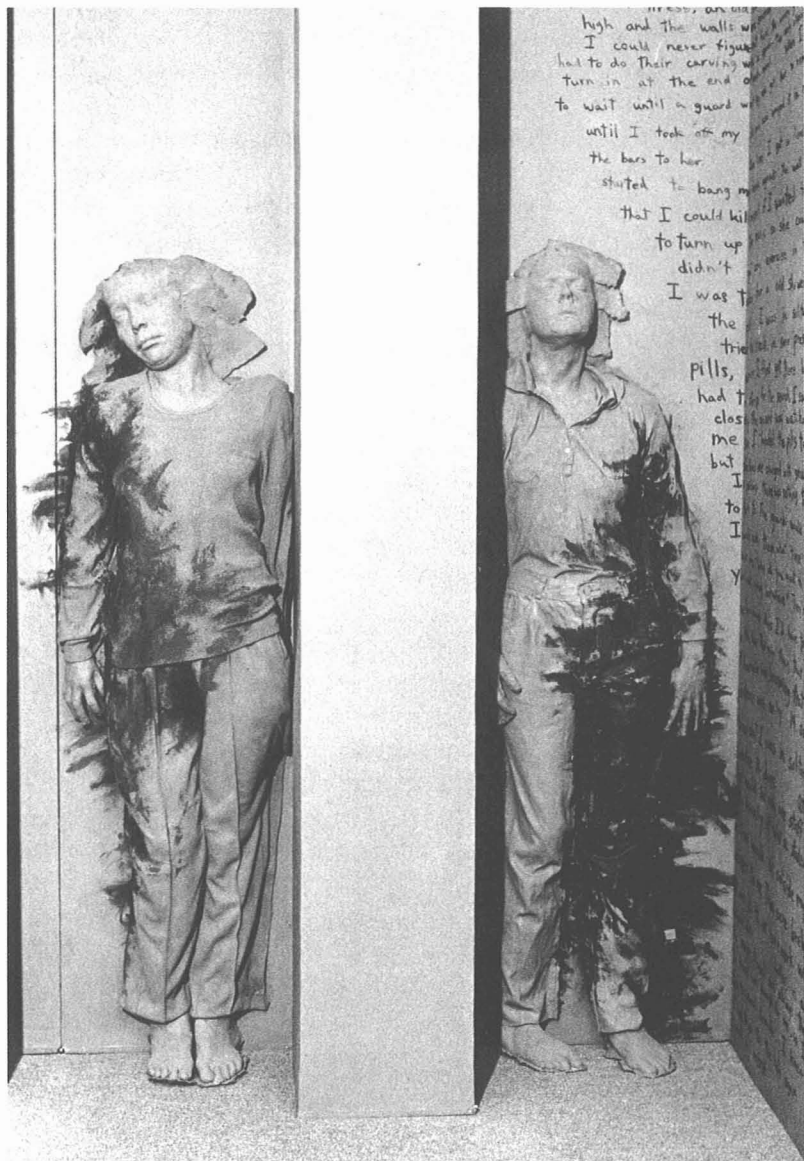
2. Time

To the average person two or three months time does not seem like a very long time. You can usually find lots of things to do and not think of three months as lots of seconds and drawn out hours and a day passing seems like a month. In prison, time is your worst enemy. Parts of my life feel like I've been unconscious for years. I learnt how to close up and pretend I never saw another woman's pain. I have laid awake all night in prison trying to tell myself I will recover when they let me out, but maybe I won't. I can't breathe in here. The air is always smoky and it smells of years of decaying flesh. What kind of a person am I to survive this?

Every day is the same in this concrete dumpster. I try to think of ways to wash the floor differently, or how can I have counted all the cracks in the walls. Every day we go to the same dining room, the same faces look at you and the guards watch you eat. I can't pretend I'm at a sushi bar. Should I eat every last morsel on my plate? Everything is the same every day. Lights out at 10:30. A guard coming in to say good fucking morning asshole at 7:30. You go get the same cup of coffee and you know who will be sitting in the day room. The same record will be playing the same song and some prisoner will say, 'I like this song because it picks me up and gets me going.' Going where? I want to smash that record if I hear it one more time.

The one thing I get to do on my own, any time between 7:30 and 10:30, is have a shower or bath. It's the only bit of responsibility, should I have a shower or bath? But that might not last, because women have slashed in that nice hot water. When someone slashes and lives through it sometimes you wish they would have succeeded in killing themselves. You know the pain they feel, the frustration of being the same every day. Your mind begins to deteriorate, living becomes meaningless, your dreams are empty of everything but self-pity, and you ask yourself for a way to escape.

Gerri Ferguson



Solitary, by Persimmon Blackbridge and Lyn MacDonald;
photo: Susan Stewart.

3. *Solitary*

Solitary confinement was in a cell about 8 feet by 10 feet with bars along the front. It had a single steel bunk with a rubber-coated mattress, a toilet and a light on all the time. The ceiling was pretty high and it was scarred with old graffiti all the way up to the top. I never figured out how the women got up that high. And they must have written it with a spoon – which was the only utensil we got, and we had to turn in at the end of each meal. Once a day I was taken for a cold shower, then back to the cell. When I had my period, I had to wait till a guard went by and get her to bring me a pad. Then she would wait while I took off my old pad and wrapped it in newspapers and squeezed it through the bars. One time I got so lonely and fucked up that I started to bang my head against the wall and yell. A guard told me that I could kill myself if I wanted to but she was just going to turn up the music so she couldn't hear me. I was in solitary because I tried to sneak in some prescription sleeping pills for my insomnia, when I first got there. When I had to strip for the search, I saw how closely the guard was watching so I handed the pills to her, but she had me charged with smuggling anyway. In solitary, the guards would go by and I would ask them what time it was and they would say, 'Why do you want to know, you're not going anywhere.' They never told me how many days I'd have to do in the hole. The only thing that made it at all bearable was knowing that my entire sentence was only 14 days. I was in solitary for the entire 14 days. At night there would be only one staff person on duty. Usually it was a student. Some of them would sit outside my cell and whisper to me. They would let me do their homework with them. It helped a lot. Later, in another jail, the major threat was always the hole. I never gave them too much trouble. I know if I had to go to the hole again, I would kill myself.

Lyn MacDonald