all from a birdcage

Illustrations by Graphic Artist, Orlando Smith aka "O. Smith"
Written by Rahsaan "New York" Thomas
INTRODUCTION

In 2022, illustrative journalist, graphic artist and comic book creator Orlando Smith participated in *Mothership: Voyage Into Afrofuturism*, an exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California, as well as two additional exhibits, one at the Thatcher Gallery in San Francisco and a solo exhibit, *O Smith Perspective*, at Manna Gallery in Oakland. At his solo exhibit, which took place in late July of 2022, his artwork sold out.

Orlando has conquered the graphic art world from a cell at San Quentin State Prison, where he is serving multiple life sentences under California’s harsh three-strike law. He could have folded under the sand of so much time. However, he remained undeterred by his circumstances. From a “bird cage,” he uses his pencil for activism, which he calls “artivism.”

“I couldn’t attend the Selma march with my ancestors and the Three Strikes Law prevents me from marching with Black Lives Matter; however, through the embodiment of my art, I fight for human rights from a prison yard,” O. Smith said.

So how does a man in prison become a successful artist in society, participating in museum and gallery events and selling his work regularly? Here, in *All From a Bird Cage*, O. Smith reveals his secrets behind the self-marketing moves that have lead to such success.

O. Smith inspired Empowerment Avenue — a program designed to support incarcerated writers and artists — in helping us see what’s possible with insider determination and outside support. Together we created this guide to help other incarcerated artists reach the next level.

WARM UP

For O. Smith, self-marketing started with believing in himself. In order to do that, he had to clean up his life and change his belief system:

"Before anything, rid yourself of any 'mental junk food,' self doubt, substance abuse, distrust, or hate."

Replace those negative traits with integrity and values that reflect the person you want to be.

"Above all else, your goals, vision, gifts, and talents are absolutely nothing without self-discipline-master your thoughts and behavior," O. Smith said. "Don’t think of yourself as an incarcerated artists, see yourself as an artist who just happens to be incarcerated."

You are going to need help to overcome the obstacle of incarceration. Start by being worthy of that help.
STEP 1

Take the time to master your craft. It took O. Smith about 3 ½ years to learn sequential art, which is comic book storytelling. To become a graphic artist, like O. Smith, study the work of others. For abstract art, read art magazines like Artforum and study art history. Know your stuff and practice your art.
STEP 2

Surround yourself with like-minded people. They do not necessarily have to be artists or writers. They just need to be well adjusted people with realistic goals, exhibiting both social and self-awareness. Staying proximate to like-minded, positive people creates networking opportunities.

O. Smith joined the Williams James Arts program at the prison, where other artists conjugated.

A year later, the instructor asked him to work there and he said, “yes.” Working for the art program gave him extra time to perfect craft and find opportunities.
STEP 3

You must find opportunities to present your art to the world. For O. Smith, that meant taking advantage of any offer that came through the William James Association Arts in Corrections Program. They provided avenues to participate in art contests, donate art to non-profits, and feature artwork in airports, courthouses and museums. While none of these opportunities paid a cent, it gave O. Smith a chance to been seen in the outside world and start building his brand.

“As my name grew in the art world, I started receiving offers,” O. Smith said.

His first offer was to participate in the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights’ Night Out for Public Safety event.

From his participation in the Night Out for Public Safety, members of the Ella Baker Center recommended him to another organization, Care Not Cages, working with Su Kim, a Bay Area organizer, and the nonprofit Prison Renaissance. They produced a zine that came out in 2017.

During the course of making the zine, O. Smith was introduced to Holly Delany Cole, who loves his art. She volunteered to be his point person on the outside. At the same time, Prison Renaissance secured graphic novel work for him and he received his first paychecks for artwork.

“On March 7, 2017, I was commissioned to do my first paid graphic novel, Ultimate Motley Crew,” O. Smith said.

Not every prison has an arts program and not everyone in prison is connected to social justice organizations. However, O. Smith, inspired by his success from working with three social justice organizations, decided to reach out to more. For people in prisons without programs, anyone can follow his model.

O. Smith created a series of Protest Posters tailored to the social justice organizations and leaders he donated to. They included Van Jones’ Dream.org, Keith Wattley’s UnCommon Law, Stanford University’s Zine Project, the Art for Justice Fund, Kim Kardashian and Bryan Stevenson.

Additionally, O. Smith entered and won first place in an art contest held by The Beat Within, a publication of writing and art from the inside. Next, he created his own calendar called “O. Smith Calendar,” which a social justice connection on the outside printed up. O. Smith donated to 25 activists and organizations every year.

“I was self-marketing with precise targeting so I could build and reach a wider audience,” O. Smith said. “It paid off ten times more.”

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights commissioned O. Smith to do a poster and a comic book style zine for their 25th anniversary. EBC paid O. Smith over $2,600.

“What you put out is what you get back,” said O. Smith.
STEP 4

O. Smith created a name for himself by using snail mail to self-market to social justice organizations and organizers. Now people reach out to commission him for art projects. In 2022, his art was featured in three events, including the Oakland Museum of California, Thatcher Gallery, and an incredible solo exhibit at Manna Gallery.

O. Smith didn’t let the lack of the internet or prison walls stop him. He sought to make himself visible to the outside world. He used the opportunities available to climb to new heights and better opportunities. He found his success all from a birdcage.
ABOUT THE CREATORS

O. SMITH

O. Smith was born and raised in South Central, Los Angeles, and is serving a 250 year sentence under the Three Strikes Law.

He is an illustrative journalist, graphic artist, graphic novel, and comic book creator. He is a contributing artist to the Prison Journalism Project, and has won multiple art contests across the nation. Smith has been featured in over two dozen exhibitions since 2019, including: Painting for Justice from Prison (MoAD, 2020, CounterPulse, 2021); Mothership: Voyage into Afrofuturism (The Oakland Museum of California, 2021); Commonstrust: artists and the commons (Thacher Gallery, USF, 2022); O. Smith Perspective solo show (Manna Gallery, Oakland, July 2022).

RAHSAAN "NEW YORK" THOMAS

Rahsaan Thomas is the Executive Director of Empowerment Avenue, a program he created while incarcerated to meet the pre-entry needs of incarcerated writers and artists, helping them to get their voices in mainstream spaces for prevailing wages. He built the organization based on his experiences as a writer, filmmaker, and social justice advocate. He is most known for co-hosting and co-producing the Pulitzer Prize finalist and 2020 Dupont Award winning podcast, Ear Hustle, as well as appearances in United Shades of America with W. Kamau Bell and the documentary 26.2 to Life. Initiate Justice credits Rahsaan with initiating the successful restoration of voting rights for people on parole in California.