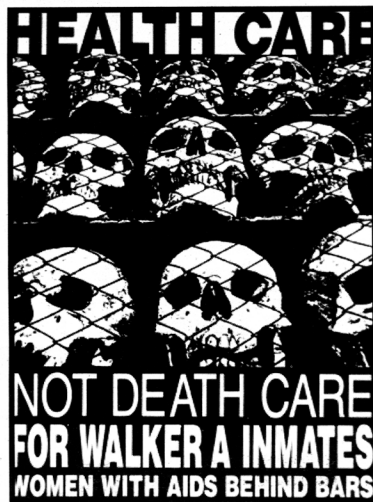
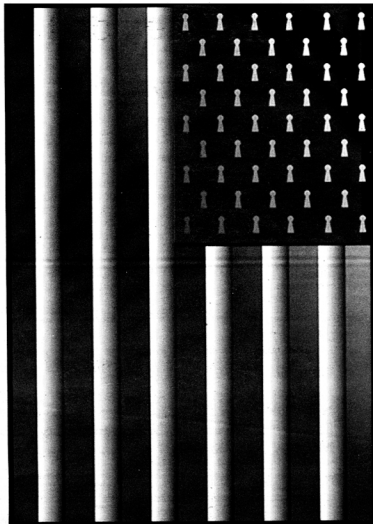


GALLERY

There's power in these posters

POLITICAL STATEMENT: *Cedomir Kostovic used keyholes and prison bars to form a U.S. flag in a computer-generated image.*

CEDOMIR KOSTOVIC



The use of imagery in placards advocating prison reform is on display at the Watts Towers Art Center.

By CINDY CHANG
Special to The Times

THE United States puts more of its citizens behind bars than any other nation, according to the International Center for Prison Studies in London. The federal government's latest count pegs the American prison population at more than 2 million, a sixfold increase since 1970.

For advocates of prison reform, these statistics underscore the need for drastic change. But for others, they are proof of how well the system is working.

Sometimes only arresting visual images, like the photographs of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, have the power to speak across ideological lines. Indeed, the prison reform movement has long used images to convey what statistics alone cannot.

Whether it's a 1960s photo of Texas prisoners picking cotton or an iconic Abu Ghraib silhouette superimposed on a takeoff of an iPod ad, an exhibition at the Watts Towers Art Center traces the use of imagery on prison-reform posters through the decades.

The show, which runs through June 4, was curated by the L.A.-based Center for the Study of Political Graphics and partially funded by the city of Los Angeles' Cultural Affairs Department.

More often than not, posters advertise countercultural points of view, and the center has sponsored many exhibits devoted to left-wing causes, including an antiwar exhibit several years ago and a just-concluded exhibit of anti-death penalty posters. Titled "Prison Nation: Posters on the Prison Industrial Complex," this show presents a take on the American prison system that is loud and clear.

Opening day in late March included a panel discussion with local prison reform organizations. A Sunday afternoon film series presented in conjunction with the exhibition is

'Prison Nation' 'Posters on the Prison Industrial Complex'

Where: Watts Towers Art Center, 1727 E. 107th St., L.A.

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays, noon to 4 p.m. Sundays

Ends: June 4

Price: Free

Info: (213) 485-1796,
www.politicalgraphics.org

screening prison-related movies. (This weekend's program features films about juveniles in the criminal justice system.)

Some of the posters were created especially for the exhibition, but many were used to draw people to a rally or to issue a call to action with maximum effect.

"There's evidence that when a campaign has graphics and visuals to promote its mission, it has more success. You need a powerful image to convey a message, something that people can pull in with a glance. Then you can give them more information," said Mary Sutton, the center's program director and a co-curator of the exhibition.

Not surprisingly, the American flag is a common motif in the show, with the stripes often standing in for prison bars.

One poster from 1976 comments on the American bicentennial by invoking Betsy Ross' name as an ironic juxtaposition to a set of anonymous female hands sewing a flag behind cell bars. "1976 — what are we celebrating?" asks the accompanying text.

Cedomir Kostovic, a professor at Missouri State University who emigrated from Bosnia in 1990, designed another of the American flag posters after watching a television news program about the United States' high incarceration rates.

Kostovic's computer-generated image of a Stars and Stripes formed with keyholes

and prison bars was the final installment of his trilogy of American flag posters. (The first was a homage to Sept. 11 victims and had stripes composed of many candles; the second, a comment on the power of American corporations, used Coca-Cola cans as stripe components.)

"I saw a magazine program about how the government can't build enough jails, how private people are building jails and it's become a big business. I was just shocked, and I thought, 'I have to say something.' I'm a visual artist, this is how I speak, so I did a poster about it," Kostovic said.

Some of the posters in the "Prison Nation" exhibition are aimed at inner-city youths. In her work at the Los Angeles-based Youth Justice Coalition, co-curator Kim McGill uses images to communicate with a generation that was raised on MTV and hip-hop and has little patience for the written word.

"You can get posters and stickers into places where you can't get any other information — schools, bus stops, in people's cells," McGill said. "We can't begin to afford the billboard space that corporations can pay for, so posters become our advertising, our way to take back public space in an environment of commercial messages."

One youth-oriented poster, from a Bay Area collective, speaks to teenagers by describing the unpleasant facts of life in prison. Written on a blackboard in white chalk is a list of the meager items issued to an inmate: three pairs of jeans, three shirts and on down the line. The simple message? "This is not a camping trip. Choose education, not incarceration."

The show also includes several posters by European artists who live in countries with low incarceration rates and who seem to be aghast at the relatively large proportion of American citizens behind bars as well as the way the United States is treating its prisoners abroad.

Amnesty International in

Switzerland designed a poster showing police mug shots of the Statue of Liberty and noting in French, "Liberty and equality? It depends on for whom."

A stenciled poster by the Swedish artist Sixten looks like an advertisement for a luxury resort called Guantanamo Bay — but if the name itself isn't enough of a giveaway, barbed wire lurks in the background and a drop of blood besmears the palm-treed island.

Taken together, the 80-some posters provide an overview of the issues that have concerned prison reformers over the last half-century.

Some, like living conditions behind bars and prison guard brutality, have stayed more or less constant. Others, like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, are newer.

Because failed efforts at change are often forgotten, posters such as these can preserve an alternative take on history, which often concentrates on the movements that did take hold, organizers say.

"Usually, you get a seamless version of history — then came this and this and this. History is written by the victors," said Carol Wells, the graphics center's executive director.

"Posters are produced by people who are involved in struggles and give their point of view, which is rarely told in history books."

ADVOCATES: *By Los Angeles ACT UP, an anti-AIDS group.*