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## A Meal Denied

Sarah Kolac

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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# A MEAL DENIED

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Sarah Kolac

Associate of Arts, Tyler Junior College, 2005

B.S., Texas A & M University-Commerce, 2008

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

It is hard to believe that three years, which seemed like such a long time when I first arrived here in Baton Rouge, have come and gone so quickly. I will miss the endless parades for almost every occasion and the scenery of the water and Spanish moss hanging down from historic oak trees.

I owe the most gratitude to my family, in particular my Mom, who has been the biggest supporter of me and my endless pursuit of my artwork and education. This year in particular has shown me what a strong and courageous woman you are.

Cannon for being my support system while I was here in Baton Rouge and letting me vent and bounce ideas off of you. For also bringing little Leo into my life, which has definitely made my last year here more interesting.

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## ABSTRACT

The photographs in the series *A Meal Denied* offer a unique portrait into the lives of individuals currently serving as Texas Death Row inmates. In 2011, due to an extravagant meal request by an inmate, Senator John Whitmire sought to put an end to the last meal requests in Texas. Whitmire stated, "It is extremely inappropriate to give a person sentenced to death such a privilege."<sup>1</sup> However, I disagree with Whitmire; every inmate on Death Row should not be denied one of the only choices they will perhaps ever have during their incarceration in prison due to one particular inmates' meal request. In this body of work I engage in a correspondence with Texas Death Row inmates who share with me their last meal request and its significance. I then select those ingredients, prepare each meal, and make a photograph that is sent to the respective inmate. By showing the commonality that we all share with food, I hope to humanize these inmates who most of society has forgotten.

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<sup>1</sup> Mungin, Lateef, "Former death row chef offers to cook meals for the condemned," CNN, accessed March 8, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/02/justice/texas-last-meal/index.html/>

## INTRODUCTION: A MEAL DENIED

A year and a half ago I became aware of a female who was to be executed in Texas for a murder she committed in 1997. She would not be granted the request of a last meal like so many other inmates who had been executed before her. Through further research I learned that in September of 2011 the tradition of a last meal request in Texas was ended.<sup>2</sup>

Inmate Lawrence Russell Brewer had an execution date set for Wednesday, September 21, 2011 for partaking in a hate crime in 1998, but before he was to be executed he received his last meal request. Brewer requested two chicken fried steaks smothered in gravy with sliced onions, a triple-meat bacon cheeseburger, three fajitas, one pound of barbecue, a beef filled omelet, a meat lover's pizza, a large bowl of fried okra with ketchup, one pint of Blue Bell vanilla ice cream, a slab of peanut butter fudge with crushed peanuts, half a loaf of white bread, and three root beers.<sup>3</sup> One could wonder how anyone would be able to finish such an extravagant meal; in a surprise to the guards at the Walls Unit in Huntsville, Texas, Brewer left the entire meal untouched.

When word of the untouched meal made it back to Texas Senator John Whitmire, he was outraged and wrote a letter to Brad Livingston who was the Executive Director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Livingston agreed with Whitmire that supplying a last meal was

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<sup>2</sup> Ingram, Sommer. "Texas Death Row Inmates Can No Longer Order Special Last Meal." The Dallas Morning News, accessed January 8, 2014, <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/state/headlines/20110922-texas-death-row-inmates-can-no-longer-order-special-last-meal.ece>

<sup>3</sup> Fernandez, Manny. "Texas Death Row Kitchen Cooks Its Last Last Meal." The New York Times, accessed March 8, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/us/texas-death-row-kitchen-cooks-its-last-last-meal.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/us/texas-death-row-kitchen-cooks-its-last-last-meal.html?_r=0)<sup>3</sup>

not necessary. "Effective immediately, no such accommodations will be made," Livingston said. "They will receive the same meal served to other offenders on the unit."<sup>4</sup>

It didn't seem right to me that one man should have the authority to decide in the course of a few days to eradicate the tradition of the choice of a last meal on Death Row, and all because of one inmate's lavish request. In a small way, the meals that I create for these inmates serve as a stand in for the real meal, which they are denied. So many of the letters I have received, even from those who decline to have a last meal, thank me for taking the time to reach out to them. On another level, the correspondence between myself and each inmate is just as important to some, if not more, than the actual image they receive.

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<sup>4</sup> Graczyk, Michael. "Special Last Meals: Texas Prisons End Special Meals for Inmates Facing Execution." The New York Times, accessed March 13, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/22/special-last-meals-texas-\\_n\\_976543.html/](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/22/special-last-meals-texas-_n_976543.html/)

## RESEARCH

Food typically serves as the fuel for our bodies, a way of sustaining life. However, what would you think of the meal you were about to consume if it did not help to further your life? This is true for a select group of individuals on Death Row. There are currently thirty-two states that utilize the death penalty, but I am particularly interested in Texas, because they have one of the highest execution rates, and because I was born and raised two hours away from where the executions take place.

As I began research for this project, there were three places in particular that I felt could lend more insight into the lives of these inmates by visiting: the Huntsville Death Row Unit, the Captain Joe Byrd Cemetery, and the Texas Prison Museum. Huntsville is a small country town located in the Piney Woods of East Texas, and the headquarters for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is housed in this city.

The Huntsville Unit, more commonly known as the Walls Unit for its bright red brick exterior, opened in 1849 and today spans just over 54 acres (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> A huge clock high above the entrance is what newly detained and newly released prisoners walk through everyday. From the building's exterior two guards stationed at each top corner of the building can be seen. My reasoning for visiting this site was to see the site where all Texas executions take place.

Although I was not able to gain entry to the building, I photographed it because I knew that just beyond those bricks was where the death house lied. It is important to note that although this unit is where Death Row inmates are executed, it is not where they are housed for the duration of their time in prison. About an hour east of Huntsville is where the male inmates on Death Row

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<sup>5</sup> Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Unit Directory, accessed March 13, 2014, [http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/unit\\_directory/hv.html/](http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/unit_directory/hv.html/)

are housed at the Polunsky Unit. Female Death Row inmates are held at an all woman facility two and a half hours northwest of Huntsville at the Mountain View Unit. The inmates are brought to the Walls Unit early in the day of their scheduled execution date.



Figure 1 Sarah Kolac, *Walls Unit Exterior*, 2013.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
12 x 18 inches

Situated just a few minutes from the Walls Unit and within walking distance from Sam Houston State University sits the final resting site for thousands of Texas prison inmates at the Captain Joe Byrd Cemetery. Inmates whose bodies are not claimed end up at this cemetery. Private burials are often too expensive for families to burden so some leave it up to the prison to carry out the task. Inmates buried here are those who have either committed suicide, died of health problems, old age, or a small percentage are those who have been executed by the state. At the top of the cemetery site are many unmarked cement crosses that were made by other inmates. The crosses were later replaced by small tombstones, and a simple X or EX on a tombstone indicates that the person was executed (Figure 2). It is easy to see that the cemetery is on the verge of being completely full. The day I visited I saw prison workers dressed in all white clearing land at the bottom of the site in preparation for soon-to-be added burial sites.





Figure 2 Sarah Kolac, *Joe Byrd* #3, 2013.

Digital Inkjet Print

12 x 18 inches

A great deal of history regarding the Texas prison system, told by inmates and previous prison employees, can be found at the Texas Prison Museum in Huntsville. There are numerous exhibits ranging from inmate contraband such as homemade weapons to one of the most controversial artifacts, the old execution chair, nicknamed *Old Sparky*, that saw the death of 361 men. One of the greatest assets I found while at the museum was a collection of books by various authors pertaining to the Texas prison system. One of the most informative was *Meals to Die For*, written by Brian Price, an inmate at the Walls Unit, who for the duration of his 14 year prison stay prepared close to 200 last meals for men and women who had execution dates. Price volunteered to prepare the last meal for Lawrence Buxton on February 26, 1991 even though he had some reservations about preparing it. Price reflected on the day he decided to take the job as the last meal cook, "The next day my captain called me into the kitchen and he said that old boy they killed last night sent a message over here that he really liked that meal you put together, he appreciated it."<sup>6</sup> Having been moved from the response that he received from Buxton, Price

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<sup>6</sup> Bigert & Bergstöm, Last Supper, 2005, <http://vimeo.com/10964671/>

decided to take the job of preparing all the last meal requests. Today, since the dissolution of the last meal requests, Price has offered to prepare the meals himself at a restaurant he owns and then bring them to the prison. His offer was turned down.

It is easy to see how the act of a last meal can be seen as a humane, yet cruel tradition that is carried out in our prison systems. Similar to Price, I struggled with the act of preparing these last meals for inmates even though the meals I was creating would not ultimately be consumed. One obstacle I had was that I was preparing meals for people I hardly knew. Typically when I prepare a meal for someone it is done through the kindest regards that I have for that individual, which makes all the hard effort worth it when you see someone enjoying what you have created. The empathy I found for these inmates came from the gratitude that was expressed to me in their letters, and from a place of being able to provide them with a happy memory. As I received more letters, even from those who chose not to participate, the overall tone was appreciation for taking the time to acknowledge them.

So much of our culture is shaped around the food we eat and who we sit down to consume food with. Recipes are passed down from generations to generations as a way to hold on to our heritage. It is due to this fact that I ask each inmate to explain the significance of their chosen meal.

## PROCESS

Through the public resources page on the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's website I was able to find a complete listing for the men and women currently serving on Death Row. In April of 2013 I selected fifty names to contact. The envelope I mailed out contained a typed and signed letter explaining the project I was pursuing, a form for them to fill out if they wanted to participate, and a self-addressed stamped envelope for them to mail back their responses (Figure 3). I made a conscious decision early on not to look at the crimes that the inmates were convicted of. I did not want my correspondence with them to be biased in any way.

**Sarah Kolac**  
P.O. Box 85460  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana  
70884-5460

January 13, 2014

Dear Jeffery Wood:

Hi, my name is Sarah Kolac, and I am an artist who works with photography.

As a native Texan, I was disappointed to learn that in 2011 requests for last meals before execution were no longer to be granted in Texas prisons. I am currently working on a body of artwork about the injustices within the prison system, and I am reaching out to inmates for input.

I would like to offer a meal of your choosing in the form of a photograph. I will prepare your meal request and then photograph it. If you would like, I will then send you a small photograph of your meal for you to keep—a small gesture of appreciation for your involvement and feedback. I realize that partaking in a last meal may be something that, if the time ever comes, you might not wish to partake in at all. However, my hope is that this photograph that I create might provide you with a positive memory or something hopeful to focus on.

If you would like to participate, I have included a form for you to write down what food you might like to have as your last meal. I am also interested in knowing why you chose a specific food. Is there a family tie to your meal? A favorite food related to a specific memory? If you prefer to not participate, I ask for your help by writing "none" on the form and returning it. My hope is to gather enough responses and create enough of these photographed meals to display them in a gallery setting. I believe that these images might be a way to raise awareness about the death penalty in Texas and the individuals affected. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah Kolac

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Inmate #: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Time spent on Death Row: \_\_\_\_\_

**Last Meal Request:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Is there a reason why this particular food?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

☐ I would like a photograph of my last meal

☐ I would not like a photograph of my last meal

Figure 3 Sarah Kolac, *Sample Inmate Letter and Form*, 2013.

It took about two weeks before I received my first response letter from an inmate. Over the course of the next month, I received a total of six letters; four of those wanted to participate and two declined. Joe Luna wrote in his letter to me "I never had intentions of requesting a last

meal. Because I already know my mind is not gonna be on food. These people are gonna kill me. The last thing I will be thinking of is food." He went on to say that several of his fellow inmates felt the same as he did, but not everyone. I hoped that my letter would resonate with the inmates so I could provide them with a photograph that would perhaps remind them of a happy memory associated with food that referenced their childhood or meals that brought to mind family members or friends.

I was grateful that of the four letters I received, the responses were pleasant. Some chose foods that they just loved, while others chose a food that reminded them of a happier time (Figure 4). Carl Wayne Buntion requested a banana split from Dairy Queen because he remembered going there as a young boy once a week with his grandfather and that was what he always ordered.



Figure 4 Sarah Kolac, *Carl Wayne Buntion*, 2013.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches

When I received the participant's meal request I would then make a list of all the ingredients I would need to complete their meal. I felt it necessary to devote a full day to each individual's meal as a way for me to reflect upon them. I chose to shoot all of the meals at my home with the use of a simple white backdrop lit by window light and utilizing reflectors. The

different plates and silverware are from my own kitchen, as well as plates I have collected from friends and family. Using my own plates allowed me to personalize the meal, as if I were cooking for someone I knew. I believe it also helps to give the inmates a sense of who I am, by what plate I chose to represent their specific meal.

I knew that the inmates, although isolated in their individual cells, could talk to other inmates who were close by. It had worried me that because I had initially received such few responses that some individuals might be offended by me asking to create a last meal for them. I chose to wait a few months before sending out my next batch of letters to the inmates. I did not want to flood the Death Row halls with too many letters and risk them collectively dismissing my letters.

In August 2013, I sent out another fifty letters. This time I became more deliberate in the way I sent out subsequent mailings. I prioritized letters to those who had an upcoming execution date, like the emotional letter I received from Jose Villegas (Figure 5). He requested a simple meal including fried chicken that reminded him of when his Dad would get paid from work and he would bring home a bucket of fried chicken for the family. After those inmates, I would next send letters to the ones who had been on Death Row for a longer amount of time such as Jack Smith (Figure 6). The letter I received from Jack was written by a nearby cell mate, Anthony Haynes. He explained in his letter to me that Jack was 75 years old and had been on Death Row for almost 35 years. He was unable to read or write so Anthony had read my letter to him and typed his last meal request for him.



Figure 5 Sarah Kolac, *Jose Villegas*, 2014.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches



Figure 6 Sarah Kolac, *Jack Smith*, 2013.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches

When I began sending out my letters there were only ten women serving on Death Row. I have yet to receive any replies from them; I have reached out to them twice over the course of a year. Kimberly McCarthy received my letter in April of 2013, but did not respond. On June 26 she became the 500th person to be executed in Texas. From the August letters sent out, I received eleven replies. Six of those politely declined to participate and five wanted their meals

created for them. Among those, I created meals for Pedro Solis Sosa (Figure 7), Raymond Deleon Martinez (Figure 8), David Lewis (Figure 9), Angel Rivera (Figure 10), and Eugene Broxton (Figure 11). It was important to me to also represent those who chose not to participate. Over the last year and a half I received a total of eight letters of those who declined a last meal request for various reasons. I chose to represent their meals by photographing an empty plate and glass (Figure 12). The reason I chose to show these eight images in black and white was a way for me to distinguish the non meal requests from the ones who requested a meal.

Figure 7 Sarah Kolac, *Pedro Solis Sosa*, 2013.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches

Figure 8 Sarah Kolac, *Raymond Deleon Martinez*, 2013.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches



Figure 9 Sarah Kolac, *David Lewis* 2013.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches



Figure 10 Sarah Kolac, *Angel Rivera*, 2013.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches





Figure 11 Sarah Kolac, *Eugene Broxton*, 2013.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches

Throughout January, February, and March of 2014 I sent out an additional 178 letters and receive a total of 21 meal request letters. I am still in the process of preparing and photographing requests that I have recently received. I try my best to get an image sent to the inmate as soon as possible and once my images are installed in the gallery I plan on sending installation photographs back to all the inmates so they can see how their images are displayed to the public.

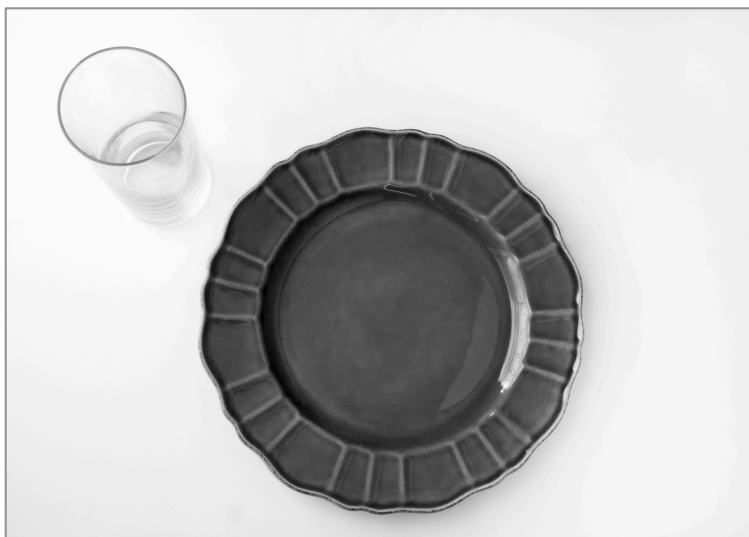


Figure 12 Sarah Kolac, *No Requested Meal*, 2014  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches

## INFLUENCES

The fascination that we have with knowing the last words or the last meal of a death row inmate is something that can be traced back to public beheadings and hangings in town squares from hundreds of years ago. Today this information is published in newspapers the day after an execution. In 2003 Texas removed the listings of inmates' last meals online because they often received complaints about it. However, before inmates are put to death, the Warden will ask if they have any last words. Their last words, if any, are still posted online.

When I first began my project I was aware that there were other artists who had re-created the last meals of inmates who had been executed. I found that many of the images were of inmates across the United States and sometimes only the more notorious inmates' last meals were used. The work of Canadian artist Kate MacDonald resonated with me. Her series *Last Meals* shows different inmates' last meals across the U.S. as paintings on canvas. The painting from her series that stood out to me the most was one I was familiar with, Karla Faye Tucker's last request (Figure 13).



Figure 13 Kate MacDonald, *Last Meal Karla Faye Tucker*, 2012.  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 20 inches

I related to MacDonald's work because I appreciated how she used a simple background throughout this series, typically employing just a simple white space or a wooden desk that the food is presented on. I feel that in my own images that eliminating a distracting background setting lets the meal choice be the focus of the image. She managed to present a viewpoint that I had not seen before; that of a half-consumed meal instead of an untouched one. That half-eaten meal then forces the viewer to think about the person who consumed it, a person who is no longer living. Her images made me question whether or not my own images might be more powerful if I showed the food partially consumed. However, in the context of my work it would not create the same impression because my inmates are still living.

MacDonald's use of a metal tray in Tucker's painting was similar to the metal trays I used for my images when I first began this project (Figure 14). I gravitated to the metal trays at first because I felt that it would give my viewers an immediate sense that the images they were viewing were from an institutional setting. However, the feedback I received from these images



Figure 14 Sarah Kolac, *Karla Faye Tucker*, 2013.  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches

did not match my intent for the project. I realized by only focusing on my viewer's point of view I had unintentionally left out the final destination of the image, the inmate who requested it. If I

were an inmate, would I want my requested meal served on something that prison systems use? Since I am entrusted by these inmates to create their last meals for them, my goal was to produce an image that was as desirable as possible.

I also became aware of Julie Green's work, *The Last Supper*. Her images were unique from the majority of artists working on last meals due to the fact that she was hand-painting hundreds of white dinner plates with past inmates' last meal requests (Figure 15). Her use of the



Figure 15 Julie Green, *Texas 21 September 2011*, 2012.  
Cobalt blue mineral paint applied to second-hand plates

second-hand plate was an idea that resonated with me. I decided to not photograph my meals any longer on metal trays, and began to use regular dinner plates (Figure 16). Yet, since what I was creating for these inmates was of a reverent manner I decided to utilize the plates that I use at home. I knew I would not have enough of my own dishes so I enlisted the dishes of friends and family as well. The inclusion of my own plates also helped to personalize the image that I would be sending to each inmate.



Figure 16 Sarah Kolac, *Marcus Druery*, 2014  
Digital Inkjet Print  
17 x 22 inches

A large component of my project is the inclusion of text. Working with text and photography was something that I had not explored much in my previous work. I was a bit uneasy originally about letting my viewers see the correspondence between each inmate and myself. I wanted to keep a level of respect for the inmate who was sharing personal information with me, and not exploit them. I looked at artists such as Jacquelyn C. Black, Barbara Caveng, and Ralf Grömminger to see how they dealt with the use of photographs and text. In Black's book entitled *...last meal*, she juxtaposes a photograph of the inmate's last meal with a black and white prison mug shot along with the prisoner's last statement (Figure 17). She also gives a small amount of background information such as job and education level.

In *Final Meals* created with Grömminger's photographs and the installation created by Caveng, viewers interact with each box by pulling on a slide out tray attached to each box that contain a prisoner fact sheet (Figure 18). The stylized images with bright colors lend themselves to the backlit advertising manner in which they are presented. I enjoyed the way the viewer had a

chance to interact with the piece and that was something I carried with me when deciding how to represent the text in my own work.

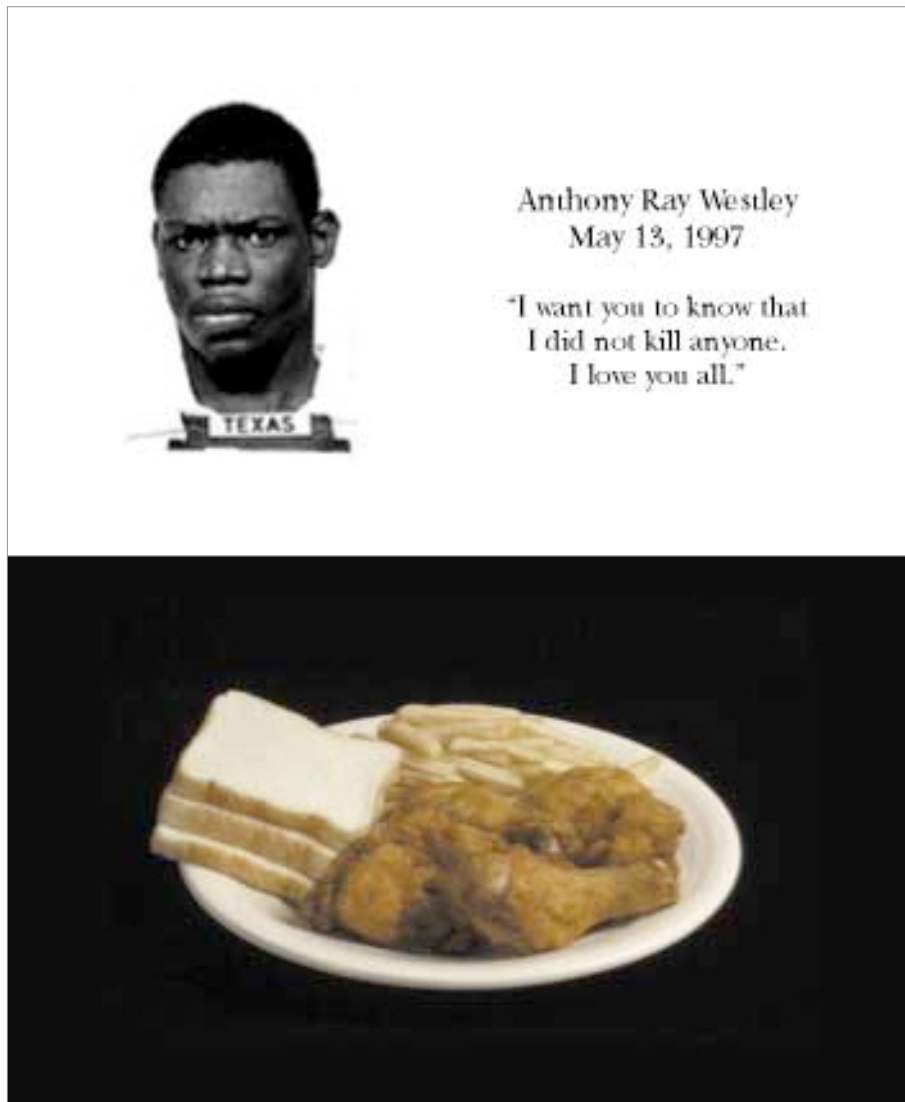


Figure 17 Jacquelyn C. Black, *Anthony Ray Westley*, 2003  
From the book ...last meals.





Figure 18 Ralf Grömminger and Barbara Caveng, *Backlightbox Meal 999177*, 2000  
40 x 40 x 18 centimeters

I deviate from these and other artists exploring this similar subject matter due to the fact that I am engaging in a personal interaction with each inmate. Through this interaction I am able to relate to each inmate on a personal level, which I then share with my viewers. By exposing my viewers to a different side of each inmate that they would ordinarily not encounter an amount of empathy can be generated.

## INSTALLATION

When I began thinking of various ways to present my photographs and letters, I had reservations about presenting the work in a traditional format on a gallery wall. I find that too often in a gallery setting people will spend so little time reflecting and actually looking at the work. I wanted visitors to sit and spend some time with each image and to read all of the inmates' corresponding letters. Creating a conducive environment for reflection was important to me.

Each of the 18 meal request images are situated on their own individual table (Figure 19). The white table-tops serve as a blank canvas for the photographs to be placed upon. Each table is complete with an individual chair so that viewers can look down upon the photograph as if they were about to consume the meal (Figure 20). The act of viewers sitting, standing, and then moving to another table will in itself allow for a more interactive experience. The corresponding letters for the inmates still incarcerated are placed in a simple manila folder next to the photo. They look as if they could have been pulled out of an office file cabinet, similar to what inmate information would be kept in at a prison. Two of the photographs on tables will have their letters in a black folder, a way of visually distinguishing the inmates who have since been executed (Figure 21). I wanted a way to distinguish the executed from the living but represented in a simple manner, the black folder signifying mourning. On the far back wall of the gallery, a collection of photographs of empty plates are arranged in a grid (Figure 22). These empty plates represent those who chose not to request a last meal. By showing these images, I am revealing the sheer numbers of inmates who are incarcerated on Death Row in Texas. I also have a folder near this wall with a collection of the letters I received from inmates who declined to participate.





Figure 19 Sarah Kolac, *Installation View 1*, 2014.



Figure 20 Sarah Kolac, *Installation View 2*, 2014.



Figure 21 Sarah Kolac, *Installation View 3*, 2014.

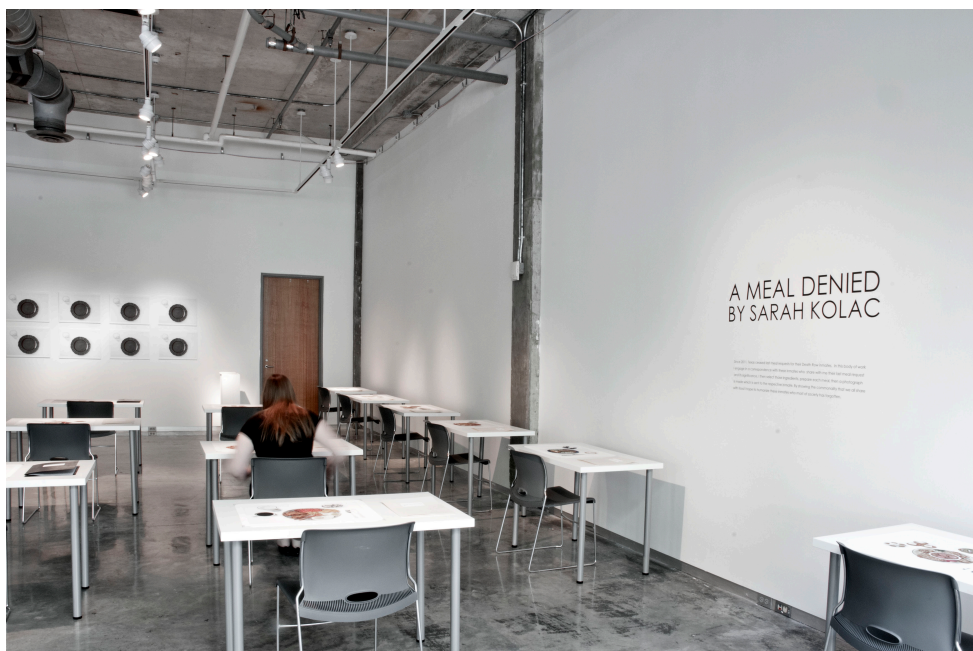


Figure 22 Sarah Kolac, *Installation View 4*, 2014.

## **CONCLUSION**

For the men and women on Death Row, selecting their last meal was one of the only choices they would be able to make during their incarceration. Since that choice was taken away from them, I wanted to provide Texas Death Row inmates an opportunity to still retain this choice and have it provided in the form of a photograph. However, throughout my correspondence with these individuals, I realized something just as important was taking place. By being in contact with them I was perhaps able to show them that they are not forgotten members of society.

Food is a commonality that we all share; it is a way of bringing people together and part of our family traditions and culture. My desire is to humanize these inmates by means of their food selections. Hopefully seeing and reading about each inmate's choice might help generate an amount of empathy that will in turn raise awareness or at least start a conversation about the issue of capital punishment. I will continue to be in contact with the inmates that I have reached out to as well as future inmates on Death Row in Texas.

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## VITA

Sarah Kolac was born and raised in the Piney Woods of East Texas. She received her Associate of Arts degree *magna cum laude* from Tyler Junior College in 2005 and later went to Texas A & M University - Commerce to pursue a degree in photography. In 2008 she was awarded a B.S. degree *magna cum laude* in Photography from Texas A & M University - Commerce. She took a few years off from school and during this time she decided she wanted to further her education by attending graduate school. She is currently a degree candidate at Louisiana State University for her M.F.A. in Studio Art.