

“MOST DEEPLY HARDENED”

ERIC T. KUNSMAN PHOTOGRAPHS THE EASTERN STATE
PENITENTIARY

Gary D. Saretzky
Saretzky Online

ABSTRACT: Eric Kunsman diligently traveled to Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP) 362 times between 2003 and 2014 to photograph, inspired by reading the 1830s–1840s journals of ESP administrators who recorded the prisoners’ “moral condition.” ESP’s “Pennsylvania System” minimized social interaction among inmates, who in solitary confinement for years were expected to reform themselves through meditating on their crimes. Today ESP’s deteriorated appearance and doleful aspect is maintained by museum policy. Kunsman’s evocative work reminds us that ideas about crime and punishment have evolved over time and that artists have a role in shaping public policy regarding incarceration.

KEYWORDS: Eric T. Kunsman, photography, museum, Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia

Born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1975, Eric T. Kunsman is a fine art photographer who explores themes with connections to American history. While in high school, he witnessed the death of the steel industry and learned of its place in the American story. His exposure to the work of Walker Evans during this time drew Kunsman to photographic education and a career in photography.¹ At Mercer County Community College (MCCC) in West Windsor, New Jersey, Kunsman studied with, and was significantly influenced by, Louis H. Draper (1935–2002), one of the African American photographers who founded the Kamoinge group that documented Harlem in the 1960s.²

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After obtaining his master's in science degree in electronic publishing from the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in Rochester, New York, Kunsman succeeded Draper as coordinator of the photography program at MCCC. While working there, he finished his master's in fine arts in book arts and printmaking from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Currently, he is the owner of Booksmart Studio, a custom bookmaking and fine edition printing studio in Rochester, and teaches at RIT, where he earned additional degrees in fine arts photography and biomedical photography. His students at RIT include those attending the National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

Kunsman's subject matter has varied but his compassion for others provides a unifying theme in his work. He is as drawn to the landscapes and neglected towns of the American Southwest as he is to the tensions of struggling rustbelt cities in the US Northeast. Kunsman is attracted to objects left behind, especially those that hint at a unique human narrative, a story waiting to be told. While at MCCC, Kunsman organized and led groups of students on field trips. Among the destinations was Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), the venerable prison that is now a museum. Shortly after his first visit to ESP in 2003, Kunsman visited the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia where some of the ESP admission ledgers from the 1830s to 1844 were being conserved. Kunsman was fascinated by the remarks in the records made by the officials about individual prisoners. These administrators summarized how the prisoners felt about their crimes, their physical condition, and other details about their lives.³ Several of the record books were recorded by ESP's moral instructor, Rev. Thomas Larcombe. In addition to noting vital statistics such as name, age, gender, and race, he commented on their "moral state," that is, their progress, or lack of it, toward rehabilitation. Among others, Kunsman focused in on remarks concerning one recalcitrant inmate, William Haines, described as "most deeply hardened."

The voices on those pages served as the genesis for the images he created on trips to ESP. Kunsman decided to combine pages from the ledgers with his images of the prison cells. He implemented this plan in two ways: he either paired original logbook texts with his own images or created photo-montages in which the handwritten text overlays the images of the cells, with the illusion of a double exposure. Both techniques are innovative, although pairs of images and texts from the twentieth century related to prisons have

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been exhibited and published by other photographers. To facilitate comprehension of the prison official's script, Kunsman provided transcripts in separate captions.⁴

Clearly inspired by the admission registers, Kunsman arranged to digitize them for ESP in exchange for access.⁵ Later, while visiting the prison, and as part of his creative process each day, he would read several pages before beginning to photograph. By blending the officials' comments made around 1840 into his own work, Kunsman created the impression that the image shows a cell as it looked at that time or not long thereafter. He wants us to think about the inhabitants of these cells back in those early days of the prison, not in the twentieth century when the likes of Al Capone and Willie Sutton did time at Eastern State.

Kunsman diligently traveled to Eastern State Penitentiary 362 times between 2003 and 2014 to produce this body of work, occasionally accompanied by his photography students at MCCC. He brought along his professional photographic equipment, including his 4×5 and medium-format film cameras, which he used to make black-and-white negatives that he later scanned, digitally adjusted, and printed. Kunsman's exposures typically lasted ten to fifteen minutes, during which he did light painting with large flashlights.

Kunsman's original prints are often much larger than can be reproduced in a book. At the most complete exhibit of his series, “Thou Art . . . , Will Give . . . ,” at the Dyer Arts Center at the Rochester Institute of Technology, he exhibited 105 prints, sixty-five of which were either 40×40 inches or 40×50 inches on digital fine art paper. His large-scale, highly detailed photographs give the viewer an illusion of being in a cell. Kunsman did all his own printing at Booksmart Studio.

Through his images, Kunsman effectively directs our attention to that era and its penal philosophy, the Pennsylvania System. His evocative work reminds us that ideas about crime and punishment have evolved over time and that artists have a role in shaping public policy regarding incarceration.

A brief selection of his work at ESP is presented here. All images and captions are by Eric Kunsman.



FIGURE 1. “The Warden’s Corridor” creates a sense of space that is more formal and offers the viewer the ability to enter the area and move throughout the frame. The lighting in the warden’s corridor is unique to ESP because it is one of the few spaces where the light is coming from the walls rather than the ceiling. I tried to capture this sense of light because the light creates a sense of spirituality throughout ESP. The architectural use of the spiritual light only coming from above for the prisoner’s cells provided them with a feeling that someone was watching over them and provided them with the ability to communicate with God. The warden’s corridor having arched windows facing outward provided the space the sense of those in control.

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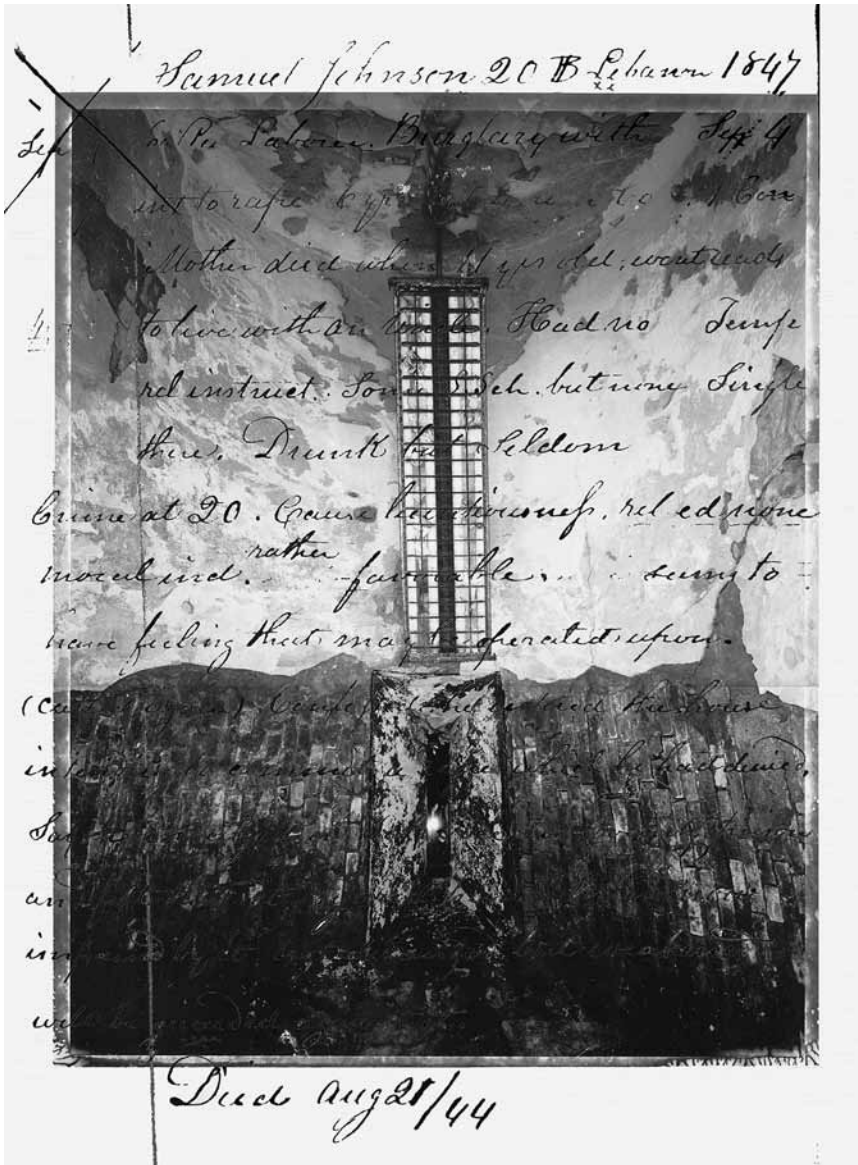


FIGURE 2. "Samuel Johnson." This photograph was the first photograph that I felt I successfully combined the text and imagery. Many of the images that combine text and imagery are done to provide only a snippet into the text and portray the individuals who once occupied the space. For this piece, the text's emphasis is the prisoner's name along with the line "Drunk but seldom." The imagery in the background helps me limit the viewer's ability to read the full journal text, thus creating a selective narration.

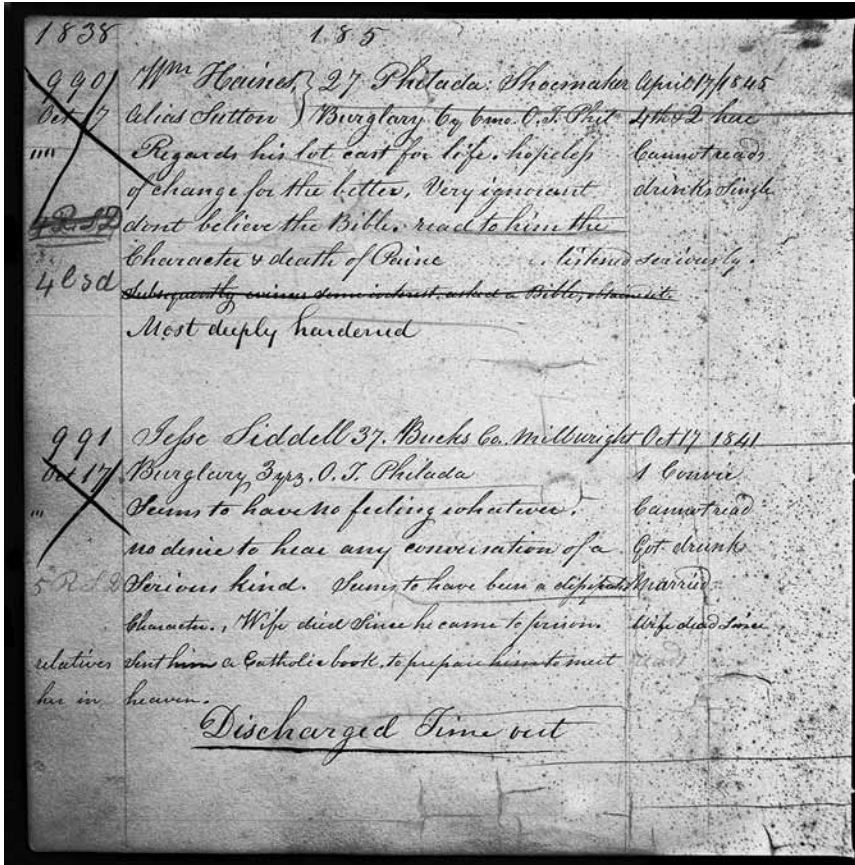


FIGURE 3. “Most Deeply Hardened.” The idea of text and imagery was fundamental to my project to allow me to provide a sense of the people who occupied this space at one time. The penmanship and marks enable the viewer to get a formal sense before reading a single word. I utilized this passage because the interviewer is dismissing the line of text by crossing it out further, emphasizing “Most Deeply Hardened,” which I took as the title.

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FIGURE 4. “Entrance into the Infirmary” is one of my personal favorites because, before this visit, I was reading pages that discussed a few prisoners who had returned to ESP after previously being released. When I came across this scene, I immediately felt the sense of departure and reintroduction to the area. While painting with light, I made sure to light the interior less than the light on the outside to allow the viewer the sense of coming back into the room. The viewer’s goal is to get out of the dark, mysterious chamber but, as we can see, there is yet another gated door preventing our departure through the open doors.



FIGURE 5. “Physiotherapy” is one of the images in which I played with text and imagery alongside the photograph’s positive and negative aspects. I utilized positive and negative imagery to further the emotion one gets from reading the journal entry, followed by the facts of Charles Allen’s death in prison on May 7, 1843. This allows the viewers to have a sense of reality while at the same time having an uneasy feeling about what they are viewing—almost as if we are in real life and the afterlife.

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FIGURE 6. "The Drapery" has become the flagship of this series, as it demonstrates the spirituality and sense of loss within a single frame. The mysterious quality of the image has individuals perceiving the photograph in many different ways. The title "Drapery" comes from the sense that many individuals saw the back wall of the cell as a drape when it is a wall from a cell that is falling outward, allowing the elements to stain the concrete facade. The spiritual light entering the frame from the window above the crescent falling wall provides the viewer with further confusion about what is occurring in the photograph. At the base of the wall is snow that slid down the falling wall and entered from the broken window above.



FIGURE 7. The image of the “Bed in the Infirmary” was created to provide a sense of the passing of time and the individuals who occupied the space. Before visiting the ESP one day, I read about many individuals in the logs who had either passed away or had mental breakdowns while in the penitentiary. The sense of the bedframe in the photograph provides the feeling of modern-day prison with the prisoner behind this bed’s bars.

GARY SARETZKY, archivist, educator, and photographer, enjoyed his career as an archivist at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (1968–69), Educational Testing Service (1969–93), and the Monmouth County Archives (1994–19). He also taught history of photography at Mercer County Community College (1977–2012) and served as Coordinator, Rutgers Public History Internship Program (1994–2016). Saretzky’s more than 100 publications include “Louise Roskam: Documentary Photographer,” *New Jersey Studies* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 1–27; “From Newark to New Zealand: Frank R. Huff, Photographer,” *Daguerreian Annual, 2017–18* (The Daguerreian Society, 2019), 54–67; “The Dunshees: Itinerant New England Photographers from Bristol, Vermont,” *The Journal* (Photographic Historical Society of New England), no. 174 (2016): 46–63; and “Charlotte Prosch: New

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Jersey’s First Female Daguerreotypist,” *Garden State Legacy*, no. 31 (March 2016). His website, saretzky.com, features his photographs, lecture schedule, and photohistory resources.

NOTES

1. Walker Evans (1903–75) was an American photographer best known for his documentary photographs taken in the 1930s under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration. Although he used small cameras, his preference was the 8×10 view camera, which produced highly detailed negatives from which he made contact prints.
2. See Sarah L. Eckhardt et al., *Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2020), and Margaret O’Reilly, ed., *Louis H. Draper: Selected Photographs* (Rochester, NY, and West Windsor, NJ: Booksmart and Mercer County Community College, 2015). Kamoinge is still an active organization of Black photographers with an expanded mission.
3. Mss.365.P381p, State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records, 1819–1955, American Philosophical Society.
4. A selection of Kunsman’s series with these captions appeared in Eric T. Kunsman, “From Hopeful to Hardened, Featuring Selections from the Exhibition, Thou Art . . . Will Give . . .,” *LensWork*, no. 143 (August 2019): 24–41, and cover.
5. Eric T. Kunsman, email to author, August 30, 2020. The digital copies were made available to ESP. Kunsman’s first visit to the American Philosophical Society (APS), where he first saw the ESP journals, was on a field trip while a student in Hedi Kyle’s bookbinding class at the University of the Arts. Kyle also worked as head conservator at APS.