

DOING TIME ALONG ROUTE 66

ART BY DEAN GILLISPIE

“This art is all I have to show for 20 years of my life being stolen. I have nothing else.”
Dean Gillispie

At age 24, Dean Gillispie was living an ordinary life in Dayton, Ohio, working a union factory job before everything changed. He was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to 22–56 years for crimes he did not commit. Thanks to a personal vendetta and manipulated evidence, Dean was wrongfully imprisoned for two decades for kidnaping and rape. In 2003, the Ohio Innocence Project (OIP) took on his case. He was released in 2011 and fully exonerated in 2017, officially declared wrongfully imprisoned. He became the 2,074th person added to the National Registry of Exonerations in the United States.

Stripped of freedom, Dean built something extraordinary out of nothing. Using scrap cardboard, cigarette foil, bottle caps, and other discarded materials he found through his job in prison maintenance, and using only handmade tools, Dean began creating dioramas - tiny buildings - that evoked the nostalgia of small-town America - a gas station - a movie theater - even an Airstream trailer - exactly what you will see in the next eight panels. The dioramas themselves are larger than one might expect - each one about the size of a kitchen toaster-oven or microwave ... standing roughly knee-high when placed on the ground - you see the actual buildings sitting on the shelves in his office in Panel #1.

As he immersed himself by creating these elaborate miniatures, Dean’s mind left the prison entirely. “I did it to keep my sanity,” Dean told the Dayton Daily News. “At night, I’d sit hunched over a little writing table in my cell, working with a razor blade wedged into a pen and a paperclip shaped into a saw. I’d get so deep into it, I wasn’t in prison anymore. I was gone.” He imagined himself far away, cruising down Route 66 and passing by all the places he was recreating.

These dioramas became Dean’s way to stay human in a place designed to strip away any vestiges of freedom. Other inmates appreciated Dean’s work and helped him scavenge materials and encourage his vision. Eventually, even the prison allowed Dean to keep creating art. When Dean was finally freed, the dioramas sat quietly on shelves in his parents’ garage - each one a miniature monument of Dean’s resilience. While the original artworks are not on display here, this exhibit features eight large-scale photographic panels of Dean’s work. Each one was built without blueprints - each was inspired by an inner, personal design. And, as you will see, each piece offers a striking contrast between their modest scale and the expansive stories they contain.

Dean’s story and art have since traveled the world from local galleries in Ohio to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. His work is featured in *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, a groundbreaking exhibition and book by Dr. Nicole Fleetwood. Dean also serves on the boards of the Ohio Innocence Project and After Innocence. Art didn’t just help Dean endure prison. It gave him a voice, a sense of purpose, and a vision of life beyond the bars. And now, through this exhibit, it offers all of us a glimpse into the power of creativity, hope, and human dignity.