

# CON ARTISTS

*At Soledad Prison, inmates discover the healing power of art*

By Hunter Drohojowska  
Photographs by Michael Edwards

**S**oledad is a town of over 4,300 prisoners and 1,500 jailers — the infamous Northern California home of Sirhan Sirhan, Dan White and Juan Corona. Euphemistically called the "Correctional Training Facility" (CTF), the pale, homely prison stands on 980 acres of farmland, a monument to the penal architecture of the 1940s. This forbidding place is where Dick Crispo, civil service artist, comes to work every day.

His job? To make artists out of murderers and thieves; to rehabilitate convicts through the power of paint. He finds inmates with talent, trains them, and they in turn become instructors.

The inmate-instructors then teach art classes to their peers, design institutional graphics and create murals for surrounding communities.

The convicts have completed a number of projects under the guidance of Crispo, including public murals in the neighboring towns of Gonzales, Seaside and Monterey, as well as a quarter-mile-long mural depicting "America on the Outside," painted on the inside of CTF's central unit.

A bearded, avuncular man of 38, Crispo has provided the impetus to the Arts-in-Corrections program since its introduction at Soledad in 1980. He wears his faith symbolically, on an inmate-crafted belt buckle bearing the program's acronym, AIC.

One of the program's aims is to train the men to be proficient in commercial art. "If you can get a guy to develop his skills and go into a vocational program, at least when he gets out, he'll have some trade besides cracking a safe," says Crispo.

The art program also helps inmates stay out of trouble and relieves the built-in tension of a prison overpopulated by some 1,300 men. Creating a work of art seems to give the inmates enhanced senses of self-esteem and purpose. "We stress art not as a hobby, but as a way of life and a way of thinking," says Crispo.

Each of California's 12 correctional institutions has an Arts-in-Corrections program, though only six are run by full-time artist/facilitators like Crispo. The programs focus on more than the visual arts. Inmates also study performing arts, crafts, creative writing, poetry and media arts. The total cost statewide is \$400,000, only a fraction of the Department of Corrections' budget of \$425 million. (The program also attracts outside funding and grants.)

Nonetheless, the program does not always meet with wholehearted approval. Why, a

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**Andrew Granger**

Age: 23.

Crime: Murder.

Sentence: Life without possibility of parole, plus 2 years.

Time Served: 1 year, 6 months.

"I like abstract but I can also do realism when I want to. Some of the things we've done in class include patterns used for fabrics and these travel posters. The one I did is of Hong Kong. These were really fun; you can't put it any other way, because it gave everybody the incentive to think about a place. It sort of morally brightened up the unit because we were allowed to hang them in different places — not just in the art class but back by the offices

where the staff sits. It sort of took us out of the prison environment for a little while, to think about something other than doing time.

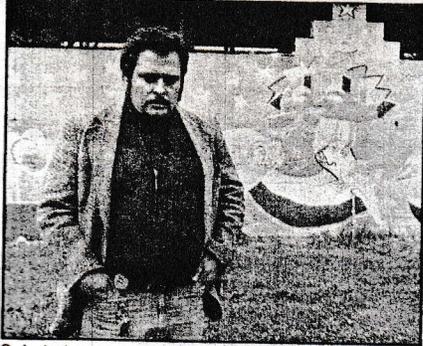
"I did some art before I came here. My father was a painter. Quite frankly, when I came in here, I couldn't draw two straight lines with a ruler. But I'm proud of myself and the work that I do. I've been here so long, I was nominated to be the cabinet keeper and keep track of all the pencils and stuff like that. I try to ration out the materials we have because we're on a very, very tight budget.

"I like the abstract and I guess I'm an abstract person. I see designs and colors that other people don't see. And I see beauty in a lot of things that other people don't see — such as chairs and stuff that literally just passes other people by. By 'other people,' I mean people who aren't into art."

taxpayer might wonder, should murderers and thieves be afforded such frills?

Bill Cleveland, director of Arts-in-Corrections at the Department of Corrections in Sacramento, says, "If I were to play devil's advocate, I'd say these people were in there to be punished. The problem is that about 98 or 99 percent of the prisoners come back to the community — 16,989 inmates were released in 1982. As of January 1983, we had 32,958 still in correctional institutions. We should help these people come back with their heads on straight — with respect for people and property and themselves."

Crispo admits that his program doesn't always



Soledad art program director Dick Crispo stands in front of inmate-painted mural in Gonzales, a town near the prison.

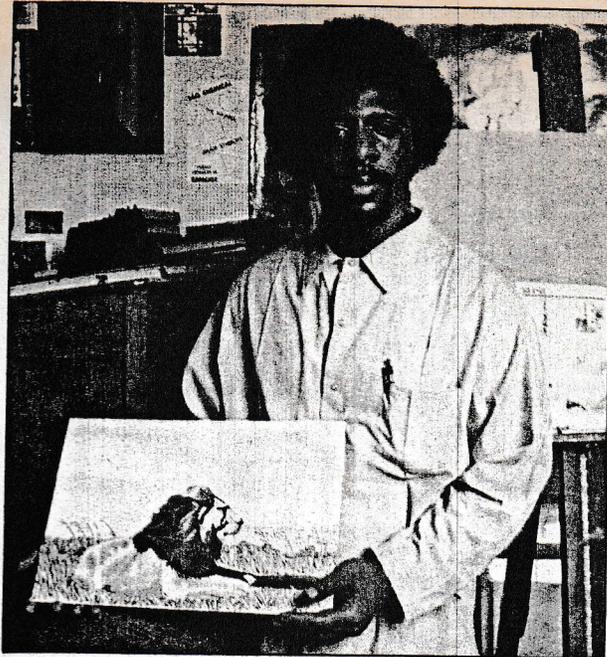
provide the ideal solution — but it can hardly hurt. "I don't want to give the wrong impression. There's no magical answer here, but I might be able to help. It may be that art is part of the question and part of the answer, but I know these guys are doing it, and when they're doing it, they're not doing other stuff. And the other stuff is what makes big problems for the institution."

The number of participants in Crispo's art program can range from the tens to the hundreds — from "guys who can't write their own name" to "guys who are college material."

No one forgets that the program is conducted in a prison, not an art school. Materials are restricted. No flammables like turpentine are permitted, since they could produce bombs; no etching tools, which can be used for tattooing; and lately, no masking tape. John Hinckley Jr. used the stuff to plug the locks on his door and attempt suicide. Crispo also carries five sets of keys, a whistle and an alarm box. If his office phone is off the hook for 30 seconds, an alarm sounds. The officer who used to stand outside his classroom door was stabbed six times in the chest in an incident unrelated to the program.

Clearly, teaching art to prisoners is not a choice many artists would make. "It's a demanding job," admits Crispo. "Yet it's an art form in itself just keeping it going in there. I like bridging the gap between art and life. That's what I like about the mural work — it's like weaving a tapestry between the two."

This philosophy sustains his commitment and his aspirations for the inmates. "They have creative minds, a lot of them," Crispo concludes. "You take that creativity and turn it around, from the negative to the positive. That's not a lot, but that's all they really need to do. Some of them are maybe *too* creative and maybe that's how they got here." ■



## Grafton Hudson

Age: 27.  
Crimes: Rape, Assault with intent.  
Sentence: 9 years, 4 months.  
Time Served: 2 years, 8 months.

"I basically like to paint animals, like lions and tigers. I really get off on that. I like scenery, too. I've done couple of murals, but that was back in Georgia. I've been involved in art quite some time now — maybe 12 or 13 years. I really enjoy this program. It gives you a chance to relax basically, to keep you out of trouble, too.

"I think they should extend the program because a lot of people here would like to be involved in something constructive. I feel art-work is constructive. The program gives you a chance to relax and get away from all the other riffraff. You don't get hassled; you do this at your leisure. It's emotional work, and you're trying to do your best, you know. You put forth your best effort. I feel like I've got this little talent and I should make it better."



## James Arch

Age: 36.  
Crimes: Assault, rape with force or violence.  
Sentence: 8 years.  
Time Served: 1 year, 2 months.

"For me, I want art to be a trade. I'm 36 years old. People on the street my age have their homes, their cars, they're set in life. For me to go out after being in prison for X amount of years, I can't compete with them in their jobs, so I'm using this to learn a trade that I can carry on in my older years. I feel I'm developing a skill that's going to compensate for the security that other people have got in their pension, insurance and other things. I don't have those pensions or insurance policies because of prison. I know it's very greedy, but that's what it is. I'm looking for something to take out of here.

"You've got people who sit in prison, do menial labor, push a broom for five hours, and when he goes to the street, he has nothing. He's wasted X amount of years. I've developed for X amount years. I'm serving time but I'm taking advantage of the time. And too many prisoners don't have that opportunity. There should be more trade opportunities in prison. Because your time here is wasted. If you can get into an art program, you can take something out of prison with you. Something beautiful, something I'm giving somebody."



## Douglas Bue

Age: 25.  
 Crime: Murder.  
 Sentence: 15 years to life.  
 Time Served: 1 year, 7 months.

"I just make compositions out of different paintings and put it together using my own colors and imagination. I've been working for nine months. I like doing it a lot. I spend a lot of time on it, and it's something I'd like to do in the future and learn to make money on it. I'd rather

be out there and sketch from nature, actually see what I'm painting. Here I have to paint from pictures or what I remember, which is very hard — you know, to paint something you're not there with. It's hard but it's also something that makes you pleased with yourself. It takes me out of this place a little bit. It's a way of escaping — depending on how much time you have, or family problems, or things like that. Every once in a while, I'll take an item off my desk and paint it, something like that. But I like country scenes. I have no desire to paint other inmates or anything like that."

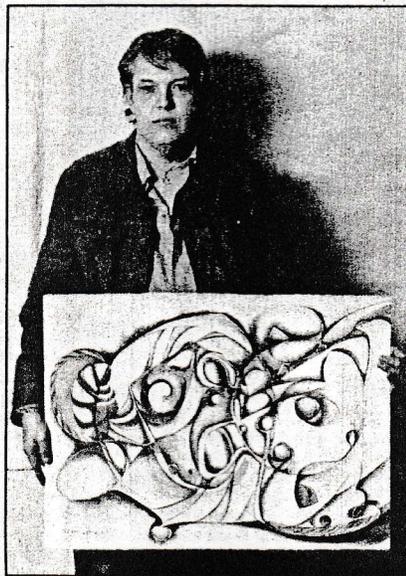
## Frank Lapa

Age: 51.  
 Crime: Murder.  
 Sentence: Life.  
 Time Served: 4 years, 7 months.

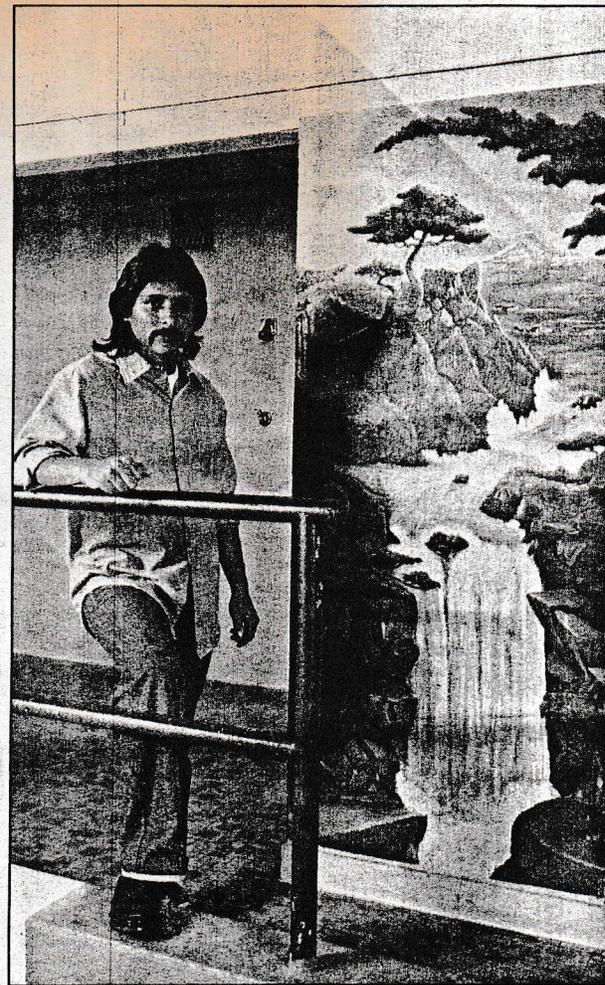
"I like abstract, and one of the reasons is I can do it on my own. We can't walk into a field and paint. It's even harder getting to other artists. I subscribe to all the national art magazines — Artnews, American Artist, Architectural Digest. Getting these helps us figure out what other artists are doing. I get Architectural Digest, in particular, because I want to see what paintings are hanging on the walls in America. I want to see what people are buying. It keeps me in touch with reality. I like working with shapes I don't have to copy.

"With landscapes or seascapes, you can only see what other artists are doing, even when you change the composition. It's not like being there at the ocean. That's why I like abstract. I'm interested in pure form and pure color.

"I'm so absorbed in painting that time just flies. Ten hours is just beautiful. I work in my cell and I work 31½ hours a week as an instructor. I've been painting a long time, but nothing good. Everything that I've done that has been anything worthwhile has come out in prison because I have the concentration here and I have the time. I went to art school. I took architectural drafting and mechanical drawing. There's a lot of junk in the art magazines today.



"I have so much respect for the classic abstract theorists like Chagall, Dali and Picasso between 1928 and 1935. But there is a lot of emphasis on realism today."



## Rocky Moreno

Age: 34.  
 Crime: Burglary.  
 Sentence: 5 years.  
 Time Served: 1 year, 6 months.

"I find that the art program is a good release for the guys when they don't have anywhere else to go in the institution. Art, to me, is a growing thing, so I'm continually learning. But I get a lot of satisfaction from seeing other guys express themselves, so I get a lot of satisfaction from teaching.

"I've never had any formal schooling in art. And yet, I've been gifted. I pick it up real fast. So the men can see me on their level, and I'm learning as they're learning. I tell them that there isn't any one specific way of doing art. The rules that do exist are there to be broken. When you get ready to break them, you understand what you're doing. I do my own style, which some people have labeled 'subconscious renderings.' That's what I like most, but I can render landscapes or portraiture. When I did this mural in the shower, I called it 'Improving on Nature.' It's a waterfall in the ocean — which is unheard of — but it looks all right."