

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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ART FROM THE INSIDE: Paño Drawings by Chicano Prisoners

Chicano prisoners in jails and penitentiaries in the American Southwest produce drawings on cotton handkerchiefs that embody a unique artistic vision. Known as paños, these pocket-sized canvases depict boldly drawn montages of Pre-Hispanic symbols, Colonial religious items, Mexican historical figures, and images from 20th century popular culture. Paños are pictorial letters that carry messages from inmates to family and loved ones on the outside and to friends and associates within the prison system. Whether love letters, narratives of personal loss or prayers for redemption, every paño tells a story.

Paño artists draw on a rich vocabulary derived from the “high” and “low” art of Mexico and the United States. Aztec warriors, the Virgin of Guadalupe and Pancho Villa; tattooed gang members, voluptuous pin-up girls, and vintage lowrider cars and trucks; clowns, teddy bears and cartoon characters – all make appearances in these remarkable prison drawings. Inmate-artists cover their canvases with powerful and evocative imagery that reflects a complex worldview. Paño art is border art with roots in both Mexican and American culture.

Although often classified as folk art, outsider art or prison art, **ART FROM THE INSIDE** will present paños as a visually compelling and expressive component of contemporary Hispanic art. With 122 carefully selected works produced in Texas prisons, this traveling exhibition will survey the form and function of paños and focus on the style and personal vision of individual artists. The paño makers’ vivid iconography will be defined and the classic themes that form the core of the tradition will be documented. Finally, the exhibition will help museum visitors discover the profound dualism that permeates the Chicano aesthetic consciousness and understand the cultural context which paño art illuminates.

Martha V. Henry of The New England Center for Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, CT organized this traveling exhibition. The curators are Martha V. Henry and Peter David Joralemon. There is a 56-page catalog with 25 color illustrations and an essay written by Martha V. Henry. In addition, there is an illustrated brochure with an essay titled “Illuminated Handkerchiefs, Tattooed Bodies, and Prison Scribes” by Professor Victor Alejandro Sorell, Social Historian of Art, Chicago State University commissioned for this exhibition by the Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame. The exhibition is also accompanied by a documentary film, “Paño Arte: Images from Inside”, produced and directed by Evangeline E. Griego, About Time Productions, Los Angeles, CA.

Exhibition Schedule

Wiegand Gallery, Notre Dame de Namur University, Belmont, CA: September 21 – November 6, 2004

The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN: January 16 – February 27, 2005

Intuit, Chicago, IL: June 17 – September 3, 2005

The New England Center for Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, CT: December, 2005

