

A photograph of a modern, multi-story building with large glass windows and red brick accents. The building is surrounded by greenery, including trees and bushes. Several people are visible in the foreground, some standing and some sitting on a bench. The sky is overcast.

ART AS TRANSFORMATION

It's a daring experiment: what happens when you design a prison building to heal instead of harm



San Quentin + Skunkworks

San Quentin is more than a prison — it is one of the most culturally significant carceral institutions in the world. Today, it stands at the center of a rare and fragile reform effort: a vision to move beyond nearly two centuries of punishment toward a system rooted in empowerment, rehabilitation, and human dignity. But that vision is precarious. Deeply embedded interests resist change, and the public wrestles with ideas of forgiveness, accountability, and second chances. What happens at San Quentin matters far beyond its walls; it will influence national conversations about what justice can look like and whether transformation is truly possible.

The Chiaroscuro: Light Within the Shadows, an initiative launched by Skunkworks, a nonprofit founded by incarcerated people, brings vibrant, collaborative art installations into this environment as a catalyst for hope and change. In a place long defined by monotone walls and harsh histories, the project imagines color as a symbol of joy, humanity, and renewal, the light emerging from darkness. Chiaroscuro is not just an art initiative; it is a partnership between artists, incarcerated individuals, and institutional leaders to reshape the physical and emotional landscape of the prison. Through creativity, shared vision, and lived experience, the project aims to inspire those inside, move policymakers, and spark global conversations about what true carceral reform can be.

FAITH XLVII



KEYA TAMA



EL SEED



eL Seed is a contemporary artist whose work bridges painting and sculpture, blending Arabic calligraphy with the dynamism of urban art. His signature style features intricate layers of color, symbols, and flowing script that communicate universal messages of peace, coexistence, and unity. Driven by a deep respect for cultural identity, eL Seed draws inspiration from the communities he visits, often incorporating the words of local poets, writers, and philosophers. His work is rooted in connection—using language as a bridge across cultures and as a tool to amplify unheard voices. Through careful research and engagement, he embeds the wisdom and stories of these communities into his art. Recurring themes in his practice include identity, heritage, and the universal human desire for belonging. His art has been exhibited globally, including on the pyramids of Giza, the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, the DMZ in Korea, and Rio's favelas. His work is held in major collections like The MET, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, and the Chrysler Museum. Recognized globally, eL Seed is a TED Fellow and a Young Global Leader (WEF 2021), and has received awards from UNESCO and Foreign Policy. His Louis Vuitton collaboration further affirms his influence in contemporary art.





Perception, Cairo, 50 Buildings, 3 Weeks

In *Perception*, eL Seed confronts the misconceptions society projects onto marginalized communities by spotlighting the Zraaeb, a Coptic community in Cairo's Manshiyat Nasr that has built one of the world's most efficient recycling systems yet is still unfairly viewed as "dirty" or segregated. Working with residents, he created a massive anamorphic mural spanning nearly 50 buildings, visible only from a single point atop Moqattam Mountain, featuring the words of Saint Athanasius: "Anyone who wants to see the sunlight clearly needs to wipe his eye first."

Welcomed as family, eL Seed highlights the dignity, generosity, and resilience of a community often mislabeled as "Zabaleen," reminding the public that they do not live in garbage—they clean the city of Cairo.



EL SEED MURAL: SAN QUENTIN AND ORPHEUM THEATER, SF

World-renowned muralist El Seed, in collaboration with San Quentin Skunkworks, a creative initiative within the prison that brings together incarcerated artists, makers, and storytellers, is proposing a landmark project that bridges the walls of San Quentin with the communities most impacted by incarceration. Together with artists inside, El Seed will co-create a mural within San Quentin, a living testament to resilience, memory, and transformation.

Outside the prison, a mirrored public mural in San Francisco will invite families, formerly incarcerated people, and community members to join in the act of storytelling, ensuring that voices from both sides of the wall are seen and heard. The dual murals are planned to debut alongside Governor Newsom's unveiling of the new San Quentin Rehabilitation Center in March, turning the moment into a cultural and human milestone as much as a policy one.

Given the symbolic and civic nature of the project, placing the public counterpart of this mural at the Orpheum Theatre in San Francisco's Civic Center deepens its meaning and impact. Situated in a district defined by cultural institutions, public dialogue, and the city's long history of social movements, the mural becomes a visible extension of the project's core intention: to bridge the emotional and societal distance between those inside San Quentin and the broader community. At this highly trafficked pedestrian corridor, the artwork transforms the Orpheum's façade into a civic gesture toward humanity, dignity, and connection—one that resonates with the city's values, aligns with statewide efforts toward prison reform, and invites the public to bear witness to the shared truth and humanity expressed by the artists on both sides of the prison walls.

eL Seed Studio

Into each other's eyes



 **BUILDING 180**



ARTIST STATEMENT

Into each other's eyes

This project is built on the idea of connection between those inside the prison and those on the outside. I've been invited to create an artwork with incarcerated people and staff at San Quentin, and while I'm honored to work within the prison walls, I also feel the need to extend the conversation beyond them.

I propose to create two identical murals: one painted by the incarcerated people inside San Quentin, and the other by people outside—family members, loved ones, or individuals connected in some way to those inside. The two murals will mirror each other, as if the people painting them were standing face to face, looking straight into each other's eyes.

□ The goal is to create a symbolic space where both worlds meet. By involving voices on both sides, the project opens a moment of understanding—a way to challenge stereotypes, confront distance, and recognize the person before the label. □

At the heart of this work, I will incorporate a line from Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*:

The world changes in direct proportion to the number of people willing to be honest about their lives.

As always, I will use Arabic calligraphy as my medium—messages deeply rooted in the place where I'm creating, yet written in a way that carries a universal dimension, so anyone, anywhere, can connect to them. Quoting Maupin here feels natural: his stories are inseparable from San Francisco, a city built on diversity, complexity, and the courage of people who dare to be honest about who they are. Bringing his words into San Quentin allows that spirit of the city to enter the prison walls, reminding us that truth, vulnerability, and human connection can travel across any distance.

This project isn't about erasing the reality of incarceration. It's about acknowledging the humanity of the incarcerated people living it, recognizing their stories, and offering them the right to be seen—by those who love them, and by a world that too often looks away.

Into each other's eyes

Sketch



SCHEDULE + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

January 8 (Thursday)

SQ Site Visit + Tour, Foundation-building, Orientation with the SQ team

Evening: Drive by SF Site + SF wall scouting, Boom lift delivery + material sorting (separate SF needs vs. SQ needs, ideal to do before and get through security at SQ in advance of arrival)

Possible start on SF wall if he has the energy.

January 9 (Friday)

Day: First painting day at San Quentin.

Evening: Return to SF. Start Painting.

If painting continues in evening, lighting/security required (sunset at 5:15 PM).

January 10 (Saturday)

Day: Continue painting at San Quentin.

Evening: Return to SF, Mural + Lodging

January 11 (Sun)

Day: Continue painting at San Quentin.

Evening: Return to SF, Mural + Lodging

January 12 (Mon)

Day: Continue painting at San Quentin (OPTIONAL), move to SF

San Francisco: Prep day for community engagement mural.

Wall fully prepped and ready for participation.

January 13 (Tues)

Work at San Quentin — goal is to wrap mural.

Evening: Public Talk — San Francisco Public Library (Tentative Title, “Light Within the Shadows: Voices from our community and from within San Quentin, sharing lived experiences shaped by systems of social injustice.”)

Latino/Hispanic Room 6:00–7:30 PM

Promote community mural, invite public to witness the installation process.

January 14 (Wed)

Day: Finish painting at San Quentin.

Evening: Prep SF Mural for Community Days

January 15 (Thurs) + 16 (Friday)

SF Community Engagement Days

Recommended schedule: 12:00–4:00 PM

2-hour community engagement shifts

Sunset at 5:15 PM → final hour available for cleanup, safety, and securing the site

Friday Evening: Dinner Gathering: eL Seed cooks for team

January 17 (Sat)

Morning: SF Touch ups (Possible second SF talk coordinated with SF Art Week (TBD))

Evening: Final wrap-up at San Quentin + Group Dinner

January 18 (Sun)

Final touchups + goodbyes.

Departure

PARTNERS

1. Building 180
2. BroadwaySF
3. California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR)
4. Market Street Arts Initiative
5. Mid Market Business Association Foundation
6. Office of the Governor
7. Paint the Void
8. San Francisco Public Library
9. San Quentin State Prison
10. Urban Alchemy

SKUNKWORK GOALS

1. Transform the Physical and Emotional Landscape:

Introduce vibrant art installations to San Quentin, replacing the stark, monotone environment with works that foster hope, creativity, and inspiration.

2. Collaborate Across Boundaries:

Foster deep collaboration between artists, incarcerated people, and stakeholders to create installations that reflect shared values, vision, and humanity.

3. Inspire Reform:

Position San Quentin as a model for carceral reform by using art to inspire policymakers, staff, and visitors, amplifying the call for systemic change.

4. Highlight Human Potential:

Showcase the creativity, resilience, and ingenuity of incarcerated individuals, reminding the world of their capacity for growth and contribution.

5. Create a Legacy of Change:

Establish these installations as lasting symbols of the potential for transformation, serving as enduring sources of inspiration for generations to come.

6. Bridge Communities:

Use the art installations to build connections between incarcerated people, artists, and the broader community, fostering empathy and understanding.

7. Encourage Broader Conversations:

Use the visibility of the project to spark dialogue about the role of beauty, creativity, and reform in the carceral system, influencing change far beyond San Quentin.

WHY NOW?



 BUILDING 180

In so many carceral environments, sensory deprivation isn't accidental — it's built into the architecture. Blank walls, muted palettes, and environments stripped of color are part of a design logic that minimizes stimulation, quiets individuality, and reinforces control. These systems often fall heaviest on populations already at the center of systemic injustices: communities disproportionately incarcerated, surveilled, and silenced. Yet even within these stark spaces, creativity has a way of cutting through the gray. Art, color, and self-expression are not decorative luxuries, they are tools of psychological stability, self-worth, and rehabilitation.

This is why I'm drawn to the Skunkworks project. It recognizes that creativity isn't a distraction from justice reform but a core component of it. When we restore color, agency, and imagination to people who have been deprived of them, we open pathways to healing and reintegration. Rehabilitation is not just policy, it's environment, experience, and the permission to see oneself differently. And that's the work I want to help build.

Shannon Riley, Founder of Building 180, Co-Founder Paint the Void, Operations and Curation for Big Art Loop, Artist Liaison + PM Volunteer for Skunkworks



 **BUILDING 180**

