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Jeanine Oleson and Photo Requests from Solitary

NOVEMBER 30, 2016 – BY MIA LEWIS, COMMUNICATIONS INTERN

New York-based artist Jeanine Oleson has worked through multidisciplinary processes this fall at the Hammer as part of *In Real Life*, and as artist-in-residence for the 2016/2017 year, will debut new work in May with a Hammer Projects exhibition. Using photography, film, performance,

In 2013, Oleson joined Laurie Jo Reynolds and Jean Casella as part of a project called [Photo Requests From Solitary](#), which began as an initiative to support efforts against the inhumane conditions implemented in prisons across the United States. Individuals held in solitary confinement units or supermax prisons were invited to request an image of “anything at all, real or imagined,” and these requests were fulfilled by artists who reinvented places, people, dreams, and memories.

We asked Jeanine about her involvement in this project and its larger goals and implications to promote visibility and activism within the community. Read on to learn how you and other artists can contribute and join the conversation.



PHOTOGRAPH FOR YOU

Date: JULY 22, 2013

Would you like to request one?

If so, fill out this form and describe a photograph you personally would like to receive.
A volunteer will make a photograph based on your description below.

You may request a photograph of anything (that is not prohibited by prison rules, of course).
In the space below, please describe what you would like to see in your photograph. (You could describe a person, place, object, scene or idea.)

I WOULD LIKE A PHOTOGRAPH OF "LIBERATION". DESCRIPTION:

ME BEING RELEASED FROM PRISON (e.g. "THE S.H.U.") AFTER 20 YEARS (e.g. "1994 TO 2013") BEING ABLE TO HOLD/TOUCH ANOTHER HUMAN BEING, WHILE GOING TO WORK IN SERVING THE PEOPLE TO END POVERTY, JOBLESSNESS, HOMELESSNESS, CORPORATE CRIME, MASS INCARCERATION, & THE MANY OTHER SOCIAL & ECONOMICAL INJUSTICES OF THE WORLD. * I'M ENCLOSING A DRAWING OF ME TO HELP WITH THE VISUAL PROCESS *

Do you have any specific instructions for the photographer?

KEEP THE PHOTO AUTHENTIC, BY HAVING IT RESONATE FEELINGS OF LOVE & HUMAN COMPASSION FOR ALL OPPRESSED PEOPLE AND DISDAIN FOR CAPITALISM, GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION, etc..

Organizations working to end the use of solitary confinement may use your photograph or request for purposes of public education, media use or fundraising. If so, we could use your name or you could remain anonymous. NO PLEASE PUBLISH/PRINT MY NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION.

If you would like us to use your name, what name should we use?

KIJANA TASHIRI ASKARI

S/N • MARCUS HARRISON • # H54077

P.O. BOX • 7500/D3-122/SHU
CRESCENT CITY, CA. 95532

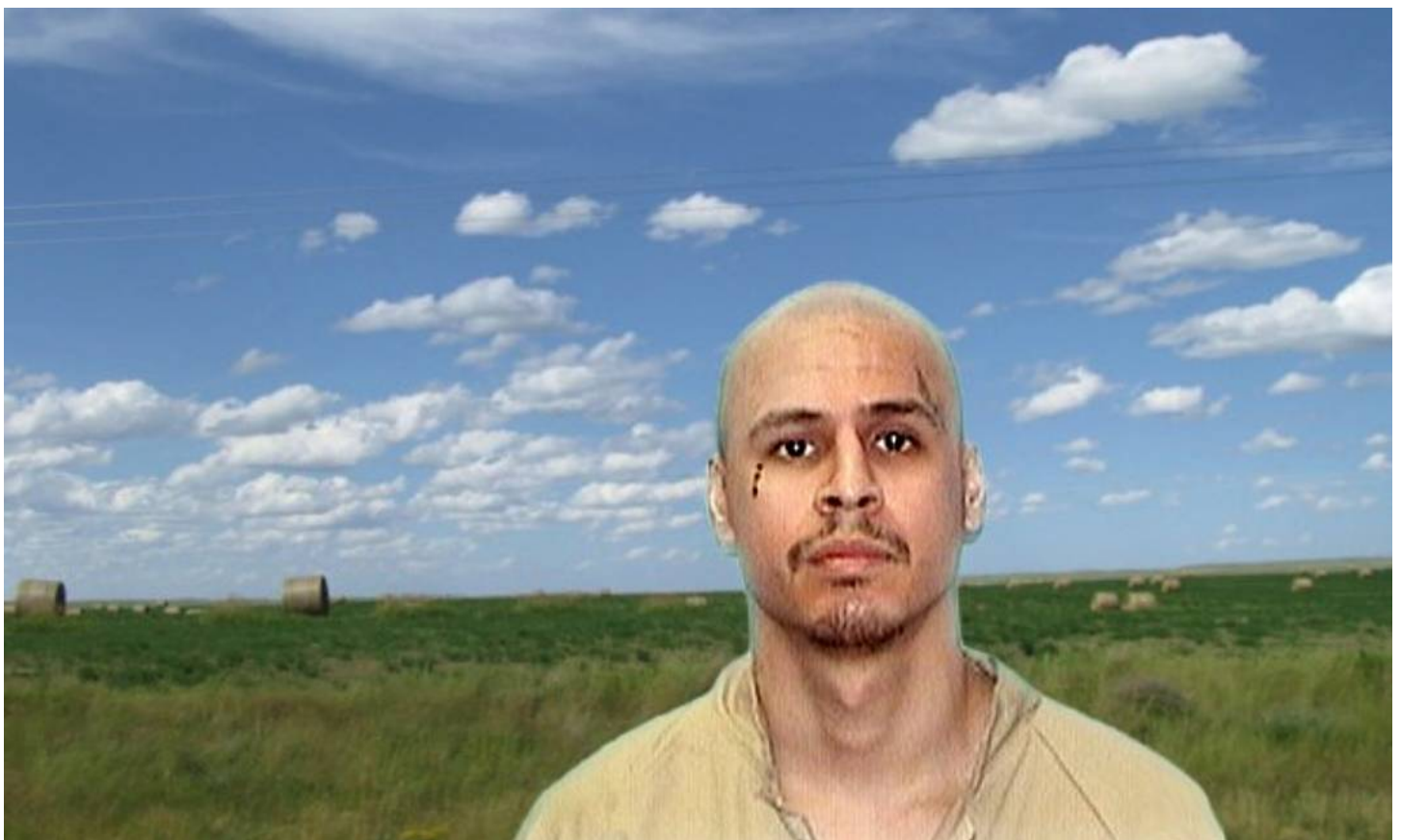
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172 5th Avenue, #16
Brooklyn, NY 11217

PARSONS THE NEW SCHOOL FOR DESIGN • SOLITARY WATCH

TAMMS YEAR TEN • NATIONAL RELIGIOUS CAMPAIGN AGAINST TORTURE

Jeanine Oleson: I became involved with Photo Requests from Solitary when it was one of many strategic efforts supporting the Tamms Year Ten (TYT) campaign in Illinois. Like some 80,000 other people in US prisons, the men in Tamms were locked in small, concrete cells for 23 to 24 hours a day without human contact. Mental breakdowns, self-mutilation, and suicide attempts were common at Tamms, and are an expected consequence of long-term isolation. The men in Tamms were invited to request a photograph of anything in the world, real or imagined and the campaign found an artist to make that image. The resulting requests were touching and often surprising.

Laurie Jo Reynolds, my friend and collaborator on this project is a head organizer of the Tamms campaign and it's initially through the campaign's stories from the men held at Tamms that I came to understand solitary confinement as legally-condoned torture that I wasn't aware of. I was struck by the fact this was happening to people in some part due to my complicity as a citizen. Laurie Jo and I talked about moving Photo Requests into a second phase in New York and California to support the work being done in those states, and we began working with Jean Casella, the director of Solitary Watch, a national organization working to expose and oppose solitary. It's precisely this ability to convey someone's story and circumstance through what they would like to see that reinvests images with meaning and agency in an oversaturated image culture. It builds advocacy and visibility for the work of groups like Tamms Year Ten or Solitary Watch with help from the amazing contributing artists who fulfill requests.



too much please. Something simple like a blue sky with clouds or a sunset in the distance would be fine.” Robert also said, “I want to extend my love to you, for you, as you have already done for me. Because genuine, authentic true love is when you do for others just because you can, and you hold no preconceived notion that you will be getting anything in return.” Photo by Laurie Jo Reynolds, 2011.

Are you or any of the other artists involved in this project able to hear responses from these men and women after they’ve received their photographs?

Yes, we communicate through the mail. We sometimes receive amazing letters back and share them with the participating artists who took the image. The letters we receive show a general appreciation for the effort of the participating artists and for making them feel seen and human while in complete isolation.



MOM, MONEY AND MANSION—Robert T. Robert, a man with a serious mental illness, sent Tamms Year Ten a photo of his mother, who had died the previous year. Because he had no family and no visitors, he was hopeless and desolate. He asked for an image of “my mother standing in front of a mansion, or Big Castle, with a bunch of money on the ground. OR if you can’t do that, THEN a substitution is a big mansion or castle with a bunch of money in front of it and a black hummer parked in front of it. I truly appreciate this a lot... Now I know somebody out there in the world cares about us in here.” Photo by Jeanine Oleson, 2013.

Art and cultural institutions generally seek to be relevant and engaged in the social and cultural spheres because contemporary art is often directly engaged in these conversations. Hopefully, the role of the museum is to contextualize and expand on artistic practices that represent the experiences of a broad constituency and some kind of secular ethic, so that means the epidemic of mass incarceration and the policies that have allowed this situation are important to present to audiences. Photo Requests from Solitary engages artists and audiences in witnessing the dreams and wishes of people held in isolation while also fulfilling an actual request.

Yes, I think art and cultural institutions should have solidarity with and support for artistic and activist work that engage a public in thinking about mass incarceration and solitary confinement. Isolation on the scale and practice that it's used in the US is considered torture by the UN, Amnesty International and in the larger global context. In 2010, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture called for a global ban on solitary confinement in excess of 15 days. The people who made the requests for this project have been in solitary for years, or even decades.

Why would museums NOT want to show these amazing images contributed by brilliant artists, find ways of informing a citizen public and envision ways to change these practices? In the aftermath of this election, I think many of people are looking for ways to engage and public institutions can provide this discursive space. For advocates working to end solitary confinement, the new administration is looking particularly bleak and many reforms may be rolled back—take a look at [this article recently written by Jean Casella](#).

This is also a perfect moment to say that we are looking for museums/institutions in California and New York to present these images in exhibitions as well as hosting advocacy programming. Please be in touch with any ideas!

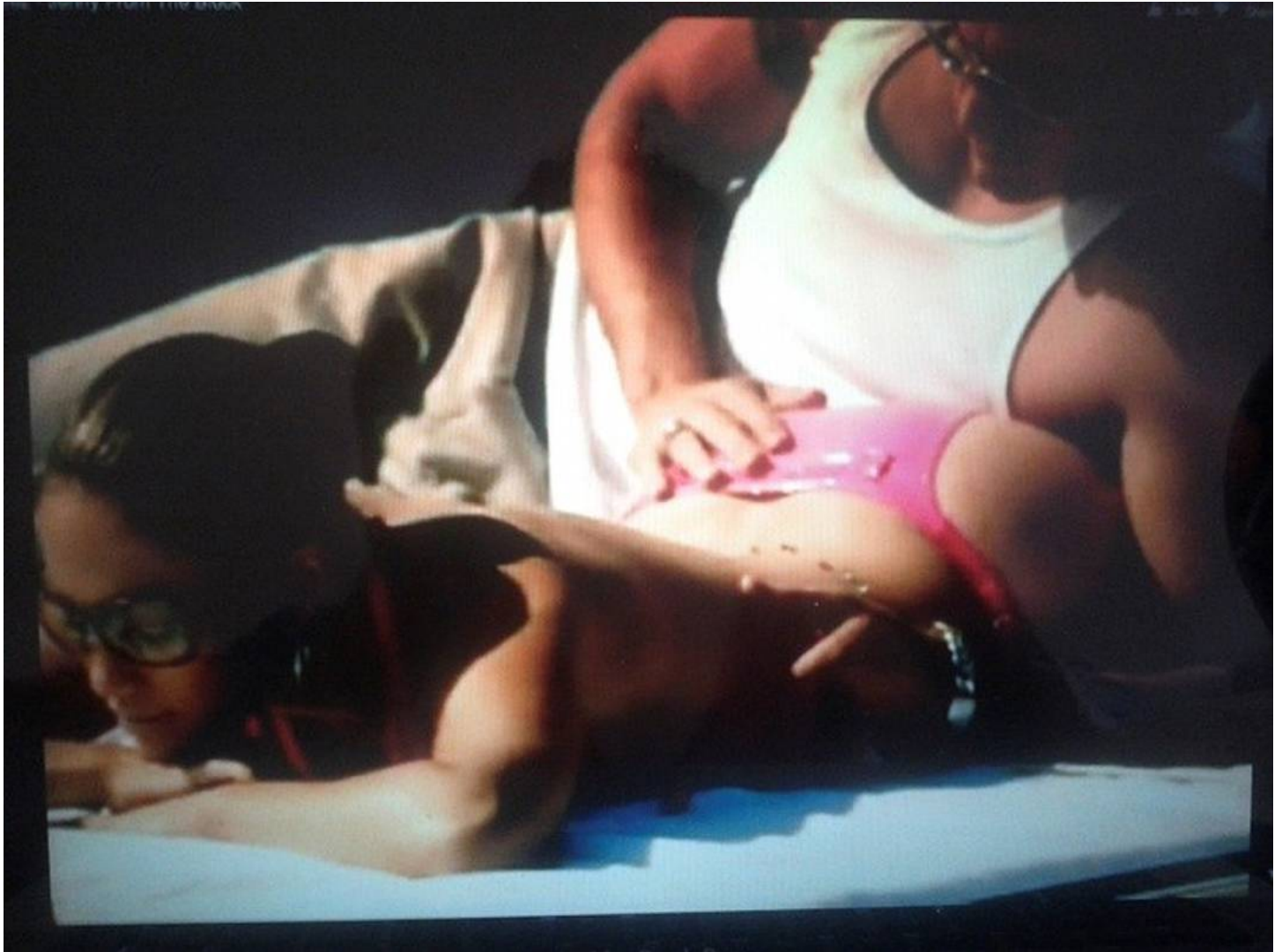


A PHOTOGRAPH WITHIN A PHOTO OF ME + WILD LIONS—Ike. Ike's photo request read: "5. A photograph within a photo of me + The Lake Front. 5. A photograph within a photo of me + The Navy Pier. 5. A photograph within a photo of me + wild lions. 5. A photograph within a photo of me + wild wolves. 5. A photograph within a photo of me + Chinese Dragon, for next Christmas mailing of cards. Please place me in the right, upper corner of the photos within a photo + make copies of them 5 each. Thank you very much + Many Blessings." Some of his photos were censored due to restrictions on prisoners being able to see their own ID photos, but others have gotten through. Photo by Jesse Avina, 2013.

How do you think these photographs support or challenge our view of these men and women, who are so often stigmatized in the media through notions of "criminality"?

The requests and images humanize the most stigmatized people in this country—the stories hopefully inspire viewers want to know more about why solitary confinement is being used so excessively or even at all and what they can do to stop it. In a recent exhibition of the PRFS images, we had advocates against solitary confinement there to speak with viewers because we feel it matters to present information and give next steps to anyone upset about the practice.

Also, to answer your question about criminality, solitary confinement is used to indefinitely house the mentally ill, children, developmentally disabled people, LGBT people, Muslims, prison rights organizers, suspected gang members—the list goes on and it's darkly absurd. People are placed



JLO's BUTT—Johnny. Johnny asked for a photo of a very specific Jennifer Lopez music video—the one with her ex-boyfriend Ben Affleck on a boat, with her butt showing. Luckily, there were people who remembered the exact same video he did (“Jenny from the Block”), and Danny Orendorff was able to take a still from it. Photo by Danny Orendorff, 2012.

How can other artists/writers/activists/ individuals become involved in this project if they are interested?

We would LOVE to hear from any artists/photographers/institutions who might be interested in participating! We rely on your creativity, interest and problem-solving to fulfill and show these requests! The list that includes some requests very specific to California like images of what Goshen, CA looks like, an image of a sunset on the Pacific taken from a boat, to more complicated requests like an image of Liberation. Please email us with questions and to receive the list of requests we are trying to fill: photorequestsfromsolitary@gmail.com.



TAMMS YEAR TEN GROUP PHOTO—Tyrone. Several men asked for photos of the people of Tamms Year Ten. One asked for a picture of everyone along with “one thing about them individually like what kind of music they like.” Another said, “I’d just like to be able to put the faces to the names we’ve seen over the years so the humanity of each can shine forth—a name or a paper at the end of the day is still just a name on paper!” This group portrait was taken after a meeting at Chicago’s Progressive Community Center/The People’s Church with Pastor B. Herbert Martin, Sr. presiding. Photo by Lenny Gilmore, December 10, 2011.



MY AUNTIE'S HOUSE ON THE BLOCK—Darrius. *Darrius requested a photograph from Chicago's Englewood neighborhood, asking that the image include his auntie's house and the whole block of 63rd and Marshfield, at 2:00pm, facing east. He wanted the photographer to talk to residents in the neighborhood, including his aunt, and see if they remembered him. "Let the people outside know that the picture is for 'D-man,'" he wrote. Photo by Chris Murphy, 2012.*



LOVESICK CLOWN- Humberto. Artists from around the world offered to fill photo requests for men in isolation, even requests for “photos” of imaginary subjects. Some photo requests were filled more than once, giving the men in Tamms multiple versions of their desired image. Chicago animator Lisa Barcy, Dutch photographer Harry Bos and Baltimore filmmaker Stephanie Barber each orchestrated a version of Humberto’s detailed request for a lovesick clown: “A lovesick clown: holding a old fashioned feathered pen: as if writing a letter: from the waist up: in black and white. As close up as possible: as much detail as possible: & the face about 4 inches big.” From left to right: photos by Lisa Barcy, Harry Bos and Stephanie Barber, 2012.



BALD KNOB CROSS—Willie. Willie requested a picture of a vigil at Bald Knob Cross on top of a mountain in southern Illinois to pray for his deliverance from Tamms and to be granted parole from prison. In order to take this photograph, TY10 caravanned down to the cross, held a litany of song and prayer and celebrated with a dinner. The next day, we drove family members to visit loved-ones at the prison. Willie was transferred from Tamms, and on July 27, 2012, he was paroled after 36 years. We had a Welcome Home party for him the week of his return. Photo by Rachel Herman, May 6, 2011.

WE WILL MAKE A

NAME: WILLIAM MARTINEZ

PHOTOGRAPH FOR YOU

Date: 8.30.2013**Would you like to request one?**

If so, fill out this form and describe a photograph you personally would like to receive.
A volunteer will make a photograph based on your description below.

You may request a photograph of anything (that is not prohibited by prison rules, of course).
In the space below, please describe what you would like to see in your photograph. (You could describe a person, place, object, scene or idea.)

I WOULD LOVE A PICTURE OF THE SMALL FARM TOWN I GREW UP IN.
IT'S NAME IS " GOSHEN, CALIFORNIA " IN CALIFORNIA'S RURAL CENTRAL
VALLEY. JUST SOUTH OF FRESNO. POSSIBLY A GOOGLE GLOBE PICTURE
OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD, RAILROAD TRACKS, CHURCH, FIELDS
THIS WAS MY HOME & BRINGS BACK SO MANY CHILDHOOD MEMORIES!

PELICAN BAY STATE PRISON
SECURITY HOUSING UNIT
UNIT D-9

THANK YOU!

Do you have any specific instructions for the photographer?

ONLY THOSE DESCRIBED ABOVE

Organizations working to end the use of solitary confinement may use your photograph or request for purposes of public education, media use or fundraising. If so, we could use your name or you could remain anonymous.

If you would like us to use your name, what name should we use?

WILLIAM " BILLY " MARTINEZ

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PHOTOGRAPH FOR YOU

Date: 11.4.13

Would you like to request one? yes.

If so, fill out this form and describe a photograph you personally would like to receive. A volunteer will make a photograph based on your description below.

You may request a photograph of anything (that is not prohibited by prison rules, of course). In the space below, please describe what you would like to see in your photograph. (You could describe a person, place, object, scene or idea.)

A Beautiful SUNRISE overlooking an ISLAND with lush Green grass, wild HORSES, raptors (Birds of Prey) at Flight, The Beautiful BLUE ocean surrounding The Island. maybe A fresh water river That runs Through the ISLAND, and gradually breaks INTO The ocean. And Hills and mountains within The Island As well. Any other Animals Also, AS The ARTIST see Fit. Thank you!

Do you have any specific instructions for the photographer?

whatever your minds eye get from my description, go with The wind Baby. God Bless you!

Organizations working to end the use of solitary confinement may use your photograph or request for purposes of public education, media use or fundraising. If so, we could use your name or you could remain anonymous.

If you would like us to use your name, what name should we use?

"Benzo"

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Unfulfilled request

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