

4 days ago



Artist Hector Rodriguez at Katonah Village Library



The art exhibit "From Confinement to Creation: The Art of Resilience and Renewal" featuring the works of Hector Rodriguez starts March 6 at the Katonah Village Library. Contributed photos.

By **ABBY LUBY**

Vibrant images in luxurious rich colors dance on canvases, painted by artist Hector Rodriguez. An exhibit of Rodriguez's paintings will be at the Katonah Village Library starting Thursday, March 6, in a show titled "From Confinement to Creation: The Art of Resilience and Renewal."

Rodriguez's work exudes a restless energy, drawing us into a universe where playful free forms of nature contrast the harshness of captivity, a theme reflecting Rodriguez's inner struggles during his 27 years of incarceration.

The tough journey of reconciling with his wrongful past drove the imprisoned Rodriguez to write about his deepest feelings while creating images; both expressions would eventually lead him to understand his innermost self.

"I was trying to figure out how I landed in prison," Rodriguez recalled of his early days at New York state's Green Haven Correctional Facility. "I would fall asleep writing and read what I wrote the next day and saw that I was full of hate."

Helping Rodriguez through his difficult and emotional journey and the harshness of imprisonment was encouragement from friends and family and from the highly successful Rehabilitation Through the Arts program, an intensive, comprehensive arts program in some New York state prisons helping those incarcerated build critical life skills. RTA and similar programs were vital for Rodriguez who would come to see the forces of patriarchy and the struggles of feminism, themes that are represented in his work. He was drawn to paintings by surrealist Spanish artist Salvador Dali and American neo-expressionist Jean-Michel Basquiat, inspiring him to tap into his youth as a visual pathway.

"I began remembering my mother in Puerto Rico," he said of where he was born. "I would go with her everywhere from the mountains to the beach and we would collect coconuts. There is no better artist than Mother Nature."

Nature is undoubtedly a compelling ingredient in Rodriguez's works where organic composites of butterflies, birds, dragonflies and voluptuous women are animated in rhythmic, gestural sweeps. In "Courtship" (2014) two fantastical feathered creatures boogie-woogie in a glitzy swirl of flora and fauna anchored by a half-female/half-bird dipping her beak into a deep violet pod. The work was created while Rodriguez was still at Green Haven.



"Scruffy The Prison Abolisher & Promoter of Love." This painting urges love and transformation over oppression. "Scruffy is a reminder that abolition is not just about tearing down, it's about building something," Rodriguez said.

"In prison, even though it's often crowded and loud you feel alone," he noted. "Solitude starts playing a game on your psyche. I was wishing I had a partner and this canvas was the place I could let my imagination go and not worry about being criticized about it."

Opening up before other inmates means chancing to appear weak — and takes incredible courage. Rodriguez credits Katonah resident and actor John Bedford Lloyd with encouraging him to "allow his prison mask to fall off."

"Hector was willing to expose himself emotionally and risk being vulnerable in front of a whole class," said Lloyd, an active RTA volunteer at the prison. "He had written a very powerful piece, which he had to perform as a monologue, something he never did before in his life. Afterwards the class erupted in praise and understanding, creating that much-needed sense of fellowship."

Lloyd also helped Rodriguez audition for a role in a play that called for a heavy-set person. Rodriguez had to stuff a coat inside his sweater for the part. He said the experience was unexpectedly powerful.

"Having a big stomach and learning how that feels took me into a make-believe character and allowed me to escape. It was a moment I was able to cry and I went back to my cell and felt very different."

Lloyd, who has known Rodriguez for over 15 years, remarked on his overall personal growth and his artistic expression.

"His journey has been so extraordinary with so many moving parts to it. He's a wonderful artist and an incredible guy," Lloyd said. "He's always helping other guys who recently got out and those who are still inside. Hector has a great inner strength."

Lloyd said he expects RTA alumni to come to the show's opening.

Rodriguez signs his paintings "Bori," a teen nickname for Boricua, or native of Puerto Rico. Among the works at the exhibition will be "The Keeper of Wild Grace" (2024), a mixed media piece using repurposed objects. A deep purple, full-bodied woman morphs into plant life, pursing her lips around a parrot's beak as her fern-like hair floats upwards, effervescent and weightless. The tone is gentle and loving. The use of repurposed objects in this work is second nature to Rodriguez who had to hunt out some unlikely items to work with while incarcerated.

"In prison you don't have the proper materials so you learn to improvise," he said.

"When walking in the yard or jogging outside I might find a feather from a seagull which I would clean and use as a fine brush. Other times I would paint on bedsheets or cardboard."

Before Rodriguez was released from prison in 2023 he earned his bachelor's degree from Bard College in the Bard Prison Initiative program. Recognition for his art followed when he was selected as a fellow at the Yale Prison Education Initiative College-to-Career Fellowship, a program he is currently involved in that allows him to paint and show his work publicly.

Rodriguez wants his art to highlight the dramatic deficiencies in the criminal justice system.

"Prisons are nothing but landfills where society puts people of color to let them die. There is a huge mental health crisis in the American incarceration system where many of those who are imprisoned suffer from mental illness. It creates a dangerous asylum — dangerous for the officers who work there and for those that are incarcerated."

To that end, in one of his newest paintings "Scruffy The Prison Abolisher & Promoter of Love" (2025), Rodriguez emphatically urges love and transformation over oppression. A raised fist by a wide-eyed innocent creature is reinforced with words "Abolish Prison" and "Step Out of Your Shadow and Fight."

For Rodriguez the message is clear.

"Scruffy stands as a reminder that abolition is not just about tearing down, it's about building something better."

"From Confinement to Creation: The Art of Resilience and Renewal" will be on exhibit from March 6 through March 30 at the Katonah Village Library, located at 26 Bedford Road, Katonah. An opening reception will be held Thursday, March 6, from 6 to 7:30 p.m.