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Artist is buried alive to explore incarceration in *Doing Time* exhibition.

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There is nothing quite like burying someone alive. It's one of the most nerve-racking things I've ever done.

It's a chilly Monday afternoon in Alexandria and it's not much warmer in the studio where I am helping to pile 120 kilograms of cold, coarse gravel over the prone form of artist Lucas Davidson. It takes surprisingly little time - four or five minutes - and when it is done, only the tips of his toes and his nostrils poke out above the surface. It is a profoundly disturbing image.

This is *Black Cell*, an endurance work forming part of *Doing Time*, a new exhibition devised by the Sydney Law School and the Sydney Institute of Criminology to bring artists together for a creative and academically informed response to imprisonment and detention.



Lucas Davidson's nose pokes through the gravel. Photo: Dominic Lorrimer

Davidson will be reburied before the exhibition's opening night at Sydney University's Verge Gallery, in Darlington. (Viewers need to be there at 6pm sharp.) If all goes to plan, he will be under the gravel for 60 minutes in an installation that may remind *Star Wars* fans of Han Solo's incarceration in Carbonite and will hopefully inspire everyone else to ponder the physical and psychological traumas associated with solitary confinement and sensory deprivation.

"The first time I tried it, I only lasted three minutes," softly-spoken Davidson says. "I freaked out."

Black Cell is Davidson's response to the 60 days former prison inmate Brett Collins spent in solitary confinement in the small, windowless "black cells" in the Grafton, Maitland and Long Bay jails while serving a sentence for armed robbery in the early 1970s. The work aims to bring awareness to mental health issues encountered in solitary confinement, including anxiety, paranoia, aggression and depression.

"I did some research into solitary confinement and Brett's story is one that stood out for me," Davidson says. "I thought about my body and about depriving it of the freedoms we have. I started looking at the raw materials used in cells and that's where I came across the blue metal aggregate used in concrete. That's the stone I'm applying to myself." Davidson says he had to work his way up to being buried for an hour, five and 10 minutes at a time. "Physically, it's painful. I lose circulation to my hands and the stones are very itchy. The weight of it means you have to be very focused on your breathing. I've only done the full hour once and after that, I thought I'd never do it again."

Davidson is one of five artists contributing work to *Doing Time*, alongside Debra Dawes, Anne Ferran, Sylvia Griffin and Carolyn McKay, all of whom have creatively responded to issues of incarceration and confinement. The exhibition includes photomedia, installation and video works.

McKay's artwork, *Model Prison*, references the increasing use of video links between prisons and criminal courts. "You have a situation now where people accused of crimes are not physically present before a judge," says McKay, a visual artist who is also completing a PhD in criminology. "I'm using a video work I made with an actor in an old lock-up in Newcastle and projecting it into a little jail - a literal model of a prison."

The idea behind *Doing Time* is to provoke discussion, says McKay. "It's a very interesting time to be talking about these issues. We have mandatory detention [of asylum seekers] and increasing rates of incarceration in our prison system. It's the right time to engage in a dialogue. Most of society doesn't get to see these places for what they are or they don't think about what incarceration is beyond what they see on TV in *Orange is the New Black* or *Wentworth*."

Davidson says he's never performed *Black Cell* in a gallery context before. "I don't know what to expect. There will be people walking around, maybe trying to interact. And there's no guarantee I can make it to 60 minutes. Lots of things can go wrong."

***Doing Time* opens at the Verge Gallery, Darlington, July 16, 6pm.**