“All my life I guess I’ve had this need to ‘walk on razor blades’--to experience some form of adrenaline rush...” reflects artist Bill Murray in a self-examining look back on his life and career. Somewhere within that statement one finds at least a partial answer as to why, in 1974, Murray steered himself away from a more traditional career and instead hurled himself directly into the path of what he himself describes as the demons that have consistently haunted his life.

Murray’s promising talent as a young artist was already apparent by 1973. Having served four years in the military, he was able to use his post-service benefits to enroll at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD). There, while only a junior, his work caught the eye of Suzanne Cohen, owner of a St. Paul gallery. Although she made it clear that she had never shown a student’s work before, she agreed to give him gallery space. Then, in a single one-day student show at MCAD, he sold 55 of his paintings-- enough to finance four years of college.

But shortly after, in 1974, at the age of 26, he turned away from the more traditional career path he could have followed. Instead, he walked into Stillwater Prison--initially as a volunteer and three years later as the first state-employed art teacher in the country to create an art program for inmates in Minnesota’s largest close-security, level four institution for adult male felons--current population: 1,604. It was a choice that would change not only his life but the lives of some of Stillwater’s most hardened criminals for the next 29 years.

The pain and pathos, as well as soaring highs and astounding outcomes, that marked his career will explode in a challenging exhibit presented by the Bloomington Theatre and Art Center at the Bloomington Center for the Arts from April 12 – May 17, 2013. Appropriately titled Out of the Abyss: William Murray and the Prison Art Project, the exhibition will showcase approximately 30 of the inmates’ works and roughly 30 of Bill’s own pieces--including some potentially disturbing 3-D box art.

“Art teaches you not just about things outside of you, but also about what’s on the inside. Every one of us has our own story, and art gives you the ability to tell that story,” explains Murray. The stories told in this exhibit are often difficult to absorb. “Prison takes your soul,” whispers Murray, “not only that of the inmates, but also of the staff.” It is an insight that foreshadows many of the images within the exhibit.

“This exhibition is a definition of my looking into the abyss, the portal to hell, my way of looking at all the kindness and all the evil I found there, through art,” continues Murray. “It is me stepping back from the madness and asking myself to somehow define that experience and share it with others.”

But, as Murray admits, the exhibit is also “a personal exorcism, helping me deal with those feelings I’ve held inside for so long and that have eaten at me.” Long troubled by depression and suicidal thoughts, Murray is painfully aware of how artists walk a fine line between creativity and madness--and how his task has continually been one of using that madness to fuel his creativity and not destroy himself.

The parallel with what he saw and experienced in prison does not escape him, which is why his years working in Stillwater have not
spared him his own psychological trauma that sometimes seethes up through his own canvases. “I was actually treated for PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) because of the effects of working there,” Murray shares. Only by doing his own reading and studying the effects of depression has he been able to harness that knowledge of his own nature and channel it into creative outlets.

“Doing this prison series has brought up things I’ve suppressed for many years,” he admits. “I took this darkness with me into the prison. I saw myself as a warrior, battling the realities of what was trying to destroy me. The prison experience was more of that ‘walking on razor blades.’” His own father, for whom he still feels love despite his father’s stern disciplinary practices, repeatedly told Murray he’d never be any good. “That was my driving motivation...,” recalls Murray, “to rise above the image I had of myself.”

“So the biggest thing is that I did something in a way no one else had done,” reflects Murray. “I was made to teach art in prison, and it set me above not being able to do anything. Teaching in the prison was a way to challenge myself as to how I saw myself and what I could do to change other people. When inmates said ‘I wish I had a teacher like you when I was young,’ I realized I DID have a teacher like me in Bloomington and I don’t forget what happened to me.”

When Murray was only six years old, his uncle, an artist, introduced him to drawing, and from that first moment, “Watching him create art was like magic,” he remembers. “He could create something from just a piece of paper and a pencil!”

“School was torturous,” Murray admits. “I wasn’t good in math or English and I’m sure I had some dyslexia. It was like listening to politicians—blah, blah, blah. Artists are notorious for being dreamers and I was always looking out the window. What they didn’t realize is that I was learning all that time—taking note of all the colors, the shadows, what things looked like outside that window. And thanks to two Bloomington art teachers, Mrs. Pensinger and Mr. Bach—I was able to demonstrate my abilities and passion in art class where I became the hero and was given compliments for the first time.”

When he started teaching at Stillwater, Murray’s mission was clear. “I had a vision in my head of starting a fire in them, starting a passion in them like it was started in me, and from that passion in them and that desire to create, I saw them change as human beings—and that was my goal. Art was just a tool. It was a catalyst for what they couldn’t talk about. Teaching art became a door, and as I opened that door to reveal another world to them, a lot of them were able to drop that bag of crap they were carrying around and move through that door with a little bit of hope and self-esteem.”

Murray recalls the transformation of one inmate in particular. “He was dirty, smelly, his cell was a mess. But I encouraged him to send one of his pictures to his daughter with whom he had no recent contact. She sent back a picture she had drawn. It started the healing they both needed so badly. He started washing, cleaning his cell. It changed him. That’s what art does.”

Murray’s art class was never traditional by any definition. Within Stillwater Prison, the art class was categorized as a job. Inmates had to apply for the class as they would for any prison job and be interviewed by Murray. His clerks, themselves first-degree murderers and therefore never intimidated while watching over his art supplies, frequently offered him advice on who should, or should not, be accepted. New students came and went every week, so “it was a bit like teaching in the Chicago bus station,” recalls Murray. “Every day was different. I had to be a chameleon. I finally created packets for new students to orient them, but some couldn’t read. I actually brought in a grade book at first until some of them told me what I could do with the grade book.”

“From then on I learned to teach like I would want to be taught. Every Friday I gave them a new assignment—something they couldn’t copy, like a childhood experience, or
their self-portrait without showing their face. Mondays and Wednesdays were studio days and I took every opportunity to compliment their work. Tuesdays were lectures, and as I identified individuals with special talents, I invited them to share those learned skills in a lecture or demonstration—the first time that they had probably ever been singled out for recognition in such a positive way. It had an unbelievable impact on them—and also on the warden, who dropped by occasionally and was amazed by what was happening. It was clear that, after his visits, he saw these inmates in a different way, and he became a staunch advocate for the art program. Fridays were critiques—and we mixed in some films and talked about what they liked and disliked."

Anyone who missed an assignment received one warning. If they missed a second assignment, they were fired, and Murray made a point of stressing "this meant they fired themselves." Students’ length of studies ranged from a few hours to two years for advanced students, “learning not only art but also responsibility and pride,” reflects Murray. One of Murray’s clerks assisted him for 13 years, “an experience that changed this man as a human being, leading to a life dedicated to art,” adds Murray, who 10 years later still follows this man’s continuing evolution with an understandable sense of admiration and pride.

In truth, Bill Murray became more than an art teacher to his students. “I tried never to judge them,” he explains. “If they wanted to talk about what they did, I listened, but I never asked. I told them, ‘Being in prison doesn’t mean you’re a bad person. You made a mistake and now you’re paying for it. Now what are you going to do about it? Are you going to change, or let it destroy your entire life?’ In many cases, I became their mother, their counselor, their psychologist.”

Add “philosopher” to that list. Murray recalls, “I showed them mistakes in some famous pieces of art—really great art despite the mistakes. And then when they were afraid to try to draw something themselves, I said, ‘You’re going to make some bad drawings. Failure is a part of the process of art, just like you’re going to make some mistakes in life. But you have a choice: to learn from those mistakes, or let them destroy you.’” Then he’d let them think about what all that meant.

By no means was Murray’s experience one big warm and fuzzy Pollyanna moment. “I’ve learned sadness beyond comprehension, violence beyond understanding,” recalls Murray. “Prison is a dangerous place, a place where people get killed. It is a violent, respect-based culture,” as he was reminded when he himself became embroiled in a fight with a murderer who was disrupting his class. Because Murray, who as a volunteer in 1974, wore no identification badge, the guards were ready to throw him “in the hole” along with the prisoner until other inmates vouched for his identity. That incident earned him respect and a reputation of being fair but firm. But it was also a reminder that his nature was such that he could have easily landed inside that prison were it not for key people and key events in his life that pointed him in other directions. “I was in a gang when I was young,” recalls Murray, “not like the gangs of today, more like I describe to my students as a West Side Story-type gang without the singing and dancing, which always gets a laugh out of them. But my anger also led me to come very close to killing a man in a very bloody fight. I looked into the abyss that night and learned how easy it is to fall over the edge.” Such memories ground him in the reality of what he has seen and learned in his three decades at Stillwater.

As an emissary from the prison world to the broader community, Murray has encountered a wide range of
This exhibit received additional support from the 2012 Next Step Fund administered by the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council. Murray’s grant application, completed with assistance from the BTAC staff, was one of only 32 selected from more than 360 applicants for the (up to) $5,000 award. “This grant is a perfect fit for Bill because its focus is on artists who are moving in a completely new direction with their art,” explained Rachel Flentje, BTAC Visual Arts Director.

Murray is also attentive to those who may be offended. “I am not trying to shove these realities in their faces—just expressing my feelings and creative ideas about the things I saw and felt. How do you visually show what you’ve done and experienced? If they are offended, know that I’ve spoken from my heart.”

“Yes, at times it scares me...yes, it makes me sad sometimes, but the sadness is simply the reality of what prison is. Prison is a very sad place. Christmas in prison is beyond your comprehension—like a sad fog setting in.

“But for me as an artist, I have to take that chance. I’ve lived with depression, thoughts of suicide, the things in my life that have made me sad. But I still have to face it. I still have to cross that line and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with that beast I still wrestle with, fight with, because that’s who I am as a person. I changed lives because I changed mine.”

For Murray, art has also enabled him to find the beautiful things in life, to “see through the fog of reality” as he explains it. “Art has given me a focus, a way to walk through my life and find some semblance of sanity.”

In the end, Murray has come to realize that all the time he thought he was teaching the inmates, they were really teaching him—about life, about people, about how one thinks about life and people, and about himself—even why he is drawn to “walking on razor blades.” Viewers of this exhibition, if they so choose, will have the opportunity to contemplate the same—and even walk on a few razor blades of their own.