

ART

# At Tufts, ‘Walls Turned Sideways’ exhibition takes a harrowing look at criminal justice

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 26, 2020, 8:37 p.m.



Martin Wong's "Cell Door Slot," from 1986. COURTESY COLLECTION ADAM PUTNAM

MEDFORD — Trevor Paglen’s “Color Study (San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA)” is one of the first things you see at “Walls Turned Sideways: Artists Confront the Justice System” at Tufts University Art Galleries. It’s a photograph of the darkening sky above the infamous jail, though the building itself is nowhere to be seen. Fiery yellow shades to soft ochre and then black, bottom to top. Intentionally or not, its title is a

double-entendre that lurches suddenly from abstract to sharply drawn. A few steps away, 1999's "Youth Police Workshop" video by Suzanne Lacy, Julio Morales, and Unique Holland captures Oakland teens — almost all Black and Latino — in a flinty conversation with local officers about what they see as systemic, racially-motivated harassment. Blacks and Hispanics constituted 56 percent of the US prison population in 2017, according to the [Pew Research Center](#). This hardly seems like a coincidence.

To be clear, "Walls Turned Sideways" isn't explicitly about race. But really, how could it not be? Paglen's work, here and broadly, is largely about landscapes and human interventions within them; prisons, for him, epitomize the human urge toward control, and fair enough. But race is built into any conversation about criminal justice. It would be like talking about marine biology and leaving out the ocean.



A view of "Walls Turned Sideways: Artists Confront the Justice System" at Tufts University Art Galleries. Trevor Paglen's "Color Study (San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA)" is on the right. TUFTS UNIVERSITY ART GALLERIES

"Walls Turned Sideways," to its credit, toggles quickly between the oblique and suggestive (Paglen) and the bluntly distressing ("Youth Police Workshop") over dozens of works, coalescing a harrowing view into a world most of us never see.

Even so, criminal justice reform has evolved into one of the few issues with bipartisan support, rare as a snowflake in June. Much talked about in the Democratic primaries, it's

sure to be a keystone in the upcoming presidential election.

It would have been easy enough for curator Risa Puleo to simply hammer it home, capitalizing on a flashpoint in an election season growing more divisive, and more urgent, by the day. Instead, Puleo's frame is broad, her view deeply historic. An independent curator who started working on the show in 2013 for the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (it opened there in 2018 before coming here), she had started to see criminal justice, and prisons in particular, in the context of other colonial institutions — zoos, libraries, universities, hospitals, and of course museums.



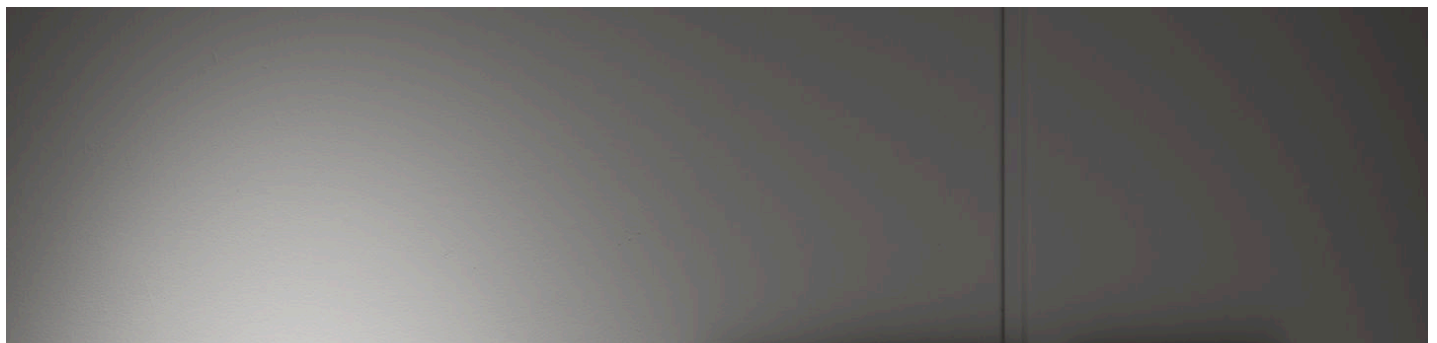
Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick's "Ditch Digging," from 1980. 1996-98 ACCUSOFT INC., ALL RIGHTS RESERVED/COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

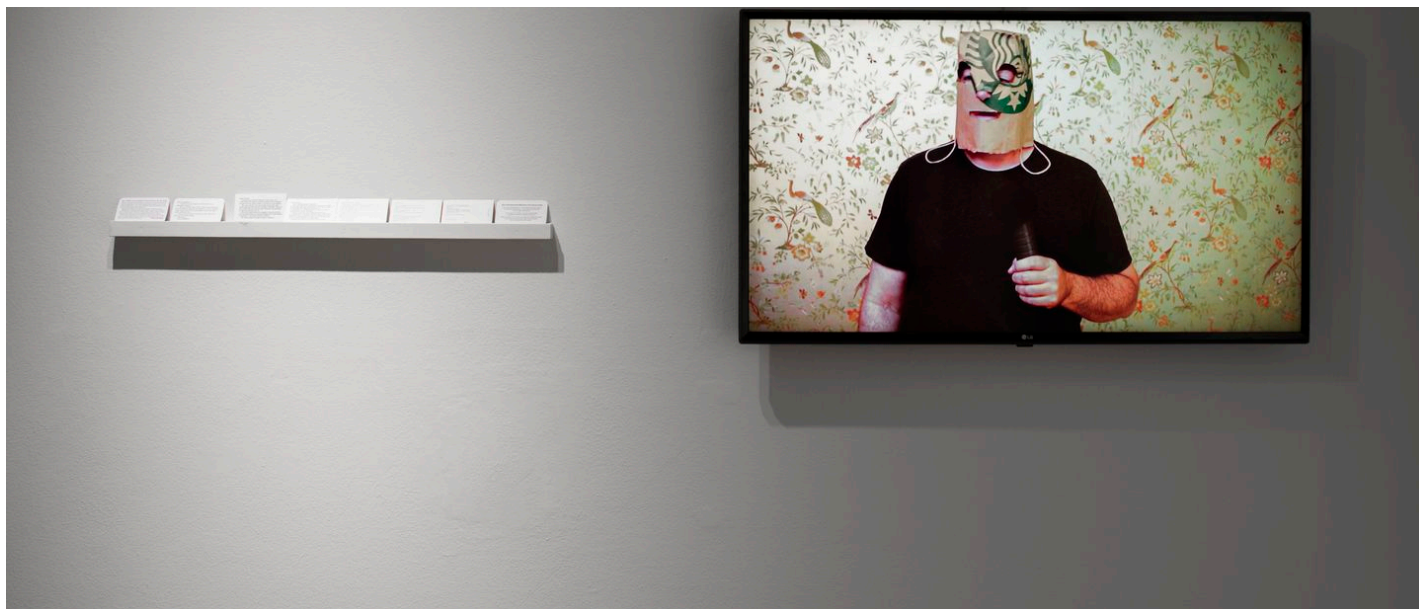
She makes a compelling argument in the accompanying book, equating incarceration with colonial practices like human zoos and rampant theft by universities and museums of cultural icons and human remains from conquered cultures. But I don't know if her point quite translates to the exhibition space (Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia's video "The

Couple in a Cage: Guatinaui Odyssey” made sense in the book, but not so much in the gallery; the two artists appeared in giant cages in public places like malls, presenting themselves as members of a fictional South Pacific tribe).

What does ring clear in the galleries is the harrowing experience of being targeted by a system more mechanical than human, whose programming is hardwired to target some more than others. It bears repeating: In America, any art about crime and punishment (a surprisingly rich subgenre) is about race. Puleo goes to lengths to leaven the inevitable tilting-at-windmills futility the endeavor might suggest. The show was inspired partly by a group of artist-activists who successfully campaigned for the closure of the notorious Tamms “Supermax” prison in Illinois; because of it, “Walls Turned Sideways” weaves art and life in equal measure, integrating more obvious works like sculpture and photography with what the art world has come to call “social practice” — artists, like the Tamms activist group, intervening in real world situations for potential social change.

These can be illuminating, like the youth workshops, or they can be deeply chilling, like a series of video documentations by Laurie Jo Reynolds called “True Person of No Status,” featuring ex-cons who are forced to register in their hometowns, including sex offenders, as they face an audience and describe their crimes. (I watched one where an actor performed a stand-up comedy routine with a paper bag over his head, in the role of a man with past sex offense convictions. It unnerved me to the point of near-panic.)





Laurie Jo Reynolds's "True Person of No Status." PETER HARRIS/TUFTS UNIVERSITY ART GALLERIES

So consider this a warning: “Walls Turned Sideways” is not, as the saying goes, dancing about architecture — clever, but ultimately useless. It’s uncomfortable, disarming and, I’ll also add, necessary. It’s as much about museums as incarceration; in this sunny moment of inclusion, where museums attempt to recast their missions across the spectrum of race and class, the past doesn’t just go away. “Walls Turned Sideways” inserts into the conversation things nobody wants to talk about, which is what makes it so vital.

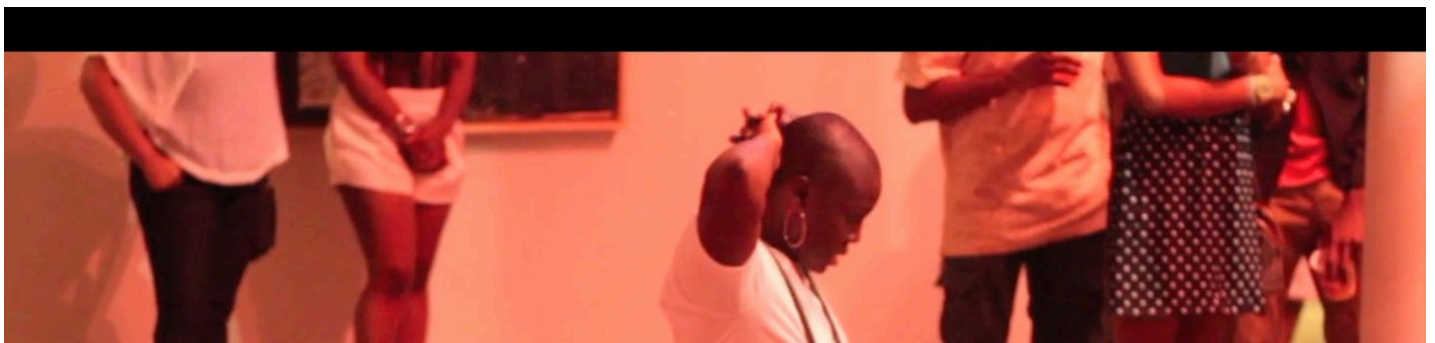
Even so, the show doesn’t forget that it’s *in* an art museum, and it’s the interplay between art and reality that gives it power. Chris Burden, best-known for self-punishment in a 1960s performance series (Burden famously made a video of himself being shot with a handgun in the arm) presents a nearly 8-foot-tall LAPD uniform pinned to the wall, service revolver and all (an exhibition note lets you know the gun has been rendered nonfunctional). Burden made it after the race riots in Los Angeles, prompted by not-guilty verdicts for the officers who beat Rodney King, a Black man, nearly to death. Its

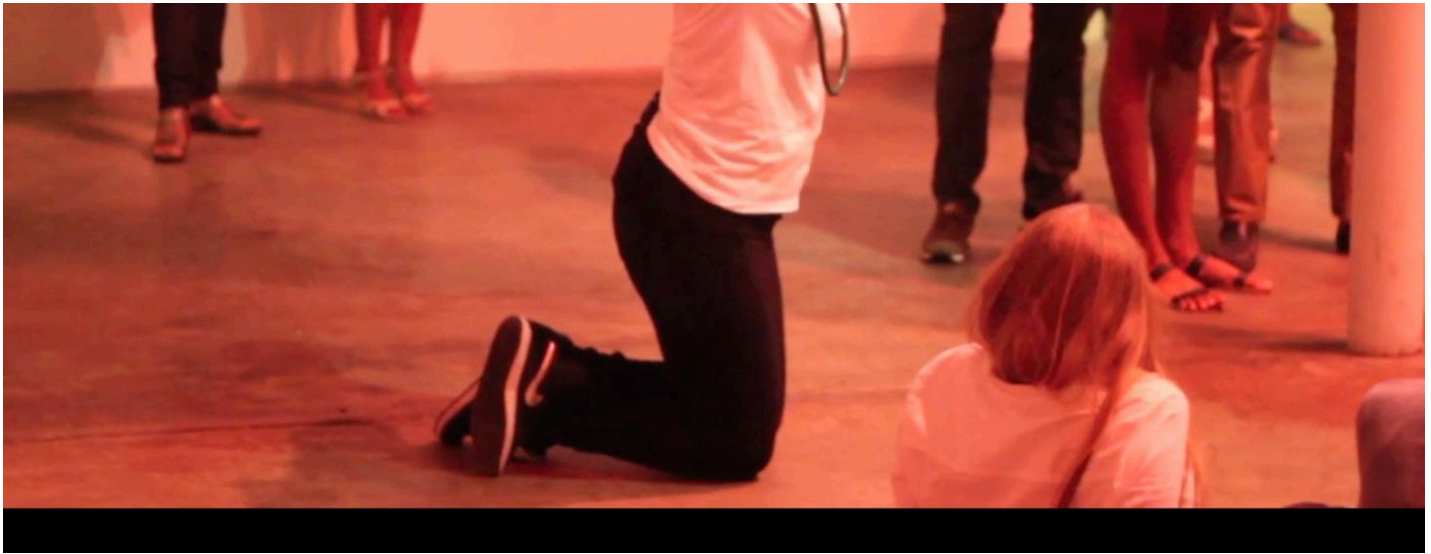
scale says something, I think, not only about the disproportionate power of authority, but its inhuman application.

Carl Pope’s “From the Trophy Collection of the Indianapolis Police Department and the Office of the Marion County Sheriff’s Office” is a masterwork of restrained terror. Made in 1992, it’s a collection of 24 chintzy sports trophies and plaques engraved with the

names of officers and the Black men each of them killed between 1980 and 1990. All were exonerated — perhaps no surprise — though Pope’s work links killer and victim in a perpetual, morbid awards ceremony. It’s a memorial for the dead, a condemnation of the living, and an indictment for society: Cheap trinkets as symbols of undervalued lives cut short, and the celebratory relief of beating the rap.

The real-world intrusion can at times be discordant and withering to more delicate works (Shaun Leonardo’s “The Eulogy,” a video of people in finery reading a re-scripted version of Ralph Ellison’s funeral speech from “The Invisible Man” that includes the names of young Black men killed by police is one of those). But most are made of sterner stuff. That’s not to say it’s universally punishing. Poetic grace, in fact, is one of the things that makes “Walls Turned Sideways” work.





Autumn Knight's "Do Not Leave Me" video, from 2013. ROBERT PRUITT/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Nowhere is that more true than in Autumn Knight's performance "Do Not Leave Me," from 2013. In it, Knight, a Black woman with closely-shorn hair, strolls breezily around the crowd at a Houston gallery, smiling broadly, a handgun tucked in the back of her jeans. She throws an arm around one person, a casual embrace; she hugs another tight. Nina Simone's "Ne Me Quitte Pas," a devastating version of the Jacques Brel original, plays in the background. It becomes clear Knight is saying goodbye.

As the song winds down, Knight takes a few steps back, raises her arms in the air, and drops to her knees with her hands on her head: She's assumed the position. Then she falls to the floor, face down, and surrenders the gun before rising to retreat. It's strange and beautiful; tense, but warm and humane, then suddenly alarming, reductive, and bleak. There's a lesson there, somehow, about not seeing things in black and white, but shades of gray. Is that so much to hope for? It shouldn't be.

## **WALLS TURNED SIDEWAYS: ARTISTS CONFRONT THE JUSTICE SYSTEM**

At Tufts University Art Galleries through April 19. 40 Talbot Ave., Medford. 617-627-3518, [artgalleries.tufts.edu](http://artgalleries.tufts.edu)

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