



*Practice of Freedom*

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## **A Reflection on Rafael DeJesus' Work & Prison Art Programs**

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*“After 23 years in jail, my brother needs to be released. He should be home with his family and should not be deported. Rafael deserves a second chance in life. While in prison, he has conducted himself with grace and integrity, being a model prisoner for two decades. Yes, he was involved in the crime but the sentence does not fit the crime. My brother was a good kid who made one bad choice and he is paying for that with his life”- Berenice Albright - Rafael's sister*

**R**afael DeJesus was born in the Dominican Republic in 1969. He moved to the United States when he was 15 years old, with his sister and mother. In 1993, at the age of 23, he was arrested in Michigan for two drug offenses: a three-ounce cocaine transaction and a nine-ounce cocaine possession. Despite being a first time non-violent offender, he was convicted and sentenced to four consecutive mandatory minimum sentences, totaling 60 to 100 years.

Of his three co-conspirators, one served 90 days before being paroled, another was sentenced to 60 months of probation and the last one was not charged. In 2003, mandatory minimum sentencing laws were changed but the changes were not made retroactive.

While incarcerated, he completed numerous college courses (including seminary classes) and certificates and has exhibited his paintings regularly since 2005. Rafael will be eligible for parole in 2024; he will be 54 years old. His mother has since passed away, leaving his sister Berenice alone to fight for his release.

We cannot pretend to remotely understand what Rafael DeJesus has gone through, and still does. Incarceration, with its loss of personal freedom and privacy, is not a concept that one can intellectualize, rather one has to live it. But we can empathize with him through his art, a beautiful manifestation of his unbroken spirit.

Art can be easy to dismiss because it is so difficult to quantify, not monetarily, but in terms of its place in the human experience. After all, don't artists make things that nobody needs? Sarcasm aside, if art is such a trivial thing, why is it that it appeared in almost all civilizations long before written language? When symbolism entered the thinking process, art got a voice. While it is impossible to clearly define all that art is and encompasses, allow me to try to frame it a bit.

Art abhors vacuum. It is triggered by the confluence of two catalysts: context and technology. We are the product of how and where we live, whether we acknowledge it or not. Context (environment, cultural mores, etc.) permeates all creative processes. We are little more than bipedal social constructs, wrapped in an emotional shell of flesh and blood. Philosophy teaches us the virtue of reason, the "*cogito ergo sum*" badge of honor. Yet reason is often merely skin deep and quickly overtaken by our true core. No matter how long ago we left the ancestral cave, we've never ceased to be emotional creatures. This duality is at the essence of the creative process, a gut feeling moves to the brain and onward to the hand.

Technology and art have always had a symbiotic relationship. The domestication of fire led to the first drawing tools. The current digital revolution allows imagination to be the only limiting factor in art making. Artists have always been at the forefront of technological progress, as a tool to explore new realms of artistic freedom and expression. Art is an emotional embodiment of technology and context; it is therefore fundamentally human.

Allowing inmates to connect with their humanity through art programs is an essential part of maintaining a sense of hope, no matter how fleeting. It is art as an affirmation of self, art as a coping mechanism, art as a tool of self-discovery and healing, art as freedom. Even Gitmo has one such program.

Looking at Rafael's work allowed me to re-visit why I make art, and why it matters.

*An ongoing petition to release Rafael can be signed through the following website that Berenice created to draw attention to the case of her brother:*  
<https://freeraphaeldejesus.wordpress.com/>