

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/11/20/voices-from-solitary-picturing-solitary-confinement/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | November 20, 2012

On his always superb blog Prison Photography, Pete Brooks last week featured a post called [Where Are All The Photographs Of Solitary Confinement?](#) As solitary confinement increasingly finds its way into the news, he writes, journalists from across America have contacted me looking for photographs of solitary confinement to accompany their article.

With a few exceptions, Brooks writes, such photographs simply do not exist. One such exception is Richard Ross, whose powerful photographs of children in solitary are part of his [Juvenile In Justice](#) project. Brooks features a few other exceptions in his post most of them showing empty isolation cells and asks for help identifying and sourcing additional photos of solitary. Readers can take part in this project by adding to the comments section of the post.

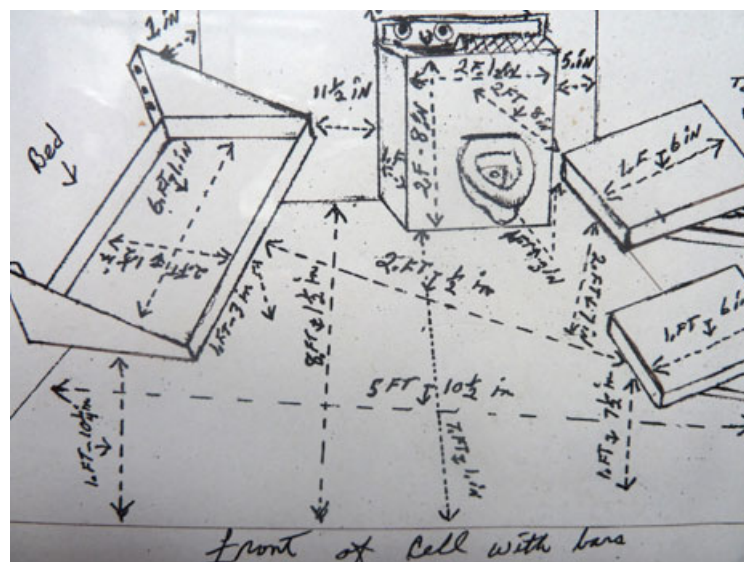
Another source for images of solitary confinement is prisoners' own drawings of their cells—their only means of conveying their surroundings, since they obviously do not have access to cameras. These, too, are rare, but we are aware of a few.

One of the most prolific and talented artists in solitary is 60-year-old Thomas Silverstein, who has been in extreme isolation in the federal prison system under a no human contact order for going on 30 years. (He describes the experience [here](#).) His artwork appears on [this site](#). It includes meticulously detailed drawings of some of the cells he has occupied, including one pictured below, which is designed (with built-in shower and remote-controlled door to an exercise yard) so that he never has to leave it or encounter anyone at all.





Herman Wallace, one of the Angola 3 (more information [here](#)) has been in solitary confinement in Louisiana state prisons for 40 years. He is now 71 years old. Wallace drew his sparse cell, complete with measurements; the total dimensions are 5 feet 10 inches by 10 feet 1 inches. (For contrast, see the dream house Wallace envisioned, in collaboration with an artist on the outside, in the trailer for the film [Hermans House](#).)



Ojore Lutalo, who spent decades in solitary in New Jersey, integrates cell drawings into his political art collages, which he says express[es] the horrors and degradation of this form of punitive punishment. His artwork appears on [this site](#).



We are eager to know about other art by people in solitary that depicts their daily surroundings. Please send any links or leads to solitarywatchnews@gmail.com.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

<http://www.lucasvilleamnesty.org/2012/03/cell-at-ohio-state-penitentiary.html>

A series of photos of cell block in Preston:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=349218848461745&set=a.349217345128562.103063.169888893061409&type=1&theater>

Los Angeles Central Juvenile Hall was/is a dreary imposing structure with its once white stone-block walls now covered with smoggy soot, mildew and graffiti. One of its exterior walls faces the adjacent railroad tracks and just on the other side of the wall is the solitary confinement unit.

Central as we simply called it back in the spring of 1962 was already 50 years old by the time I first arrived to its entry point at the ripe old age of ten. Central's grimy front windows were barred with rusting iron and gave little away as we approached it.

I have spent to the Central's hole at least a half a dozen times always for fighting. It is said one has only three choices when doing time: Fornicate, Fight or Flee. I knew that the only way to really escape is to alter my paper work so I never considered this. Being sexually abused was also not an option so I squared off with some foe from time to time and without a complaint I did my two or three weeks stint

in the hole to make amends.

For some reason I always seemed to end up on the side of the building facing Centrals towering wall. It was a dreary view of a blank 15 plus foot high wall with only a narrow patch of yellowing grass and weeds between my cell and the wall. Neither wildlife nor plants of any kind could be seen from the grimy sooty window with a heavy screen that smelled like someone had sneeze in a closed car. Only a bit of the sky was visible above the wall and only then on days when the smog was at a reasonable level. Not often in LA.

The cell had a steel bunk bolted to the floor with a two inch thick mattress covered with sheets and a standard military style wool blanket, and this bedding could be all taken away for any reason. The bed took up the space from one side of the cell to the other. The bunk was located right under the window on the far side of the cell from the door so that would make the cell about 6.5 feet wide and the length and the depth couldnt have been much longer. There was a toilet sink combo which filled much of this space located in plain view of the 6 X 12 wire reinforced window in the door.

In solitary I passed the day reading comics with frequent interruptions from others locked up nearby. There were the Please let me out! type crying and banging on their doors to no avail. Then there was the occasional angry inmate cursing and threatening the guards while also banging on the door or throwing his bedding about.

At times the guards would feel the need to rush into a cell to subdue an inmate and the sounds of their keys rattling on their hips would mix with the sounds of the struggle to subdue the inmate. One could hear the demands of the guards countered by the shouts of defiance by the inmate.

With these sounds and a little imagination you could then visualize the struggle in your head without ever being able to see it. The struggle would invariably arouse other inmates to yell in support of their fellow inmate like babies in a nursery are lead to cry in support of one another.

It was as if I was in a mad house and Im sure that a good percentage of the inmates did indeed have mental problems that were only being aggravated by their surroundings.

In between these dramatic episodes in the relative silence of my solitary confinement I would lie on my bunk and listen to the melancholic sound of the trains passing by on the other side of the wall. I enjoyed imagining the beautiful places that they might be headed to. The passing trains soon began to represent the lives of the free populace which were unrestrained and continuing to advance even while my own life stagnated behind the towering walls just outside my window. I came to realize that in my bunk I was out of sight and out of mind and I longed to be free and moving forward along with the passengers on the trains just over the wall.

Thankfully the reading and day dreams got me through when others broke down and were forced into ever longer stays in a vicious cycle.

After a confrontation with an unstable inmate whom had a habit of self mutilation I was taken to solitary confinement where I spent both Christmas and New Years Eve holidays of 1968. I was 17 years old.

Although nearly a half century has passed now I can still clearly recall the solemn escorted walk over to Prestons solitary confinement unit in mid-afternoon. It was cool but clear outside and the pathway following just inside the perimeter fence allowed me an up close and personal look at the rear of the institutions original building, referred to as Preston Castle. Built in 1894 the structures closeness to our path allowed me a clear view of the decay of all but the red brick. The era in which it had been built was also an era when Brickbride asylums were built around the nation. I believe Prestons architectural design was heavily influenced by these asylums. Pictures can be found using:

kirkbridebuildings followed by .com

The interior of the structure was especially ravaged by time and thus the entire building now took on an even more haunting appearance in my mind. We walked past a large tree turned and entered the solitary confinement building through a large dark wooden door and up a narrow stair case to the third floor. The center of the aging rectangle building was open allowing a view from the third tier to the first. The individual cells lining the perimeter of the building had doors opening to the tiers hallway lined with a ornate wrought iron railing around the center opening.

A heavy diamond shaped wire mash covered the exterior of the cells lone window and this mash combined with the cells heavy duty interior screen prevented the cleaning of the glass which had thus yellowed over the years and with a build up of grim.

Thus the light entering was highly filtered which made the cell quite dim and the view outside dreary and blurry. My bunk with its green wool blanket was on the left hand side as I entered with the window just behind and to the bunks right. The toilet and sink was also on the right hand side near the door and clearly designed to be visible by the guards though the doors 6 X 12 wire reinforced window which was located just above the locked food slot. This was my entire world for the holidays. No books or any other distraction other than the wails of the other inmates was given.

However when I read about the long term isolation that inmates endure today my experience seems to pale in comparison

Many views of Preston Castle including a couple of a wooden restraint chair with straps can be found here including a wooden restraint chair with straps for the arms and legs:

The images come in slowly

<http://flickrriver.com/groups/479039@N25/pool/interesting/>

Photo 0304 is of Company G, the solitary confinement unit also mentioned in Bunkers Memoir Education of A Felon.

Preston School of Industry:

Page 23: I was sent to Northern California, outside Stockton, to the Preston School of Industry. It was for boys sixteen and seventeen, with a few who were eighteen. I had barely turned fourteen. I was assigned permanently to G Company, a unit with a three-tier cell block. It was dark and gloomy and a carbon copy of a prison cell block

Page 24: they were not allowed to keep a youth under sixteen in a lockup cell for more than twenty-nine days at a time. So on the thirtieth morning, they took me out of G Company after breakfast. I checked into the regular company and went to lunch. After lunch they took me back to G Company

Search this site for my more in depth story of mu own experience using this.

Voices from Solitary: Christmas in the Hole, 1968

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