

The Last Supper

Julie Green talks to [Lucie Parker](#) about painting death row inmates' dying wish

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For us in Britain today, the death penalty is a thing of the past, having been abolished in 1965. A phenomenon that has deeply rooted connotations with medieval public executions, capital punishment is an alien concept to those working within our justice system to rehabilitate the lives that have strayed from the moral path of British law. But cross the Atlantic, to a land that shares many of the same liberal democratic principles and you will discover an entirely new world of justice. America still retains the death penalty in thirty-three of its fifty states.

With a total of 1320 U.S state executions carried out since 1976, the capital punishment debate remains a hugely controversial thorn in the side of the American system of justice. The intricate and difficult nature of this debate is reflected in the fact that there are no trends in the rate of states that abolish this law: Wisconsin rid themselves of it in 1853, whereas Connecticut voted for its abolishment only last year. This disparity darkens the clarity needed for such a divisive issue, preventing the development needed in our newly emerging globalized world that enshrines human rights within its doctrines to understand and solve this issue.

Those in fierce favour of protecting this traditional law argue for the effectiveness of its deterrent-like nature, claiming that the harsh character of the punishment is enough to prevent the callous crimes that fit it. Those fighting to protect the lives of every citizen in U.S society, regardless of their crime, purport the simple fact that it costs more for the taxpayer to keep an inmate on death row and execute them than it does to give them a life sentence without parole. The question that also darts in and out of the mind of anyone considering the execution of someone to death is that of their potential innocence. What if the state got it wrong?

Opponents of the death penalty express their principles through a smorgasbord of mediums, from a global Amnesty International perspective to local demonstrations. A current trend pulsing through this human rights-centric world is using artwork as a form of protest against capital punishment. Using visual

stimulation to stir anti-execution feelings is certainly an effective technique, with artists using a variety of hard-cutting ideas to drive home the brutality of something that has become so enshrined in U.S law that it turns death into a systematic process, not something to be mourned.



The most prominent of these ideas is The Last Supper. The general practice in each state that carries the death penalty is that every inmate is allowed to choose what they want for their final meal before their execution. This meal is modest in most states, as many selections are limited to what can be made in the prison kitchen. Other states provide a meal from local restaurants, with California allowing a fifty dollar budget on take out food, and Oklahoma providing a budget of fifteen dollars for inmates to select from venues such as Pizza Hut. Other states are less generous, with Texas banning its highly publicised final meal in 2012 after one large meal wasn't eaten, and Maryland remaining the only death penalty state to serve the standard prison meal with a ban on alcohol and cigarettes.

This is a phenomenon that has remained highly publicised in every state that carries out executions, one that has subsequently been taken further by these artists who want to encapsulate the humanity that executions destroy. Celia Shapiro uses photographs in loud colours to represent the juxtaposition between the bright sustenance of the food that was eaten by the life that has now been extinguished, and Jonathon Kambouris places food items on top of a blown-up mug shot of an inmate and photographs it from directly above, looking down. Henry Hargreaves also produced a photography exhibition that re-created last meals alongside the name, age and conviction of the murdered individual, to construct perhaps the starkest reminder of the human life taken by the state.



The artist in this genre that has most recently risen to prominence however is Julie Green, a professor at Oregon State University, who has spent the past twelve years painting the final meal of death row inmates on second-hand ceramic plates for her ongoing series, The Last Supper. The plates, currently numbering 500, are a tragic accumulation of lives lived and lost to the American state, and each food object is painted in the tradition of blue-and-white china, a hue that is simultaneously absurd and

significant, drawing from one of the most recognized traditions in ceramics. Her goal? “To continue painting until the death penalty is abolished”. This is a powerful provocation of the nature of justice in America, and an unapologetically political statement that represents her simple “observations of contemporary society”, as she is “driven to the studio to make some sense of our world. Art is meditation, it is a way to reflect and think about something”.

Her journey into this politically charged yet artistically brilliant legacy began with reading of these final meals in her local state newspaper of Oklahoma, on occasions, there being more than one a day. “When first seeing final meal requests in the newspaper, I called the prison warden and the Oklahoma paper, and asked “why is this information in the paper?” Both replied with identical language, stating that “the public wants to know.” This was the catalyst for the explosion of morbid curiosity that led Green to delve deeper into the debate surrounding final meals.



This was what “humanised death row for me. It hit home that these meals were so personal and so specific”. When reflecting on how often she cooked with her family, the realisation that these inmates were human and had once been part of family food rituals too was what gave them an identity for her. The underlying and compelling theme of the final meal is choice, what do people who have spent many years in prison with no choice at all do with this last one? “Their final requests provide many clues on region, race and economic background”. Some reach back for childhood comforts; one inmate “asked that his mother be allowed into the prison kitchen to make the chicken dumplings he loved”. Others take this opportunity to try something they’ve never eaten before, with one inmate ordering lobster and steak. The sad reality of some of the underprivileged people who end up on death row is also portrayed as a bleak reminder through the simplicity of food: “he told us he never had a birthday cake so we ordered a birthday cake for him”.

This choice attempts to bring a humane factor to an extremely inhumane process, striking an ironic chord in allowing those sentenced to death one choice of the most primitive thing one needs to survive. Why allow this choice at all? “Some years back I contacted every state with capital punishment, and asked about the ritual. Answers vary, but all basically say it’s a tradition, something we’ve always done it. It is my belief that the final meal is something positive for prison staff to tend to on execution day.”

With 50 plates a year being painted, it appears that Green still has a long way to go in achieving her goal. However her highly publicised exhibition has successfully carved a plate-paved pathway towards the awareness of what she deems as the inhumanity of death row. “Andy Warhol said the artist of the future will simply point. I paint to point”. M



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