

CARCERAL REFLECTIONS

Jean-Paul Sartre once recounted this haunting parable from Kafka: “A merchant goes to plead his case at the castle. A terrible guard blocks his entry. The merchant does not dare go past him, he waits, and dies waiting. At the hour of his death, he asks the guard: ‘How come I was the only one waiting?’ And the guard responds: ‘This door was only made for you.’”

What does that door look like? Cell 43? A wedding gown? A computer terminal? Black leather?



Virgil Marti, *For Oscar Wilde* (1995)

Live sunflowers, ceramic plaque, silk lilies, handprinted wallpapers (pigment on paper-backed cotton sateen), cotton velveteen, iron bed.

Documentation of an installation at Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia.

Overall dimensions: variable.
Cell dimensions: 106" H x 96" W x 216" D

In the final chapter of *Discipline and Punish*, the one titled *Le carcéral*, Michel Foucault locates the date of completion of the carceral. January 22, 1840. The official opening of Mettray, a juvenile prison *qua* home, school, military compound, courthouse, and factory—what Foucault brilliantly referred to as “the first training college in pure discipline” or “the carceral archipelago.” Why Mettray? Because it combined a range of disciplinary clusters, replicating authority, the big brother, inspection, the military, supervision, the factory foreman, examination, the school teacher, punishment, the judge. Because it deployed all the coercive technologies on human behavior. The modern carceral system is premised on the idea that subjects need to be trained in order to be improved.

The virtual art exhibit for the *Carceral Notebooks* explores this space zoned carceral—this extended sphere of normalization, these tentacles of social control, this ideal of discipline. It explores our strong desire—and our uncanny ability—to shape the other, to normalize her, to exploit him, but also our powerful resistance to that very exploitation.



Mia Ruyter, *Wedding Dress #1* (2005)
Color photograph
18 x 12 inch print on 16 x 20 inch paper

The virtual art exhibit, which you can visit on the web at <http://www.thecarceral.org/artexhibits.html>, is both ode and eulogy to the carceral and to our resistance to it.

Virgil Marti, in his installation and photographs, creates a sanctuary for Oscar Wilde in the Eastern State Penitentiary. Wilde, an intensely aesthetically sensitive person, was imprisoned for his sexual preference and forced to live the most abject of existences. The contrast between pleasure and degradation heightens sensitivity and made his punishment torture. Silk lilies and transcendental light prove the impossibility of extinguishing the instinct for pleasure. The decay of the walls and the luxury of the flowers—the flowers should smell exquisite, but they were silk, not real. Sexuality is both corporal and virtual—sex is never free from power, from psychic forces. It is also where we struggle in our psyche between human enlightenment and the meanest level of instinct. Silk flowers and decaying walls. Wilde was locked for and in desire.



Virgil Marti,
For Oscar Wilde (1995)
Documentation of an installation
at Eastern State Penitentiary,
Philadelphia.

For *Oscar Wilde* was made to commemorate the centennial of Wilde's trial and imprisonment. The installation was designed as a series of tableaux with increasing degrees of abstraction, in accord with Wilde's ideas about the superiority of the artificial over the natural. Wilde spoke of the sunflower and lily as being the natural forms best suited to design; so the viewer moved from a patch of live sunflowers growing outside, to a field of silk lilies in the cellblock, to a cell wallpapered with those motifs. Ironically, the design of Eastern State Penitentiary somewhat resembles a flower.

I have no first-hand experience of prison, so I felt it would have been offensive to conjecture what that would be like. However, I did always find Eastern State very beautiful. What does it mean to have an intense aesthetic experience in such an awful place? This seems related to the terrible irony of Wilde's life—preaching aestheticism as beyond conventional morality and ending up in prison.

Rather than rely solely on the poetics of decay in the penitentiary, I chose to insert something new and pristine in jarring contrast with the surroundings.

Wilde wrote, in letters from prison, that he found the white walls to be one of the most dehumanizing aspects. In an attempt to redress this complaint, I refurbished a cell for him and wallpapered it. Wilde's association with wallpaper is best-known through his alleged deathbed quote:† “My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go.” While researching, I came across another: “Modern wallpaper is so bad, that a boy brought up under its influence could allege it as a justification for turning to a life of crime.”

—*Virgil Marti*

Mia Ruyter, in her photographs and wedding-dress installation, offers another glimpse of the carceral. Notice how the pieces of the dress themselves, the separate structures, do not do any work, alone. A suit case contains all the parts. Undone, undressed, they go together neatly in little piles. Here the laces. There the pearls. The swaths of fabric. When organized in these proper categories, they are powerless. Just a bunch of things—lace, pearls. Strips of fabric. But when we reshuffle the elementary structures and reconstruct the dress, they become so powerful, so loaded with meaning. Where do the symbolic dimensions come from? Why do we create this control over ourselves?

How do we maintain control over our lives? Why do we lock ourselves in? Why do we seek so desperately to control the future?



Mia Ruyter
Wedding Couple #1, 2005
Color photo, 12x18 inch print on 16x20 inch paper, edition of 5



Mia Ruyter
Wedding Couple #2, 2005
Color photo, 12x18 inch print on 16x20 inch paper, edition of 5



Mia Ruyter
Wedding Dress #4, 2005
Color photo, 12x18 inch print on 16x20 inch paper, edition of 5

I found a wedding dress in a thrift store. I was struck by the strangeness of a wedding dress for sale at the Salvation Army. I wondered who wore it, what happened to the relationship. I went home, but couldn't get it out of my mind. I had to go back and buy it.

I hung it up in my studio and looked at it. I took pictures of it. The dress had a very powerful aura. It was beautifully constructed, with layers of lace and pearls and sequins and ruffles and bows. It was a princess dress. I took pictures of the details, and the insides, trying to understand the power of this fetishistic object. I put it on and took pictures.

And then I decided to deconstruct it—literally. I invited a bunch of friends over and served them champagne and seam rippers. We sat in a circle around the dress, removing the lace from the hem, ripping out the seams at the waistband, detaching the skirt and the sleeves from the bodice. It was remarkably well made. The seams were sewn three and four times. And it was remarkable how scary it was to rip out the seams—as if we were breaking a law.

Weddings are rituals of social recognition of a committed relationship. Weddings are legal contracts between two people and the government. Weddings mark the assimilation of a relationship into socially formalized system. Weddings are erotically charged. A wedding is a business arrangement between two people or two families. Weddings are spectacles and massive consumer events. Weddings have unforeseen consequences. Weddings require couples to pretend that they are sure of the future. Weddings are the messy mixing of emotions and legal contracts.

Luis Buñuel once said that “Sex without religion is like cooking an egg without salt. Sin gives more chances to desire.” Does the blessing of the church or the approval of the law shape the romantic relationship? Does it change it? Make it stronger? Does it steal from the passion or does it give more chance to desire?

-Mia Ruyter

Sara Black, in her performance, hauntingly reproduces the feel of being locked in. Is there more desire, more tension, because of the enforced separation? The tension between the lovers, the space between them, the moment when the two are about to embrace, may be the most passionate of all. Before the power struggle is truly engaged, before the two bodies confront the realities of giving and taking pleasure.



Sara Black, *Untitled* (2001)
Mixed Media
Documentation of a performance at the Foster Gallery,
University of Wisconsin
Dimensions: 9 x 4 x 25 ‘



More happy love! More happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

– John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819).

Are they suspended in time? Are they in pain? Are they longing? Or trapped in a relationship? Locked in? Powerful—or powerless?

Slavoj Zizek suggests that if we define the rules of ‘proper’ sexual rapport in which partners should indulge in sex only on account of their mutual, purely sexual, attraction—excluding any ‘pathological’ factors (power, financial coercion, etc.)—we may lose the sexual attraction itself. If we subtract from sexual rapport the element of ‘asexual’ coercion—financial? physical?—which only distorts ‘pure’ sexual attraction, we may lose the charge. “The very element which seems to bias and corrupt pure sexual rapport,” Zizek suggests, “may function as the very phantasmic support of sexual attraction—in a way, sex as such *is* pathological.”

The lovers performing this about-to-happen moment are experiencing bliss and anguish. Or pain. We, the spectators, have a different experience. Our pleasure comes from watching, from thinking. From the empathetic experience. We experience the bliss or anguish or pain vicariously, an experience that is dull in comparison to theirs. The representation depends on this remove from actual experience.

“What does it mean,” Virgil Marti asks, “to have an intense aesthetic experience in such an awful place?”

–*Bernard E. Harcourt*
Hyde Park, Chicago