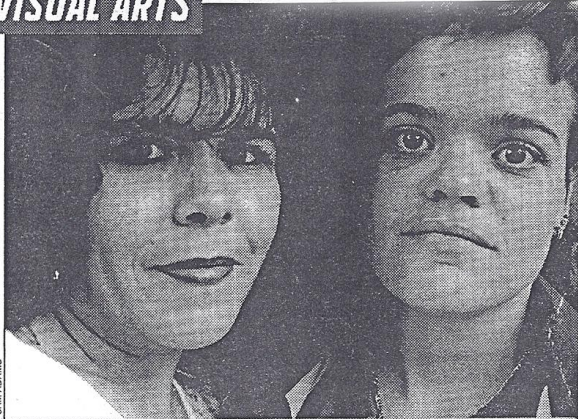


VISUAL ARTS



SAM ADAMS

DANCING IN THE YARD

SAM ADAMS
'INMATES'
THROUGH JULY 3
PLAN B EVOLVING
ARTS
1050 OLD PECOS
TRAIL
982-1338

It's a pleasure to be a subject rather than an object.

DENNIS JARRETT

On Cinco de Mayo last year there was a dance at the New Mexico Women's Correctional Facility in Grants. It was held in the yard, and the band, Lumbre del Sol, came all the way from Santa Fe. After they tuned up and their music started to bounce off the concrete the inmates got up and began to dance with each other. They yelled at the wallflowers to join them. By the time the band was ready to quit the women were calling for encores, pleading for one last dance.

The event was part of an ongoing project sponsored by Santa Fe-based Outside In, a non-profit group that produced more than 100 performances last year at all sorts of "inside" locations such as nursing homes, hospitals, day-care centers and children's clubs.

Photographer Sam Adams was there. He had made several visits to the prison and by the time of the dance the women were used to him. In fact, he had a lot of power because he was the man with the camera. He could make an inmate look good or bad. And they wanted to look good. At Grants they let you use makeup so most of them wore lipstick and eye shadow and, as Adams said, "hair is a really big thing. A whole lot of attention goes into hair." There's a lot of evident pleasure in being photographed, even among the handful of women with the lean-and-mean

mask, their tattoos turned for display. You almost can sense the putting-on of another face in some of Adams' pictures. At the top of the stairs is a radiant portrait of two young black women, composed and confident, tentatively pleased to be subjects rather than objects.

One inmate, tough-looking and impatient, asked Adams where were the most recent photos and when he told her she spun on her heel and dashed off to the gym. If the women don't like the way they look they refuse to sign a release. Later, she came back to Adams, contrite. "I have to apologize for being so rude, the way I ran away to get my picture."

"I've been there about 10 times," Adams told me. "No lady ever addressed me except with courtesy and good will. I didn't hear a hostile word. Of course several of them wouldn't sign releases."

He even photographed the warden. But that picture is not in the show. I wonder why. "She's the most unwarden-like person you've ever met," said Adams. "She's young and attractive and you'd just never guess she was a warden. You can't quite imagine her interfacing with some of these rough ladies." But with at least one of the security guards pictured . . . you can imagine that interface. Wearing a white uniform blouse and black trousers, she stands just inside an open sheet-metal prison door with a wire window in the middle, the kind that closes with the attitude of a wall safe. She's wearing shades and a swept-

back, country-and-western haircut and she has a vertical furrow on her brow. It's easy to imagine her using the expression "female offender." She's inviting you to come inside.

Adams' photographs of the women of NMWCF are well-designed portraits of subjects who know, who really know they're having their pictures taken. There's nothing candid about them, although Adams manages to convey an almost snapshot quality because he includes a lot of the dull, oppressive background these women experience day after day as foreground. In the gym four women are using one of those multi-purpose workout machines. One of them, the star, a clip-on ID badge on her regulation T-shirt, thrusts herself out from the bench toward Adams' camera like the figurehead of a carved wooden goddess on the bow of a ship.

At the bottom of the stairs is a group of the strongest photographs. One is a beautiful profile of two black women in pullover shirts looking out a window together. Or is it a window? It's a source of light. They're inside. And they're looking out.

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