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Entertainment & Life

Arts review | 'Red Hell' revisits old Ohio Penitentiary for newer generation

By Peter Tonguette / For The Columbus Dispatch

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The Ohio Penitentiary ceased operations in 1984 and, 14 years later, was torn down.

Still, gallery owner Angela Meleca readily recalls the building.

"I have distinct memories of driving down Neil Avenue and passing the huge stone wall of the Pen and always kind of being mesmerized and intrigued by the structure," said Meleca, 48, a Columbus native.

A newer generation of central Ohioans, however, probably don't recall the penitentiary at all; the Arena District rose in its place.

"I was mentioning it to someone who grew up here," Meleca said, "and she's maybe in her 30s and said: 'I don't even remember it. Where was it?'"

To draw attention to the penitentiary (and its inhabitants), Meleca has organized an exhibit at her Downtown gallery.

"To What Red Hell," curated by New York artist Jason Simon, is on display through Oct. 27 at the Angela Meleca Gallery.

A few years ago, Meleca was introduced to Simon, who had created a Super-8 film documenting the decaying structure in 1990. She was inspired to create the exhibit after viewing the film (which is being shown on a loop in the gallery space).

"To What Red Hell" references a 1934 short story by Chester Himes, an acclaimed African-American novelist who had once been incarcerated at the penitentiary.

“(He) hung with the wrong crowd in Columbus and then subsequently was arrested for robbery and sent to the Ohio Pen,” Meleca said. “While he was in the Pen, he wrote this story, ‘To What Red Hell,’ that was centered around the fire at the penitentiary (in 1930).”

Himes’ story ran in Esquire magazine, a copy of which is presented in a display case along with a music album made by inmates who called themselves the Ohio Penitentiary 511 Jazz Ensemble.

The exhibit’s contemporary works, however, command the most attention, as artists grapple with the penitentiary — as well as the general subject of incarceration — in surprising ways.

Four works on paper by Leni D. Anderson starkly reflect confinement. One presents the entrance to a cellblock, with a tangle of beams and bars obscuring the viewer’s vision; another shows the lonely corridor of a cellblock hallway. Yet the artist’s warm hues — heavy on yellows and oranges — are strangely inviting, even cozy.

Startling, too, are enormous photo collages by Masumi Hayashi, who in 1996 took pictures of the inside of the prison. In one piece, single photos blend to form an extraordinary wide-angle view of Death Row, littered with concrete and plaster; inside some cells, bed frames — sans mattresses — are visible.

Equally haunting are Moyra Davey’s photo “Untitled (Oozing Wall),” which depicts a vacated guardhouse atop a disintegrating wall, and sculptures by Mary Jo Bole. In “History of Penal Sanitation,” Bole affixed a Kohler sink to a door salvaged from a prison; words and images cover the fixture and door, including rules of prison sanitation and advertisements for plumbing products.

Gallery visitors should notice not just the wall but also the floor — where they will find Bole’s “Purge Pipe,” featuring a brass sanitation pipe meant to echo the type of fixture that might have been found in the penitentiary.

The exhibit functions as a sometimes-troubling, always-thought-provoking act of remembrance for a building once so prominent in Columbus.

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