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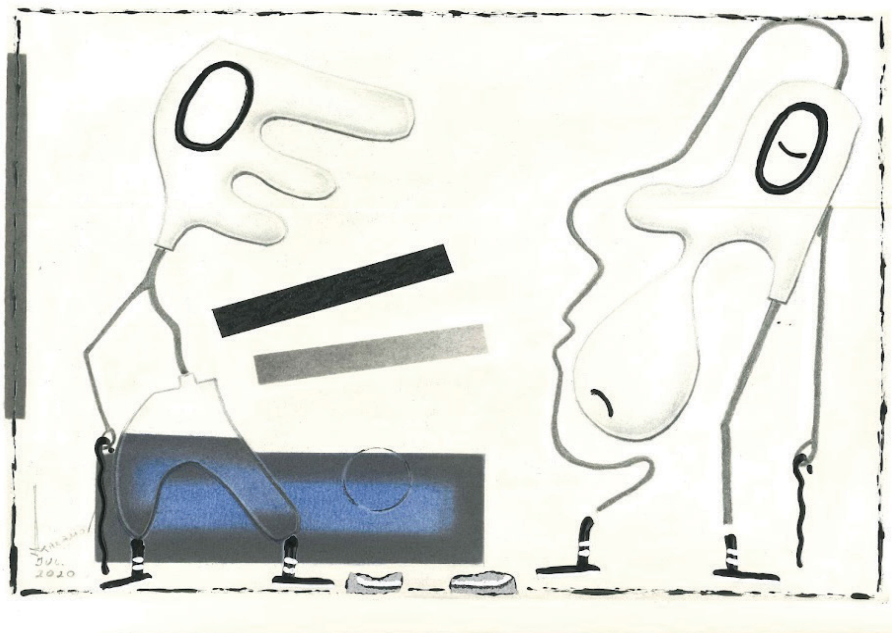
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Cover Page Footnote

Written for Project Mend



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Katherine Nikolau

Alone in a cell, Yuri Kadamov tapes a piece of string to his metal locker, folding it into a unique shape. He arranges a few simple items on the surface—a hair tie, the rim of a Coke bottle, a paper clip—taping them all down securely. He covers the suspended collage of knickknacks with a sheet of paper and sprinkles some graphite on top.

Pushing a piece of plastic along the paper, Yuri brings these whimsical shapes to life, anthropomorphizing them into quirky characters who seem as though they're about to leap off the page and get into all kinds of mischief.

Yuri calls this technique a manifestation—

a word that seems to align perfectly with the magic of creating such energetic, delightful personas from tools that, to anyone else, would be throwaways. Yet Yuri has kept them all for years, reusing them over and over again.

The technique has resulted in a few stunning art collections—*Our Kind of Society* and *We as a Society*—full of his eccentric, intriguing characters.

All the works in these two collections feature these puzzle-like beings, yet each rendition is distinctive, communicating a new emotion. Some of the sentient shapes feel gloomy and disheartened. Others seem to be sassily

conversing. Some wear colorful sweaters and earrings, and others lean on thin black canes. Still others appear in black and white. He calls this his “Tuxedo Series,” and it serves as a demonstration of his belief that we all look better in black and white, as well as a call for racial unity. All of them, without exception, feel incredibly alive—as is Yuri. But this is a fact that he has to remind himself of again each day. Yuri has been in solitary confinement for the past twenty years.

Yuri is the only citizen of any European Union nation to be on U.S. federal death row. Under a death sentence, he can’t be transferred back to his home country, Lithuania. Arrested in 2002 and sentenced in 2007, Yuri is someone whose experience of extreme isolation precedes his even being convicted. He was put into solitary confinement after his co-defendants launched an escape attempt from the detention center in Los Angeles where they were being held. With no hearing and no court findings of his involvement in the escape plan, Yuri was still put into solitary under extremely restrictive conditions for three years, until his sentencing.

After he was convicted in a case that is currently on appeal, Yuri was incarcerated by the U.S. Bureau of Prisons and put on federal death row in Terre Haute, Indiana, in the Special Confinement Unit (SCU), where he remains. Like others in the SCU, Yuri is not allowed outside and is kept from breathing fresh air or feeling sunlight. Because of this, he has developed a vitamin D deficiency. He is frequently subjected to the tobacco smoke that wafts into his cell from tobacco smuggled into the prison by correctional officers. As he suffers from asthma, these conditions have led him to develop severe breathing restrictions

over the years.

But of course the excruciating effects of solitary are not just physical.

“I live all day long in a seven-foot wide by ten-foot long prison cell,” Yuri writes in the artist statement on his website. “My window is frosted over so that, although I can tell when the sun rises and sets, I am unable to actually gaze upon these natural events.... Still, while my physical world is limited, my mental world has no borders or walls.”

Prior to his incarceration, Yuri was an accomplished musician, playing in bands as a drummer and even writing his own songs. As a teenager, he taught himself to play the drums and the guitar, eventually becoming skilled enough to be recruited into the Soviet Military Orchestra as a drummer based on merit, an honor usually reserved for members of the upper class.

Unable to play music in prison and trying to cope with his oppressive circumstances, Yuri turned to art as an outlet, teaching himself the way he once did with music and slowly developing his own style. His early works imagine collaborations between different classic artists—such as meshing the abstract shape-play of Picasso with the dreamlike surrealism of Dali. Without any formal instruction, Yuri has developed a trademark style that is unique to him and his experience.

Many of his earlier pieces are big and bursting with color. Looking at Yuri’s portfolio over time, however, one can observe a shift to smaller, more sparsely colored works. This change in style was not accidental but rather a direct result of the shifting conditions Yuri has faced in solitary.

In the past few years, a 30% markup by the Bureau of Prisons on all art supplies has made



it extremely costly to get things as basic as canvas and colored pencils, imposing harsh barriers on Yuri. In response, he had to get more creative, insisting on still expressing himself even under the most limiting conditions. Out of nothing—or practically nothing—Yuri manifested his puzzle-piece societies, willing them to dance their way onto the page.

“I don’t think he would say he’s glad he’s had a lack of access to materials,” reflected Josh Pickar, one of Yuri’s post-conviction attorneys. “I do think what he would say is that it’s forced him to be really creative and to come up with new ways to express himself. . . . I think it shows the type of resilience and spirit that he has.”

Yuri’s innovativeness and resilience are especially impressive to consider alongside the inhumanity of his environment. Given that he is an outgoing, gregarious, lighthearted

person, Yuri’s isolation is incongruous with his natural disposition. Then again, it is arguable that solitary confinement of this kind is always incongruous with an understanding of basic humanity.

Under the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, commonly known as the Mandela Rules (named after human rights activist Nelson Mandela), Yuri’s imprisonment violates international standards for solitary confinement. These rules stipulate that solitary confinement should be used only for limited periods of time in prison, and only as a last resort—never based on a prisoner’s sentence (as is the case for Yuri).

The rules also assert that such confinement is “prohibited in the case of prisoners with mental or physical disabilities when their

conditions would be exacerbated by such measures” (14). Yuri’s mental and physical states have indeed been worsened by his living conditions (e.g., the intensification of his asthma), making these violations all the worse.

Specific to the United States, Yuri’s isolation can be read as a breach of the Eighth Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. What could be more cruel than putting a nonviolent, artistic, outgoing individual in a place where he can receive no significant human contact?

“He has really been tortured for twenty years,” attorney Pickar stated.

In spite of it all, Yuri makes his art, striving to create at least one piece every day. Waking up each morning to see a new composition on his wall reminds him that he is not yet dead.

A petition for an appeal of Yuri’s case was filed in October—it’s 430 pages long. Challenging a death sentence in the U.S. is an incredibly daunting task, especially considering how hard it is to be released from prison in the U.S. in general, even with overwhelming evidence of innocence. Still, Yuri is fighting—supported by those who care deeply enough to fight for him, with him.

The petition on Yuri’s website, “End Solitary Confinement on Federal Death Row,”

urges justice for all those who have been forced to endure the dehumanization of solitary. Yuri has also started the Art against Death project, through which he hopes to create the world’s largest piece of collaborative art as a protest against murder globally.

The state of affairs is dire, but Yuri’s imaginative spark persists nonetheless.

Having recently obtained a guitar in prison, he is currently writing a musical and plans to animate his peculiar characters. Even without any music, though, Yuri’s lively squiggles seem to have movement all on their own. If you look closely, you can almost see them shifting around, exploring the world of the page, finding limitless possibility in their bounded space.

“It is like jazz,” Yuri explains playfully in his artist statement. “Either you get it or you don’t.”

Yuri has sold many of his works, continually channeling the funds into getting art supplies. It is a beautiful resistance, an unapologetic demonstration of his humanity and spirit in a system that deprives him of the essential need—connection—that all humans share.

Gifting a friend two of his Society pieces, Yuri was happy to see them go as a pair.

“I love that they are going to get to be together,” he remarked. “I don’t want anyone to be alone like I’ve had to be alone.”

