

LOCAL

Art exhibit shines light on incarcerated women in Minnesota

Marcia Haffmans wants to illuminate a hidden population of women in Minnesota, and she's using flashlights to do it.

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Marcia Haffmans wants to illuminate a hidden population of women in Minnesota, and she's using flashlights to do it.

Haffmans, a visual artist in Minneapolis, is preparing to unveil an installation this week at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, which features the handwriting of incarcerated women in Minnesota stitched into sculptures roughly the size of fists. To properly see the sculptures — collectively titled, "Script from Within" — patrons will have to pick up a flashlight off the floor and illuminate them.

Haffmans' goal is to draw attention to Minnesota's rising number of people behind bars. By presenting the women's words in raw, handwritten form — spelling errors and all — she endeavors to spotlight the identities of those stuck behind bars, many with families and struggling with addiction and poverty.

"It feels like I'm really on to something," she said. "It's very humbling. It's very scary."

Haffmans, an international business lawyer, is originally from the Netherlands — a country with a much smaller prison population than the United States' — where she worked as a public defender. After moving to Minnesota in the 1990s, she's been struck by reports about the state's rising incarceration rate, she said.

Decades of tough-on-crime policies from the Legislature have caused Minnesota's prison population to grow about 150 percent over the past 25 years, according to the Department of Corrections. It's among the fastest growth rates in the nation.

As a consequence, the state has run out of room in state prisons, and instead turned to county jails ill-equipped for long-term stays to house inmates. Legislators have also been debating the possibility of reopening a private prison in Minnesota to house the overflow.

Haffmans wanted to find a project that brought to life the people behind these statistics, particularly focusing on imprisoned women, of whom there are currently 737 in state correctional facilities, according to July DOC data. Her idea was to make the women's handwriting the center of the art, she said. "So let's flip everything around and let's say to the women who are incarcerated, 'You are the artist.'"

To fund the project, Haffmans obtained a \$10,000 grant for emerging artists from the Minnesota State Arts Board. She was among 191 artists to get funded out of 668 applicants, said Sue Gens, executive director of the arts board.

To find subjects, Haffmans first reached out to the state's only prison for women, the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Shakopee, but the warden refused to grant her access to inmates, she said. She had more luck talking to staff at metro area jails.

Haffmans eventually persuaded about 100 women to give her handwritten messages to use in her installation, covering everything from their families to their experiences being incarcerated. Many of the women were in jail awaiting trial, meaning they had not been convicted of crimes.

"I can't describe it," she said of the final product. "You just have to experience the exhibit."

The exhibit runs from Jan. 10 to Feb. 28 at the law school's art gallery on 875 Summit Av. in St. Paul. Haffmans will speak about the installation on Thursday, Feb. 15, at 6 p.m. at the college.



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1515468057617: 'Script from within' The show runs from Jan. 10 to Feb. 28 at the Mitchell Hamline art gallery.