

The New York Times

Pristine Sculptures, Disturbing Evidence

The objects in Cameron Rowland's remarkable show at Artists Space offer a history lesson and an aesthetic experience, intricately fused. Accompanied by terse explanatory captions, they expose some of the troubling inequities in American society, especially concerning its prisons and their use of compulsory inmate labor. The process of grasping the meaning of this work equally involves looking, reading and feeling but its subject is one of the most urgent of our time.

ROBERTA SMITH

ART REVIEW

Mr. Rowland, who was born in Philadelphia in 1988 and earned a B.A. in studio art from Wesleyan University, has been exhibiting for less than five years but has become known for his carefully chosen, sometimes arcane use of existing objects. "Bait, Inc.," his 2014 solo show at Essex Street Gallery on the Lower East Side, included scavenged materials like copper and car parts that can generate underground economies. An underlying theme was the way investors and government profit from the new workfare programs begun in 1996.

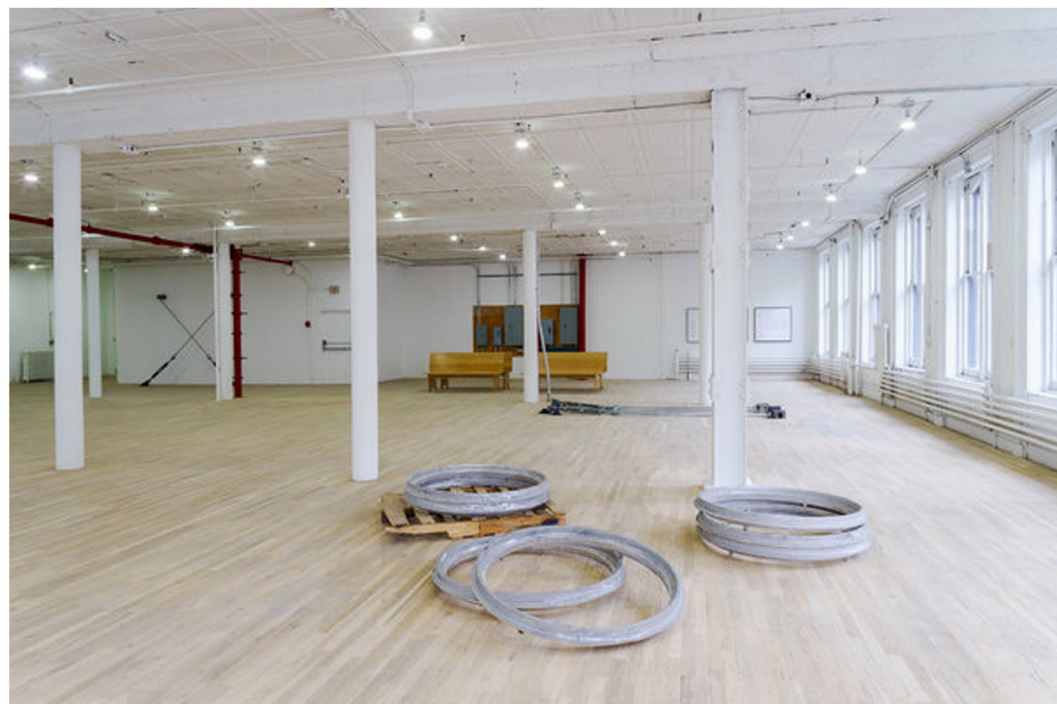
In his Artists Space show, "91020000," Mr. Rowland deals with a not-too-visible economy that is especially dependent on cheap inmate labor. He presents ready-made objects as sculpture but also as charged, disturbing evidence. Much of what we see here has been made by inmates in state prisons — three in New York and one in California

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91020000 An installation view of Cameron Rowland's show at Artists Space. In foreground, two works made from containership lashing bars, each titled "Insurance"; on wall, two Nomex firefighting suits.



An installation view of works in Cameron Rowland's exhibition at Artists Space.

PABLO ENRIQUEZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Pristine Art, Disturbing Evidence In Objects Made Behind Bars

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— one-third of whose occupants are African-Americans, who enter prison at rates that far exceed their representation in society as a whole.

When you enter Artists Space, you'll see several sizable, pristine objects positioned at the edges of the generous space — marginalized, you could say. But their placement establishes instantly that Mr. Rowland is an artist who thinks spatially and sculpturally as well as politically.

Before us stand a generic desk of metal and wood-grain laminate. Three large cast aluminum rings are arranged around a wood pallet, and two firefighting suits — one orange, one yellow — hanging on a nearby wall. In addition, lying side by side on the floor are two lashing bars, or turnbuckles, used to secure containers on ships; four wood benches grouped tightly together; and two more lashing bars are fastened to the wall, forming a large X. All but the lashing bars have been made in prisons.

The objects are enlarged upon by their captions, which the artist considers a part of each piece and which are printed in an accompanying brochure. The combination draws us in, making us ponder in strictly material terms society's disparities and the price of ignoring history. The show is a calm, often devastating argument that the legacy of slavery, and forced labor dating to Reconstruction, persists in the country's prison system.

In the brochure, Mr. Rowland traces the roots of racial imbal-

"Cameron Rowland: 91020000" is on view through March 13 at Artists Space, 38 Greene Street, at Grand Street, SoHo; 212-226-3970, artistspace.org.

ance in prisons to what has been called the re-enslavement of newly freed blacks in the South after the Civil War, a term that gained usage after Douglas A. Blackmon's searing 2009 book on the subject. Because of vague vagrancy laws and corrupt judges, black individuals, mostly men, were frequently arrested and quickly convicted, sentenced and leased to private industry, including large corporations, often to work under conditions so inhumane they died.

Within a few years, states realized that inmates could build the paved roads so sorely needed

Grim connections among a work's title, caption and presence.

for the South's commercial infrastructure and the system of leasing prisoners was superseded by chain gangs. The vagrancy laws continued, part of a network of restrictions known as Black Codes that Southern states began enacting after the 13th Amendment abolished slavery but allowed involuntary servitude as punishment for crime. As Mr. Rowland writes, these laws "aligned the status of ex-slave and the preconvict."

The objects here represent the continuing tradition of prison time used for discounted or so-called stolen labor that contributes to all kinds of economic development. With few exceptions, all inmates work, and for wages well below the \$7.25 federal minimum wage. In New York, inmates' wages for industry jobs can be as low as 10 cents

an hour and can go as high as \$1.14 an hour.

The products inmates make are sold by state agencies organized under the National Correctional Industries Association — New York's is called Corcraft. They can be purchased by schools, universities, courts and police departments and certain nonprofit groups. (Artists Space qualified; the show's title is its customer number with Corcraft.)

The play among the a work's title, caption and material presence provokes connections that are mostly grim and occasionally benign. The wood benches are primarily used in courtrooms, although they can also make you think of churches. The office desk is titled "Attica Series Desk," for the New York prison where it was made. The label also notes that when prisoners seized command of Attica's D Yard in September 1971, one of their top demands was to be paid the minimum wage.

The cast-aluminum rings are used to make manhole covers level with roads, conjuring the original chain gangs. And the captions for the firefighting suits inform us that they were made in a California prison; orange suits are for that state's "4,300 inmate wildland firefighters," while the yellow are for "non-inmate wildland firefighters," who are there more or less by choice.

The container lashing bars are titled "Insurance." Their nautical use is self-evident: They bring to mind the Middle Passage, an image intensified by the word "lashing." According to the labels, Lloyd's monopolized the marine insurance of slave-trading ships and around 1750 devised a classification society, Lloyd's Register, to assess a ship's level of risk for underwriters that is still used today. Thus we learn that when slave ships crowded with people

stolen from their homelands sank, it was not a total loss for shipowners. The two lashing bars arranged in an X evoke burning crosses but also Leonardo's Vitruvian Man drawing.

Mr. Rowland seems to have chosen his objects partly for their adamant sculptural presence and the ways they intersect with the history of recent art, conjuring the boxes of Donald Judd, the soft sculpture of Hannah Wilke, the art-furniture of Scott Burton. But their solidity, and to some extent their mobility, speaks to the absence and immobility of their makers.

This work belongs equally to a long tradition of art dealing with racial issues. Adrian Piper, David Hammons, Glenn Ligon and Kara Walker are among Mr. Rowland's predecessors. Like them and various Conceptualists, he makes language and form inextricable.

And like Hans Haacke, Mr. Rowland is deeply interested in economics and history. So interested, in fact, that he has devised a marketing method for his work that cuts investment and profiteering out of the picture. Mr. Rowland rents his works to collectors, at cost, for five years, at which point the lease can be renewed or the works revert to the artist.

Mr. Rowland's scrutiny has a particular grinding force. Here it accrues inexorably into an argument in the form of art for reparations. By making us look through his stubborn objects, back to their physical origins, to the systems they serve and to the corrosive practices that they perpetuate, they make viscerally real America's tragic racial divide. They press on us an understanding that must become much deeper, and more encompassing, if the virulent heritage of slavery is ever to be eliminated.