At four feet by four feet, these cell-scale prints bring to mind Richard Avedon’s work. But unlike Avedon, Morgan grants her subjects permission to be themselves, much as Diane Arbus did in her revelatory and disconcerting portraits.

Morgan also expects to disconcert. “I see the work as distilling the prison experience,” she says. “It is about how the inmates survive there, the environments they create and what they do to make it bearable. It isn’t that I think these people should escape punishment. They’re as responsible for their actions as any of us. Yet after treating them this way we release 95% of them into society, expecting that they will be better than when they went into prison. To me the ones who manage to make it outside are a miracle.”

Morgan’s interest in social conditions and in the penal system is longstanding. Like Lewis Hine, she studied sociology before she began her career in photography. Although Morgan has worked at the San Francisco County Jail since 1979, she negotiated for months before being allowed into San Quentin. Connecting with individual prisoners immediately by explaining her purpose and returning with their portraits, she established the rapport that characterizes this work.

In spite (or because) of this rapport, there are not many men in these photographs that we would like to bring home to dinner. Look at the shaded, lascivious gazes of two cellmates who lounge without relaxing in their claustrophobic quarters.

One’s foot nearly touches the camera; the other man sits on the toilet, only inches from the pin-ups on the rear wall. While Morgan’s technique makes the electric light almost tender, it doesn’t spare us the harshness of the walls and the banality of the bric-a-brac and prison-issue bedspread and linoleum.

Standing outside his cell, the handsome young man with an X-stamped headband is less frightening. We notice the feminine voluptuousness of his ornamented arm, the tough set of his lips and the childlike yet sexually suggestive clasp he maintains on his elegant model “bike.”

Morgan connects with these men, yet documents their separation from her and from society. Through her insight and daring a fundamental paradox is once again revealed: although human qualities bind us together, social, political, physical and emotional factors place us at unfathomable distances from each other.

Ruth Morgan, who lives in Berkeley, received her B.A. in sociology with a minor in photography from San Francisco State University in 1969. In 1983 she received a grant from the San Francisco Foundation for her photography. The California Arts Council also has awarded her yearly grants from 1979. She has worked since 1982 as Arts Coordinator at the San Francisco County Jail, where she began as Artist-in-Residence in 1979.

Jean McMann
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