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THIS PROJECT WOULD not have been completed without the cooperation, support and encouragement of numerous individuals.

First, we offer our most sincere thanks to the artist, Mark Francis. We certainly appreciate his astounding sculptures, but we also value the lengthy and often long distance relationship that we have shared with him for more than a decade. We are honored that he called us last spring, initiating the discussions that made this exhibition possible.

Secondly, we offer our gratitude to Roberta Harding. It was she who introduced Mark’s work to our museum and helped us to acquire our first pieces by him. Roberta also served ably for many years as a member of KFAC’s advisory board.

We are grateful to the great Lexington-based artist and advocate Robert Morgan, who, for years, supported Mark and his work. Robert donated an early sculpture by Mark to our collection, and he gave generously of his time to author the introduction to this catalog.

Additionally, we extend our thanks to 21c Museum Hotels for lending several key works from their extraordinary collection.

As always, we owe our thanks to everyone at Morehead State University, our parent institution. Without MSU’s consistent support and trust, projects like this would be impossible. We also offer our thanks to the Friends of Kentucky Folk Art Center Board of Directors, who are always ready with advice and support.

I began to warm and chill
To objects and their fields,
A ragged cup, a twisted mop,
The face of Jesus in my soup,
Those sinister dinner deals,
The meal trolley’s wicked wheels,
A hooked bone rising from my food,
All things either good or ungood.

~Nick Cave (b. 1957)
from The Mercy Seat (1988)
THE CLOISTER OF PRISON
An Introduction

THE FIRST TIME I SAW ONE of Marvin (Mark) Francis’s tiny dioramas of a man in a cage I felt like I was a kid again, looking at an exotic, menacing, and beautiful jewel-like insect trapped in an old mayonnaise jar with air holes poked in the lid.

I was totally fascinated and totally bewildered. Marvin’s work takes you totally away from all that is familiar and drops you into a somewhat frightening but captivating world where all the rules are changed and a strange language is spoken. I felt compelled to enter that world and decipher that language.

There seemed to be a riddle within a riddle, and Marvin’s personal mythology was the key. Marvin slowly began to open the lid of that mayonnaise jar and over the next few years gave us many clues to solve that riddle. Many characters began to appear and his unique style and abilities began to emerge.

The most amazing character of all seemed to always be Marvin himself, trying to solve his own personal riddle: Who am I, and why am I here? It’s an age-old question and one asked by artists from the dawn of time, but of course Marvin did not even know that he was an artist at first. Marvin seemed driven to create as a survival technique, more out of instinct than design.

Marvin was in the Kentucky state prison system doing a life sentence for a murder conviction. And, everything about Marvin’s situation fed his imagery, content, symbols, and expression. The deeper I got into his work, I began to sense something that I recognized, something I had seen before, something deeply embedded in my subconscious memory.

The faces of terror, bewilderment, discovery, and participation in the divine comedy were all created and executed in the same style and symbols as the medieval illuminated manuscripts I had seen in history class and Bible studies.

His passionate search for himself and an understanding of the human condition was also much akin to the work produced in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. There was a deep search going on to find and come to terms with his personal demons.

When I thought more about it, I realized, though Marvin was cloistered in the Kentucky state prison system, in very many ways he was working under the same conditions as monks in a traditional monastery system. This realization began to unlock all the mysteries and riddles of Marvin’s work and is an insight I feel is important to share.

~ Robert Morgan
April 12, 2016
WHEN MARK FRANCIS ENTERED prison in 1986 at the age of twenty-five, Kentucky, indeed the entire world, was a much different place. He was released in the autumn of 2014, blinking into a strange new reality dominated by the blue glow of LED screens. Over the past three decades, America changed in ways that would have been almost unimaginable to anyone alive in the 1980s. The Berlin Wall fell, and the Soviet Union came undone. The Space Shuttle program was mothballed. America was attacked dramatically by domestic and then foreign terrorists. Rural America and the Rust Belt continued to decline as young people left the farms and manufacturing jobs left our shores. The number of television channels grew exponentially. The nation fought multiple and often desultory wars in the Middle East. The “Great Recession” brought severe economic difficulties and unleashed societal anxieties. The internet and the miniaturization of computer processing technology led to the ubiquity of personal computers and cellular phones. A black man became President of the United States. But, none of these startling changes meant anything to Mark Francis. He was confined to a cell, contemplating his past, and teaching himself to make some of the most powerful and technically astounding papier-mâché sculptures in the history of American art.

Francis’ work was first shown at the Kentucky Folk Art Center (KFAC) in the spring of 2003 as part of a traveling exhibition of art made by prison inmates from across Kentucky. Like most prison art, these works were made of materials that the artists could get their hands on, and many pieces would have been very labor intensive. Amongst the dozens of drawings and paintings on printer paper, the model vehicles, and the matchstick fiddles, Francis’ two sculptures stood out as possessing wit and soul. Yes, his pieces, like many others, displayed obsessive technique and almost countless hours of work; however, it was clear that Mark Francis was becoming an artist with something important to say.

TIME & CHANCE

*I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all.*

~ Ecclesiastes, 9:11

New American Standard Bible

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PART I: The Things He Carries with Him

MARK FRANCIS WAS BORN in Detroit in 1960, but when he was young, his father moved the family to his hometown of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, about an hour north-west of Nashville. When Mark was only seven years old, his father shot and killed his mother. The shooting was ruled accidental, and his father was never charged for a crime. This incident, obviously, left deep scars, and it impacted Francis’ life from that day forward. He and two younger sisters were now alone in the care of an abusive father, and Mark took the brunt of the pain and punishment that he handed out.

In 2004, KFAC acquired five of Francis’ works. At this time, and for several years after that, he was represented in the world outside by Roberta Harding. Harding was a professor at the University of Kentucky College of Law, who did death penalty defense and maintained an interest in prison art. Harding had learned about Francis through a friend and soon began acting as his agent and promoter. Through Harding, KFAC purchased five of the artist’s sculptures. She also donated an early work from her personal collection, as did the Lexington artist Robert Morgan, who provided the introduction for this catalog.

In 2005, KFAC presented these seven works along with a number of other recent museum acquisitions in an exhibition titled, New Perspectives. Francis’s sister, Kathy McCormick, and her husband, Tim, attended the opening. One of her brother’s sculptures in the exhibition brought Kathy to tears. One of her brother’s sculptures in the exhibition brought Kathy to tears. Man Fishing (2004) depicts a middle aged man (perhaps the artist himself in some imagined future) with a cigar and a rotund belly protruding from beneath the bottom of a sweaty t-shirt. The man has just caught a bass and sits on a stump with a dog, a tackle box, and a cooler in front of a rail fence that displays a “No Fishing” sign.

However, the aspect of the work that had such a powerful impact on the artist’s sister would go almost unnoticed by a casual observer. At the bottom of the scene, between the fisherman and his dog, sits a small Hormel Tamales can with worms protruding from its open lid. Upon seeing this, Kathy began to cry. She said that after their mother’s death, their father became increasingly abusive, especially when he was drinking. When their father came home drunk, Mark, at the age of only eight or nine, would provoke him and take the beating, many of which were severe, in order to protect his younger sisters. After these incidents, the father would leave home, sometimes for days on end. Mark would then be left to care for and feed his younger siblings. The children would scour the house for loose change. He would take whatever money they could find to a nearby store, often returning with a can of tamales.
AS A YOUNG MAN, Mark Francis did a stint in the Navy and worked as a carpenter. He found his way back to western Kentucky in 1986, suffering from a severe addiction to drugs and alcohol. Along with two other young men, Francis planned a home invasion robbery, targeting a local grocery store owner, who, they believed, would have money at his house. When the men arrived at the home of Seldon Dixon, Sr. with a plan to tie him up and rob him, the young men’s ill-conceived plan went sideways. Dixon saw the men coming toward his house from his carport. He pulled a gun from his pocket and fired multiple shots. Francis panicked and returned a single shot in Dixon’s direction. Mark Francis was unharmed, but Dixon would die later at a local hospital.2

Francis was convicted of murder and sentenced to twenty-five years to life in prison. He believed his life was over. He was distraught over what he had done. The scene played on a loop in his mind with a sense of horrible unreality.3 Mark Francis was only twenty-five years old. He had endured a traumatic and abusive childhood. Addiction had led him to make some horrible and desperate decisions, resulting in the death of another man. This is where his story might have ended were it not for one prison art teacher.
SECTION II: Light in the Darkness

MARK FRANCIS STILL WISHES that he could thank her. He wants to tell her how she changed his life, maybe saved his life. When Francis began serving his sentence, he was sent to the Northpoint Training Center near Burgin, Kentucky, southwest of Lexington. There he enrolled in an art appreciation class offered at the prison by Lindsey Wilson College. He had never made art before. When he was young, his father would berate and denigrate him for drawing or coloring, calling it “sissy shit.” But, in prison, Francis actually found himself with the psychological freedom to pursue this interest.

One day in class, his instructor, Betty Messenger, challenged the students to make something, anything, using whatever materials that they could get their hands on. Francis used toilet paper and white shoe polish to sculpt a cockatoo, its eye colored with ink from a pen. The quality of Francis’ first attempt at art making startled both him and his teacher. From that point on, Mark Francis devoted himself to producing art. For the next two and half decades, he spent almost every free moment making increasingly complex sculptures.

Through and Through, 16 x 14 x 8, papier-mâché and other media, 16 x 14 x 8, Collection of the Artist

Defiance, 2009, papier-mâché, 18 x 10 x 10, Collection of the Artist
IT IS NOT AN EASY thing to do, to make art in prison, especially art like Francis wanted to make. For one, his choice of materials was limited, as were his sources of inspiration. He recounts the time that he wanted to make a sculpture of a horse. He spent weeks in an attempt to get a photograph of a horse from which to work. He needed to see how a horse stood, how its back swayed, how the muscles shone beneath the skin. He talked to everyone. He asked friendly guards and administrators for help. *It was only a picture. Couldn’t someone sneak him one in?* Francis never got his picture, since inmates were not allowed to possess photographs.

*Buster Head*, 2007, papier-mâché, 18 x 9 x 7, KFAC Permanent Collection

*Kids on Horseback*, 2007, papier-mâché and other media, 10 x 11 x 10, 21c Museum Hotels Collection
While prison inmates can purchase some basic art supplies like paint and brushes, many of the other types of tools that the artist needed were off limits. For obvious reasons, prisoners cannot possess drills or sharp tools for cutting and sculpting. This left Francis with a need to improvise. He often had to make his own tools through creative use of other available objects. Things like paper clips, push pins, and nail trimmers came in handy. Emery boards provided a good substitute for sand paper. Francis eventually discovered how to make his own sculpting tools from old paint brushes by removing the bristles and flattening the metal holders. All in all, Mark Francis had to maintain an extraordinary commitment to his artistic vision if he was going to be successful in the environment of prison.

Francis had to experiment extensively with media, as well. He had easy access to toilet paper, purchasing rolls from the prison canteen. However, standard papier-mâché paste recipes typically call for other items such as white glue, flour, and salt. These things were virtually impossible to come by, and glue, in fact, was not even permitted in Kentucky prisons during Francis’ time at Northpoint. He began with a paste made from a combination of oatmeal and rice, but he eventually settled on a formula that used crushed ramen noodles dissolved in water. After the artist was transferred to Kentucky State Penitentiary in 1988, he finally had access to glue, which provided a major improvement in his working conditions.

Francis’ earlier works were rudimentary when compared to the things that he can make today. Like all beginning artists, he started small. He copied the work of others or sculpted figures from popular culture. However, it was not long before he began to find his voice as an artist and speak about his life and the life of other prison inmates. By the early 1990s, he had begun to make the first examples of what would become his signature series, “the man in a cage.” In these works, he depicts a figure alone in a cage, which is often too small to comfortably contain him. The cages are built using wooden plaque boards as the top and base, and small wooden dowel rods form the enclosing bars. The artist settled on these materials because they were approved and available to him via mail order.
IN 1994’S MAN IN A CAGE, a small, solitary figure in a striped prison jump suit sits on a die, a ball and chain attached to his right ankle. A clock on the rear of the cage is marked with years in apparently random order, but one that was surely of personal significance to the artist. On the floor of the cage is painted a “Go To Jail” square from a Monopoly game. Francis’ early works about prison life are more thematic than narrative, and those two key themes of time and chance are always prevalent to varying degrees.

In 1996’s Man in a Cage Holding a Man in a Cage..., Francis continues to play with the concepts of space and time. A gaunt figure is cramped in the small cage. Again, there are oversized dice at his feet, and he is shown holding a sculpture of a miniaturized version of himself holding another man in a cage who is, in turn, holding the same sculpture. The viewer is left to assume that this process repeats itself forever, the figure shrinking infinitely into nothingness. On the back of the cage, a clock is displayed with no numbers, save the year 2000, which is written at the six o’clock position. On the clock’s face, Francis has painted the album cover from Pink Floyd’s Dark Side of the Moon, which depicts the dispersion of a beam of light through a prism. This is cleverly mirrored on the floor of the cage where both a stop watch and the sculpture’s base show the search light from a prison watch tower being cast across the landscape. Here the light is a threat, rather than a beacon of hope.

These early works show the artist grappling with the broader meaning of his imprisonment. He is taking on big philosophical and social issues. What role does chance play in all of our lives? If Francis’ father had not been an abusive alcoholic, would he have still become addicted to drugs? If he hadn’t hooked up with the wrong people upon returning to Kentucky, would he have ever been involved in a plan to rob someone? If the bullet had only landed an inch to the left or right, would Mr. Dixon have died? In addition, these early works show the artist struggling to understand the concept of time in prison. How does he mark its passage, certainly in different ways than we do in the outside world? Is there a point at which time has no meaning or when it ceases to exist as a useful concept? In the early 1990s, these were the things that the young artist was trying to figure out.
Mortus Intra Muros, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 25 x 12 x 6, Collection of the Artist

LifeBlood, 2010, papier-mâché and other media, 18 x 12 x 8, Collection of the Artist

Chow Time, 2009, papier-mâché and other media, 24 x 12 x 12, Collection of the Artist

No Room at the House, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 15 x 7 x 5, Collection of the Artist
SECTION III: The Man in the Cage Becomes a Master

BY THE EARLY 2000s, Mark Francis was coming fully into his own as an artist. After untold thousands of hours of art making, he had become a master of both material and technique. The Kentucky Department of Corrections and staff at Kentucky State Penitentiary (KSP) had become supportive of the artist’s work. At KSP, Francis lived in a single-person cell on the institution’s “honor walk” where he could focus on his sculptures with limited interruption. The prison also allowed him to get works out into the world through Roberta Harding.

As Francis’ skills advanced and he found himself in an increasingly supportive environment, he began to speak more confidently as an artist. The message and meaning of his works became more profound and complex. Whereas the broad themes present in his early work (time, space, and chance) were still present, he was now incorporating narrative to powerful effect.

**Man in a Cage Holding a Rat,** 2003, papier-mâché and other media, 13 x 12 x 9, KFAC Permanent Collection

**The Key to What**, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 17 x 12 x 12, Collection of the Artist
HIS SEVEN PIECE SHOWING in KFAC’s New Perspectives show in 2004 seemed to provide a springboard for bringing broader public attention to the artist’s sculptures. Following this exhibition, there were numerous articles in the regional and national press about him and his work. Harding was also finding quality exhibition opportunities, including group shows in places like Berlin, Germany (2006) and New York City (2007).

One of the works from the New Perspectives exhibition perfectly demonstrated Francis’ growing confidence and strengthening artistic voice. Time spent in the same prison that houses Kentucky’s death row inmates had a profound impact on him, and this resulted in 2004’s Execution. In this work, a Christ figure in a red prison jump suit is tied to a cross inside the cage. On the figure’s right sits an electric chair, to his left is the cocktail of three chemicals used for lethal injection, which are connected intravenously to the figure’s arm. The rear of the cage is covered with a typed list of the names and dates for many inmates executed in Kentucky, over which various execution related news clippings are posted. Regardless of the viewer’s personal or political feelings about capital punishment, this work stands as a powerful statement on the issue.

Execution, 2004, papier-mâché and other media, 13 x 12 x 9, KFAC Permanent Collection
BY THE LATE 2000s, Francis was using his “man in a cage” motif to fully explore the emotional and psychological impacts of confinement. While the cages had remained largely the same, still constructed of plaque boards and dowel rods, the size of the figures within them had grown. In many works, like the stunning Barbed Wire (2008), inmates are depicted kneeling, crouching, or otherwise crammed into cages that close in on every side. There is no room to move, almost no room to breathe. The faces on the figures display different emotions: fear, defeat, anxiety, anguish, or some combination of all of these feelings.

In Self-Portrait (2007), the artist depicts himself in a cage. His head is bowed, and a mask is displayed on the crown of his head. He holds other masks in each hand, and even more hang from the rear of the cage behind him. This sculpture presents intellectually and psychologically sophisticated ideas about the concept of personal identity behind bars. Here an inmate must wear different masks for the different types of performances required to survive his incarceration. All the while his true identity is kept hidden.

Barbed Wire, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 19 x 12 x 9, KFAC Permanent Collection

Self-portrait, 2007, papier-mâché and other media, 13 x 13 x 10, KFAC Permanent Collection
IN NATURAL BORN FELON (2009), Francis makes a clear statement about the effects of child abuse. Given the circumstances of his childhood, the artist has deep personal connections to this issue, and he often donated proceeds from his art sales to organizations that advocated for abuse victims and troubled youth. Francis learned firsthand that many prison inmates had been victims of such abuse. In Natural Born Felon, he replaces his typical inmate figure with that of a crying toddler, who is covered in bruises and cigarette burns. The infant is encircled by a chain of handless clocks, which spell out the title of the piece. On the figure’s right wrist is a cast signed with multiple inscriptions, which read:

- Good for nothing
- Loser
- Should have had an abortion
- Bastard
- All your fault
- Worthless
- No good
- Hate you
- Mommie is so sorry but you must learn to listen!!
- Mom

AS THE OLD SAW GOES, windows are the eyes to the soul, and no one does eyes quite like Mark Francis. The eyes on his figures are always slightly oversized but not in a cartoonish way. Whereas a great sculptor like Rodin might draw emotion from the way a body is posed, for Francis the eyes of his figures are often the key to understanding the power and meaning of his works. The eyes show the fear, the longing, the pain, and even the hope that each character feels. And, in many cases, the eyes in a Mark Francis figure seem fully alive, glistening and watching.
BUT, FOR ALL OF THE MOVING WORKS discussed above, Mark Francis could hit more than one note and take on a wide variety of subject matter. Many of his pieces display a strong, dark sense of humor. For instance, he sculpted *Turkey Beaks and Feet* (2010) in response to a riot in August, 2009 at the Northpoint Training Center, where he had served the first part of his sentence. Prisoners there rioted to protest the extremely low quality of food provided by the prison’s dining contractor. During the riot, numerous buildings and prison facilities were damaged, and almost the entire population of the prison had to be sent to other facilities while repairs were made. The incident created a potent political scandal in Kentucky, and the governor, state legislature, and authorities openly debated the failures of both prison management and the food contractor that led up to the riot.

In *Beaks and Feet*, a food contractor employee leans against a menu board with a mop, picking his nose. One prison inmate wearing an apron pumps turkey sludge out of a barrel onto the meal tray of another inmate, who looks away in disgust. The figures and the scene are hilariously over-the-top. The instruction label on the turkey sludge barrel reads, “Add thickening agents to produce imitation Ham, Bologna, Bacon, Sauces, Soup and Desserts. Less than 1% meats by volume. MADE IN NORTH KOREA.”

In addition, Francis used his artwork to take occasional jabs at the prison staff, itself. In *Keep ‘em Down* (2007), a prison guard on top of the cage has his hands and legs wrapped around the handle of a plunger. Inside the cage the plunger rests on top of an inmate’s head as he is forced slowly downwards into a steel toilet.

The artist states that he would sometimes “take a little heat” for his works that poked fun at or protested the actions of prison staff or administrators. However, his right to say what he needed to say was largely respected. Only one work, which depicted a guard mooning a prisoner, got Francis time in the hole. Funnily, the guard portrayed in the piece was a friend of the artist’s, and the work was merely an outgrowth of their ongoing banter.
MARK FRANCIS ALSO DIRECTED his black humor at the behavior of inmates. One recurring target is “Buster,” a sexually sadistic “bull queer” character. In this series of works, the first name Buster is typically followed by the last name Head or Cherry. In The Weight Pile (2008), Buster is shown holding a leash, which is connected to a collar around the neck of a submissive victim. The submissive figure wears makeup and a mop wig. His body is covered with tattoos of dozens of men’s names, many of which have been crossed through. This particular figure also appears as a recurring character in other of Francis’ sculptures.

Buster Cherry (2008) presents a scene of sexual sadism in a prison shower. Here Buster uses soap-on-a-rope to control three new inmates. The towel clad victims are presented as a twisted version of the three wise monkeys (see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil), and the entire scene can be hidden inside a case that shows a startled eye peering through a keyhole. While Weight Pile and Buster Cherry do possess a strong vein of dark comedy or gallows humor, they also call viewers’ attention to a serious human rights problem in American prisons. As a 2001 Human Rights Watch study found, sexual slavery amongst populations of male prisoners in the United States often happens under the guise of consensual relationships and is, therefore, often overlooked by prison staff.11
IN CONTRAST WITH SUCH BOLD and troubling pieces as these, Francis also created subtly moving works, including a series of small sculptures featuring winged mother figures. *Wondering* (2007) and *Mother’s Broken Heart* (2007) depict lone female figures in a dreamlike setting. Both pieces include removable outer cases, which can be used to conceal the emotional work within. In *Comfort* (2008), the winged mother figure is shown providing solace to a prison inmate, who has collapsed to his knees holding a broken heart.

While many of Francis’ most politically and emotionally powerful works dealt with themes relating to prison life, he made numerous works that dealt with lighter subject matter. Over the years, he sculpted growling Kentucky wildcats in blue basketball uniforms, comical dragons, and works featuring wildlife. Birds, with their intricately layered feathers, provided a perfect vehicle for the artist to show off his technical mastery.

In addition to being an outlet for psychological and political commentary on prison life, Mark Francis sometimes used his artwork as currency in prison. He always kept small, quickly made sculptures around. Over the course of his sentence, he used these little sculptures, which could be held in the palm of a hand, to trade for goods with other inmates or to present as gifts to friends and helpful prison staff members.
IN 2009, MARK FRANCIS was transferred from the maximum security Kentucky State Penitentiary to medium security Kentucky State Reformatory at LaGrange. He was nearing twenty-five years served, and the transfer was done to prepare him for his possible parole. This change in his living situation transformed the character of many of Francis’ sculptures. The works from 2009 through 2010 display more angst and anxiousness; they are more uniformly expressive of Francis’ personal emotional state.

During this period two notable motifs emerge—turtles and men coming out of their own skins. The move from KSP, where he had spent two decades, was not easy for Francis. At Eddyville, he had enjoyed a private cell and had become familiar with the workings of that world. At LaGrange, he had a cellmate again, and he was removed from his normal routine. The turtle may symbolize the artist’s desire to go back into his shell or, perhaps, to come out of his shell in his new environment. There is some ambivalence present in these works. In *Waiting for Death* (2009), a fearful character wears a turtle’s shell to which chains and a clock are attached. In different works from the series, prisoners are depicted on top of the turtles in various states of fear, desperation, or remorse.

In other sculptures, Francis depicts figures whose torsos have been opened by a zipper or other means to reveal something, usually another figure, hidden within. In some sculptures, like *Death and Life* (2009) or *Rage* (2010), another character is revealed. In works, like *Inside the Walls* (2010), there is a keyhole in the figure’s chest. These pieces clearly express a desire to release or unlock the emotions and desires that the artist has been forced hold inside himself for so long. In moving from Eddyville to LaGrange, Francis had endured one significant change, and he could sense another big change might be coming. He had almost unbearable hope, but his life offered him no guarantees.
IN THE FALL OF 2011, word came that Mark Francis was coming up for parole. At this time, he was working on a masterpiece. *Prison Blues* (2011) may be the most complex and best executed piece of prison art ever made. This large sculpture makes heavy use of the artist’s emerging keyhole motif and features six individual cells, each of which presents a different portrait of life in prison. In one cell, an insane inmate wears a tin foil hat, which is connected to an imaginary television made out of an old cardboard box. Below him, one inmate reads a pornographic magazine on the top bunk, while his cellmate spies on a guard who is sleeping off a fast food lunch. At bottom right, a disabled inmate plays guitar while his cellmate defecates, and above them another inmate threatens a squirrel with a rolled up magazine. In the top center through a large keyhole, the viewer finds the figure of a kneeling inmate wrapped in barbed wire. His torso is opened by a zipper and a key protrudes from a hole in the figure’s chest. From the opening spills a melting clock. A calendar and clock are painted on one side of the cell, and a miniature of Dalí’s *The Persistence of Memory* is painted on the opposing wall.

The cell block structure of this amazing work presented a technical problem for the artist, however. Unlike his previous works featuring single cells surrounded by open bars, the multitude of walls in *Prison Blues* did not allow for enough ambient light to permit the viewer to clearly see the sculpture’s many intricate details. Francis solved this problem by wiring the piece. Each cell has its own ceiling light, and the guard station includes a rotating ceiling fan. In addition to a main power switch, all of the electrical components can also be controlled by individual switches, and the fan’s speed can even be adjusted by a knob!
THE MERE PRESENCE of an artist of Mark Francis’s skill and accomplishment can make waves in an environment like prison. Some prisoners wanted him to make something for them; refusal made them bitter. Other of Francis’ fellow inmates were surely jealous of the attention he received or the money he made by selling art in the world outside. Some likely perceived him as getting special treatment because of his talents. Some even wanted to teach him a lesson.

Mark Francis does not know who snitched, who made up the story that he was planning an escape only weeks before his parole hearing. But, it was certainly the result of some of the issues described in the preceding paragraph. It also had immediate consequences. Suddenly, Francis was transferred again from LaGrange, where he had been enrolled in an excellent rehabilitation program, to the East Kentucky Correctional Complex at West Liberty, less than thirty miles from our museum. On October 4, 2011, the parole board gave Francis a three-year deferment.

Being denied parole was an enormous blow for Francis. Taken as a whole, the sculptures he made in the months following his deferment were the most personal and bleakest of his career. They are clearly works born out of emotional and psychological crisis. Gone are the biting wit, the keen eye for social commentary, and vivid colors. The sculptures from this period tend toward gray and despair, but they are, nonetheless, intense personal statements about depression.

ON THE DAY AFTER HIS DEFERMENT, Francis completed a harrowing sculpture titled Parole Denied Within (2011). In this work, a shirtless inmate kneels upon a red and black keyhole. He screams in pain as he tears open his own chest, out of which spills the figments of his anguish: razor wire, clocks, locks, keys, a broken heart, and more. Beneath it all, an enraged face protrudes. A small gray tombstone hangs from a chain, bearing the Latin phrase “mortus intra muros” or “death within the walls.”

In other works, the artist imagines himself being consumed by prison. In Just a Number (2012), a nude inmate kneels inside a cage. A bar code hangs around his neck. The stripes from a prison uniform are painted directly onto the figure’s skin. Prison has left a permanent mark, a stain that cannot be removed. Assimilation (2012, pg. 2) depicts a figure literally becoming a part of his environment. His body is being subsumed into the gray walls of the prison.
IT WAS MORE OF A STRUGGLE for Francis to make art at the prison in West Liberty. The administration there at the time was not interested in supporting his artistic endeavors, and the culture, once again, was markedly different from what he had experienced at Eddyville and LaGrange. It was there in April, 2012 where I and Adrian Swain, KFAC’s then Artistic Director, visited the artist for the first time. We were all on edge at first. Adrian and I were nervous because, while we were used to working with artists who had spent time in prison, we had made few prison visits ourselves. Mark Francis was nervous because we were art professionals, and he wanted to impress us. We talked for a good while about life in prison, about Mark’s art, about how the world had changed since he had been incarcerated. We talked hopefully about Mark’s potential release. Where would he go? What would he do? Would he be able to make art in the world outside? In the end, it was a good day.

Regardless of the difficulties and the anxieties that had beset him, Francis did manage to make fine sculptures at West Liberty. His art making there culminated in a large and magnificent self-portrait, completed in March, 2014. The sculpture depicts the artist shackled, sitting in a domed cage. His brow is deeply furrowed with worry. Both hands hold the top of his head. His back is covered with spider web tattoos, which surround a Daliesque painting of a crying eye peering through a keyhole. Large keyholes also provide openings in the bars, and a gold pocket watch hangs by a chain from the cage’s top. The work is filled with yearning and unease, but there is also a glimmer of hope. The keyhole openings in the cage are almost large enough for the figure to crawl through.
SECTION V: Release and Renewal

ON NOVEMBER 3, 2014, Mark Francis left the East Kentucky Correctional Facility in West Liberty a free man. His sister and brother-in-law picked him up and drove him straight to our museum. We knew he was coming. We installed a recently acquired sculpture by him (Redemption, 2013) on a wall shelf near the entrance to our main gallery. Mark walked in beaming, if a little overwhelmed. We bought him his first lunch on the outside at a nearby Mexican joint. He could not believe that there were televisions on the walls. He was startled by all of the diners staring into the little black boxes in their hands. His eyes hurt from an overabundance of light and color.

Mark Francis moved to Tennessee where his sister Kathy lives. He got a job. He got a girlfriend. He married his girlfriend, and he got promoted. He was trying to make up for lost time. He took a trip to the beach. He bought a small house on several acres on the hill above his sister’s place. His probation officer was thrilled with his progress. He initiated a relationship with a sales gallery in Virginia. Then he got an even better job, and he bought a new car. He was trying to find time to make art again. He was finding out that, in the world outside of prison, all of the clocks had hands and they seem to spin faster every day.

He was like a colt let out of the barn for the first time. With all of that exuberant energy, a couple of stumbles were to be expected. His marriage was not a good fit, and the couple split up after only a few months. Francis realizes now that he needs more time before he is ready to live with someone else on a daily basis. He also struggled to make art. His first job left him physically exhausted and with little time to sculpt. A second job left him with an injured back and stiff hands. He is currently working part-time and putting more energy into making art. The last time that I visited Mark Francis at his home just outside of Dickson, TN, he was making a massive papier-mâché tree, the branches of which hold three large owls. It was a commissioned project.
IN THE SPRING OF 2014, only six months out of prison, Mark Francis called me. He needed to get his prison sculptures out of his small house. He said that he could not look at them anymore. He needed a break. He could not move forward as an artist or a person, if he had to be around all of those persistent memories on a daily basis. I asked him to think about it for a few days, and I would think about it, too.

The next week I called back. The Kentucky Folk Art Center purchased Prison Blues with the help of friends who donated to our museum’s small acquisition fund. Francis generously donated a number of other pieces, and all the rest were gathered up to be presented as part of a future, major, solo exhibition of his work.

Sometime in the mid-2000s, Roberta Harding had asked Adrian Swain and me about doing a big solo exhibition of Francis’ sculptures. At that time, we begged off. We said that it wasn’t the right time, that we wanted to see how his work developed, that we wanted to do a show at a time when it could most benefit Francis and help to cement his legacy and reputation. 2016 is that time.

As a self-taught, incarcerated artist, Mark Francis’ accomplishments were unparalleled. But, perhaps more importantly, it was art that saved him in those darkest hours. It was art that helped him deal with the pain and troubles of his early years. It was art that gave him a purpose and a voice. We are tremendously excited to see how he puts his keen eye and wonderful skills to use as he moves forward in a new life, in a new world, in a new century.

~ Matt Collinsworth
April 8, 2016

ENDNOTES

1 Interview with the artist, February 6, 2016.
3 Interview with the artist, February 6, 2016.
4 Interview with the artist, February 6, 2016.
5 Interview with the artist, February 6, 2016.
6 Interview with the artist, February 6, 2016.
7 Unpublished essay written by Roberta Harding with assistance from the artist’s sisters.
8 Unpublished essay written by Roberta Harding with assistance from the artist’s sisters.
9 Unpublished essay written by Roberta Harding with assistance from the artist’s sisters.
10 Telephone conversation with the artist, April 6, 2016.
12 Telephone conversation with the artist, April 6, 2016.
13 Interview with the artist, February 6, 2016.
14 Telephone conversation with the artist, April 6, 2016.
The Acorn, 2008, papier-mâché, 12 x 7 x 7, Collection of the Artist
Ageing, 2012, papier-mâché, 7 x 9 x 7, Collection of the Artist
Aloes & Last, 2009, papier-mâché, 9 x 7 x 6, Collection of the Artist
Assimilation, 2011, papier-mâché, 11 x 10 x 6, Collection of the Artist
Barbed Wire, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 18 x 12 x 9, KFAC Permanent Collection
Bagging for Forgiveness, 2010, papier-mâché, 14 x 8 x 6, Collection of the Artist
Beardy Bob, 2012, papier-mâché, 8 x 7 x 6, Collection of the Artist
Buster Cherry, 2005, papier-mâché and other media, 12 x 9 x 7, Collection of Robert Morgan
Buster Cherry, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 11 x 8 x 5, Collection of the Artist
Buster Hood, 2007, papier-mâché, 10 x 9 x 7, KFAC Permanent Collection
Capital Murder, 2004, papier-mâché and other media, 11 x 9 x 6, Collection of the Artist
Choe Time, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 8 x 12 x 12, Collection of the Artist
Comfort, 2008, papier-mâché, 5 x 5 x 4, Collection of the Artist
Condemned Man is a Cage, papier-mâché and other media, 13 x 10 x 8, Collection of the Artist
Corrosion, 2012, papier-mâché, 7 x 5 x 5, Collection of the Artist
Day Dreaming, 2013, papier-mâché and other media, 17 x 12 x 5, Collection of the Artist
Death & Life, 2009, papier-mâché and other media, 10 x 5 x 4, Collection of the Artist
Debt to Society, 2012, papier-mâché, 14 x 8 x 6, Collection of the Artist
Defiance, 2009, papier-mâché, 18 x 10 x 10, Collection of the Artist
Double Banking, 2014, papier-mâché, 7 x 9 x 9, Collection of the Artist
Dream, 2007, papier-mâché and other media, 5 x 5 x 2, Collection of the Artist
The Dysfunctional Family, 2007, papier-mâché and other media, 9 x 10 x 8, 21c Museum Hotels Collection
Execution, 2004, papier-mâché and other media, 13 x 12 x 8, KFAC Permanent Collection
The Execution II, 2006, papier-mâché and other media, 14 x 12 x 9, 21c Museum Hotels Collection
The Execution III, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 9 x 5 x 5, Collection of the Artist
Going Northern Fast, 2012, papier-mâché, 7 x 6 x 10, Collection of the Artist
Hawk, 2012, papier-mâché, 18 x 12 x 6, Collection of the Artist
How the Hell Did This Happen, 2012, papier-mâché, 7 x 5 x 5, Collection of the Artist
Inside the Walls, 2010, papier-mâché, 14 x 8 x 6, Collection of the Artist
Just a Number, 2012, papier-mâché and other media, 12 x 10 x 7, Collection of the Artist
Keep your Distance, 2007, papier-mâché and other media, 24 x 12 x 12, Collection of the Artist
Kids at a Hollow Tree, 2003, papier-mâché and other media, 10 x 12 x 8, KFAC Permanent Collection
Kids on Horseback, 2007, papier-mâché and other media, 10 x 11 x 10, 21c Museum Hotels Collection
The Key to What, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 17 x 12 x 12, Collection of the Artist
Libedl, 2010, papier-mâché and other media, 18 x 12 x 8, Collection of the Artist
Life Sentence, 2012, acrylics on board, 25 x 19, Collection of the Artist
Lost in Time, 2011, papier-mâché, 11 x 4 x 6, Collection of the Artist
Lovo Devil in the Hole, papier-mâché, 11 x 5 x 3, 21c Museum Hotels Collection
Man in a Cage, 1994, papier-mâché and other media, 13 x 12 x 9, KFAC Permanent Collection, Gift from Robert Morgan
Man in a Capo Dono! Served Time, papier-mâché and other media, 17 x 11 x 9, Collection of the Artist
Man in a Cage Holding a Man in a Cage..., 1996, papier-mâché and other media, 10 x 8 x 5, KFAC Permanent Collection, Gift from Robert Harding
Man in a Cage Holding a Rat, 2003, papier-mâché and other media, 13 x 12 x 9, KFAC Permanent Collection
Man in a Cage with Tattoos, 2003, papier-mâché and other media, 13 x 12 x 9, KFAC Permanent Collection
Man Fishing, 2004, papier-mâché and other media, 10 x 12 x 9, KFAC Permanent Collection
Mortus Intra Muros, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 6 x 12 x 12, Collection of the Artist
Mother's Broken Heart, 2007, papier-mâché, 7 x 5 x 5, Collection of the Artist
My Time, 2011, acrylics on paper, 29 x 23, Collection of the Artist
Natural Born Felon, 2009, papier-mâché and other media, 15 x 12 x 9, KFAC Permanent Collection
No Room at the House, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 15 x 7 x 5, Collection of the Artist
Notabed, 2007, papier-mâché, 6 x 2 x 2, Collection of the Artist
Purple Denial, 2006, papier-mâché, 14 x 8 x 4, Collection of the Artist
Perverse Denial Within, 2011, papier-mâché, 12 x 6 x 6, KFAC Permanent Collection
Poco, 2004, papier-mâché and other media, 5 x 3 x 3, Collection of the Artist
Ponal Pox, 2012, papier-mâché, 14 x 10 x 8, Collection of the Artist
Pyton Blues, 2011, papier-mâché and other media, 28 x 24 x 12, KFAC Permanent Collection
Rags, 2010, papier-mâché, 10 x 4 x 5, Collection of the Artist
The Rats, 2009, papier-mâché, 8 x 7 x 4, Collection of the Artist
Redemption, 2012, papier-mâché and other media, 12 x 10 x 8, KFAC Permanent Collection
Reflection, 2013, papier-mâché, 25 x 18 x 5, KFAC Permanent Collection
Self-portrait, 2007, papier-mâché and other media, 13 x 12 x 10, KFAC Permanent Collection
Self-portrait, 2016, papier-mâché and other media, 23 x 12 x 12, KFAC Permanent Collection
Smoke & Charley (paint), 2008, papier-mâché, 11 x 10 x 5, Collection of the Artist
Snake Eye, 2011, papier-mâché, 10 x 9 x 6, Collection of the Artist
Tears of Time, 2012, papier-mâché and other media, 19 x 9 x 8, Collection of the Artist
Through & Through, 2013, papier-mâché and other media, 36 x 34 x 9, Collection of the Artist
Turkey Books & Foot, 2010, papier-mâché and other media, 19 x 9 x 8, Collection of the Artist
Waiting for Death, 2014, papier-mâché, 7 x 6 x 4, Collection of the Artist
Way the Wight Pile, 2008, papier-mâché and other media, 19 x 10 x 8, Collection of the Artist
Wonderful, 2002, papier-mâché and other media, 15 x 12 x 9, Collection of the Artist
Wandering, 2007, papier-mâché, 5 x 3 x 3, Collection of the Artist