



LORI WASELCHUK

Lori Waselchuk's exhibit includes "Prison Guard Watches From the Levee" (above) and "Lloyd Bone (#73857) Drives the Funeral Hearse" (below).

## Capturing prison life, and death

Waselchuk's images in Louisiana are stark, but humane

By Mark Feeney  
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Angola, the one in Africa, is a foreign country. That's obvious enough. But so's the one near Baton Rouge. That Angola is home to the Louisiana State Penitentiary, the largest maximum-security prison in the United States. Along with Parchman, in Mississippi, it was long notorious as one of the worst places to be incarcerated in this country. It's been said that the only thing worse than dying there was living there.

Lori Waselchuk, a Philadelphia-based photographer, went to Angola in 2007 to document its prisoner-run hospice program. Twelve of those photographs make up "Lori Waselchuk: Grace Before Dying." It runs at the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University through July 10. The show will also be installed at the Concord Public Library, from June 1-20.

These are literally life-and-death matters Waselchuk is showing. Which makes all the more impressive the restraint with which she presents them. It helps that the photographs are in black and white. Color raises the temperature of an image. Black



and white lowers it. It also helps that Waselchuk uses such a horizontal format (the pictures are 40 inches by 14½ inches). The landscape justifies the horizontality. It's almost oceanically flat. "Field Line 15" makes the Midwest, by comparison, look nearly mountainous by comparison. In long shot, we see a parked bus, a barbed-wire fence, and 25 pairs of men marching in profile. The sense of emptiness is overwhelming.

More often, people (nearly all male) fill the frame. Sometimes it's just a single person. The title "Lloyd Bone (#73857) Drives the Funeral Hearse" is nearly self-explanatory. The numerals are his identification number. What the title can't convey is the almost-majestic quality that informs the image. Bone wears a bowler hat. The hearse is horse-drawn. The tight stretch of the reins seems almost to bisect the picture, even as they parallel a rail fence in

the background.

Waselchuk gives us Bone in profile. In "Prison Guard Watches From the Levee" the subject faces away from the viewer, the facility spread out before her in the distance. The word "CORRECTIONS," on the back of her jacket, sits, bang, in the center of picture. Or, rather, what we read is "ORRECTIONS." A rifle butt obscures the letter "c." It's one of the few reminders of the violence that defines Angola.

Usually, it's groups and pairs that we see. The intentness of the men in "Pall Bearers" as they stride toward the photographer underscores the gravity of their task. In "Volunteers' Monthly Meeting," the sight of the nine men seated in a semicircle in a large nondescript room shows that Waselchuk's letterbox format suits Angola's interiors as well as exteriors.

The most moving photographs show pairs. In "Terry Remains in Lockdown," a

### PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

LORI WASELCHUK:  
Grace Before Dying

At: the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University, 832 Commonwealth Ave., through July 10. 617-975-0600, [www.prcboston.org](http://www.prcboston.org)

prisoner in solitary confinement looks out from a slot in the door. His eyes meet those of a hospice worker on the other side. The sense of connection between the two men is so compelling that one almost overlooks the lock fastened above the slot. Almost.

"George Checks Jimmie's Breathing" is an implied pair. We see only one man. He's asleep, with a breathing tube, in a hospital bed. In the foreground, an arm reaches in from outside the frame. The hand attached to it rests on the sick man's chest. The image is profoundly moving, with its echoes of centuries of religious art and even more centuries of parent watching over child. As with the other 11 photographs, this one has a sculptural quality (Waselchuk has an impressive eye for form). More important, and also like the other photographs, it's deeply humane.

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