

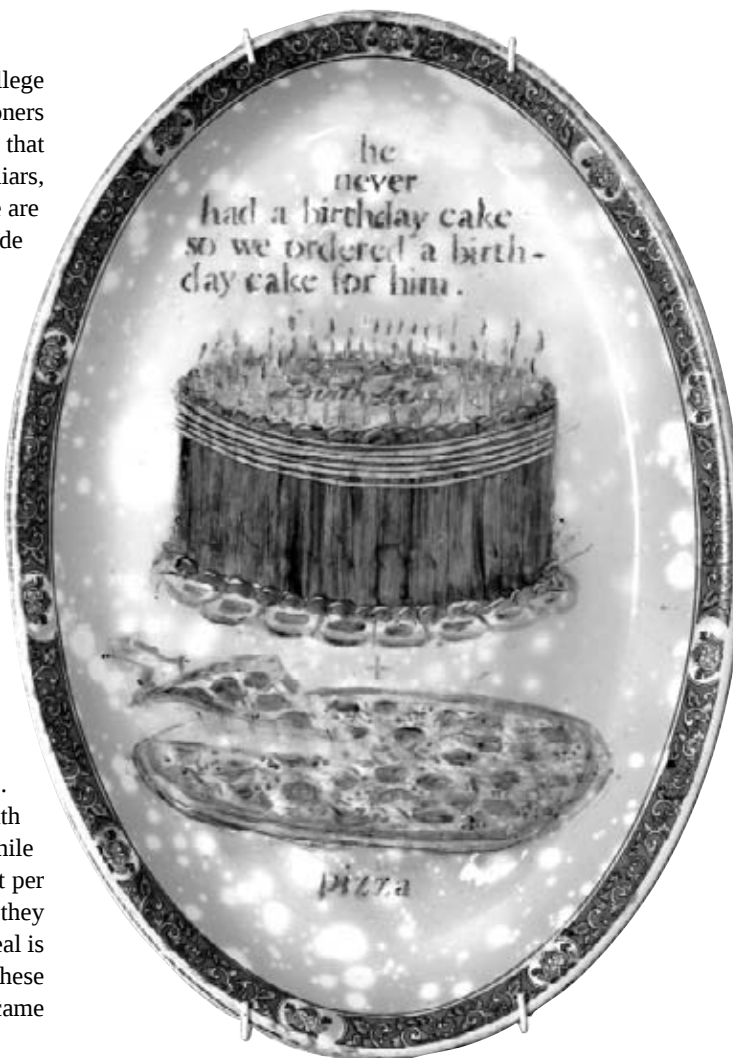
planning to take art classes at Lane Community College this fall. His objective with the exhibit is to give prisoners an identity and shake stereotypes. “Most people think that prison inmates are bad people. They’re thieves, liars, stealers — that’s just not true,” Hampton says. “There are a lot of good people who end up in prison and they made a mistake and they’re having to pay the price.”

The Last Supper

The concept of choosing your last meal, especially as an inmate on death row, is too disturbing for Oregon State University art professor Julie Green to wrap her brain around. Instead of trying to make sense of the ritual, Green decided to paint. And over the past 15 years, she has painted nearly 500 white porcelain plates with blue tempera illustrations. Reminiscent of Delft pottery, her painted pottery doesn’t feature windmills or idyllic provincial scenes; the dishes feature paintings of death row inmates’ final meal requests — from corn dogs and Coke to fish and ice cream cones.

“Capital punishment is one of many concerns I have about our contemporary society,” she says. Green, a trained tempera painter, became familiar with last meal requests described in a local newspaper while living in Oklahoma, which at the time had the highest per capita rate of execution. “I read those final meals, they humanized death row. What we ask for in our final meal is a bit of a self-portrait or history. All of a sudden, these inmates that I never really thought much about became much more of individuals.”

The plates, when hung together as they will be at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, give a quiet beauty and lasting permanence to something as ephemeral as a meal. Many of the delicate paintings show fast food burgers or paper soda cups, as many inmates are allotted only \$20 for their last supper. Some are elaborate, like a final meal request in Ohio from 2009 that says “Final meal request of a well-done porter house steak with steak sauce, a baked potato with sour cream and bacon bits, salad with lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes, radishes, green peppers, carrots and French dressing, corn on the cob with butter, grapes, macaroni and cheese, dinner rolls and Cool Ranch Doritos with a jar of salsa, strawberry ice cream and strawberry cheesecake — both with real strawberries, a 2-liter of Dr. Pepper with ice and one tea bag” while others are more laconic, like a dish from a meal slated for Oct. 25, 2006, that states in lowercase blue type “request: eat from a vending machine with family members.” Several possess a more somber starkness, expressing “No final meal request.”



‘INDIANA 05 MAY 2007’ BY JULIE GREEN
FROM THE LAST SUPPER SERIES

Green wants her art to be a visual and historical record, like the images of Matthew Brady, the famous American Civil War photographer, which many believe transformed perspectives on war and lead to the Emancipation Proclamation. “These images spoke more than writing could. Art in all forms has a huge potential for waking up our population.”

Although Green holds a firm anti-capital punishment stance, she wanted to create a neutral exhibit as to spark conversation on all sides of the debate. “I love the quote by Andy Warhol, ‘The artists of the future will just point,’” she says. “I feel that’s my role. I’m just pointing.” Green’s goal for the exhibit is to find a permanent home for the collection, ideally in a state with high rates of execution, and to continue painting 50 plates a year until, one day, she hopes, capital punishment is abolished in the U.S. “Why do we have this tradition for final meals? Fifteen years and I still wonder,” Green says.

Dead Man Walking

Upon hearing the music of the opera *Dead Man Walking*, based on Prejean’s experiences as a Catholic nun and spiritual adviser to inmates on death row, Shankman knew he had to bring the production to Eugene for the “Prisons, Compassion, and Peace” conference. In the summer of 2011, Shankman contacted Eugene Opera general director Mark Beudert with the idea, who agreed. The opera board, however, had its reservations. “They were concerned that *Dead Man Walking* would be propaganda,” Shankman says. But, he continues, “It’s not ideologically based. You feel all the pain of the victims’ families.”

“We knew it was going to be controversial,” Beudert says. “It’s a tough opera.” Shankman and Beudert, who both know Prejean personally, invited her to speak to the board. “It was important to her to let us know it was important to her,” Beudert says.

This was not the activist nun’s first journey to Oregon — Prejean has spent time in UO classrooms discussing restorative justice and also taught a creative writing workshop through Shankman’s Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Prejean, who is coming out with a prequel to *Dead Man Walking* in 2015 called *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey*, visited the board in 2011 to convince them that this opera would not be one-sided. She told them that true art, rather than propaganda, illustrates both sides of a conflict and that has always been the goal with the *Dead Man Walking* book, film and opera. “The arts get underneath political belief. They go to the place of humanness where we’re all together as human beings,” Prejean tells *EW*. Prejean believes that the public is too removed from the criminal justice system. “Because they are so removed from it, we only have the arts — we have books to wake us up, film, music, opera. They are so removed from the suffering they drive by. They have no idea of the suffering of solitary confinement, mental illness, drugs. When you’re removed from people you tend to demean them.”

Prejean believes it’s the role of the arts to present the “fierce juxtaposition” of any conflict. “Everyone is worth more than the worst thing they did in their life,” she says, explaining that two-thirds of people are in prison for nonviolent crimes and 90 percent of people on death row were abused as children. “That is the heart of restorative justice. Other than art what do we have?”

Beudert, who will be teaching “Opera and Social Justice” at Notre Dame this spring, knew that the opera would have to walk a fine line in presenting all sides of a crime and its consequences. But he also says that opera as a medium has a long tradition of “holding up a mirror to society.” Beudert points to Verdi’s *La Traviata* as a commentary on sex workers in Paris during the 19th century.

The end of the first act of *Dead Man Walking*, which features world-renowned soprano Janis Kelly as Prejean, is “moving in a way that is dangerous,” Beudert says. Because, unlike operas like *La Traviata* that have over 150 years of distance, *Dead Man Walking* tackles contemporary issues without looking away, like execution and the power of forgiveness. “It’s tough to use the word healing. There are things that can never be healed,” Beudert says of the opera. “But they are part of life and undeniable ... the artistry will move us in spite of ourselves.”

Outside-In

Shankman recalls another student, a UO student, who was moved by Dostoyevsky’s text. “In the classroom an ‘outside’ student got up and said, ‘I’m going with Dostoyevsky on this one.’” The student went onto explain that when he was a senior in high school, he attended a professional baseball game with a friend. The friend got in an argument with another man in the parking lot, who then fatally attacked him. Shankman remembers the student saying, “I hated that guy for doing that to my friend ever since. I detest him.” The student continued, “Ever since I’ve been in this class, I’ve been reflecting on it. I’m trying to see my part in that. We had a real macho atmosphere in our high school, to fight. I was part of that. I’m responsible. I created that.” ■

Prisons, Compassion, and Peace

VISIONS FROM WITHIN

Exhibit runs now through March 31 at Eugene Airport gallery, and Feb. 1 to March 31 at DIVA and the second floor of the Eugene Public Library. Opening reception 5:30 to 8 pm Friday, Feb. 1, at DIVA.

THE LAST SUPPER

Exhibit runs now through Feb. 16 at The Arts Center in Corvallis and March 1 to April 7 at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. Artist’s talk with Julie Green 5:30 pm Wednesday, March 6, at the Schnitzer.

“MEET-AND-GREET” with *Dead Man Walking* composer Jake Heggie and author Sister Helen Prejean. Discussion 5:30 to 6:30 pm Friday, March 15, at Studio One, the Hult Center; \$25.

DEAD MAN WALKING

Pacific Northwest premiere of the opera.

Dead Man Walking shows 7:30 pm Friday, March 15, and 2:30 pm Sunday, March 17, at the Hult Center; \$20-\$84.

For the full list of “Prisons, Compassion, and Peace” events and sponsors, visit eugeneopera.com, unesco.uoregon.edu, eugene-or.gov/library and sponsorsinc.org