

## To Create in Prison

### Spel

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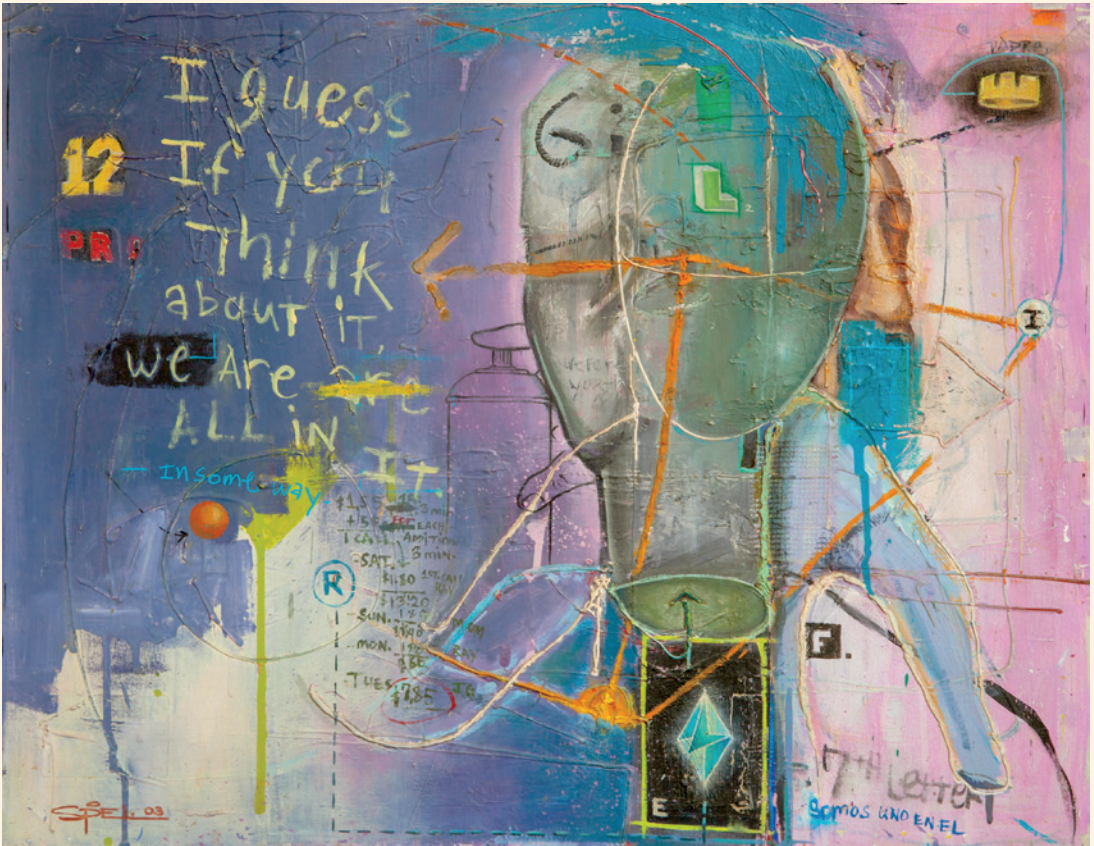
**Spel**, known also as Hernan Cortes, is considered a Philly aerosol art legend from the 1980s street scene. For the past thirty-two years he has been incarcerated in Pennsylvania, having been wrongly convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to Life Without Parole for a crime he did not commit. He and his team of supporters continue the fight to bring justice to light. To learn more about Spel and his ongoing fight for justice, visit <https://www.freespel.com>.

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Most individuals who observe my work at a glance are prone to say, “It’s abstract, it’s expressionistic, modern.” It may be, but I believe that to categorize is to marginalize, and such labels I defy. My work includes personal elements conveying the unfettered spirit and soul. Creativity provides meaning when all else fails. The work is alive. It summons willing participants to hold dialogues, to be educated, to elevate their spirit and consciousness to the unknown. Through these paintings I am a vessel transmitting for the voiceless, rendering a symphony of balance and pure energy, reflections of the past, present, and future. Layers of dichotomous elements are symbolic to what exists in this life and thereafter.

Making art has always been instrumental in my journey through life. Being incarcerated forces you to have to acclimate and accept the conditions of life in a new world where rules and regulations are met from both the jailed and jailers. To survive is key. Creating becomes much more serious in such an environment, but with so many restrictions and rules about “what you can and cannot have,” you again must adapt and become super resourceful; the adage “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure” becomes so real.

For a long time, I salvaged all sorts of discarded materials, foraging for what I viewed as being useful for the next masterpiece. Having created



Spel, *I guess if you think about it we are all in it*, 2002–3.  
Acrylic, oil, oil stick, spray paint, marker, drywall tape,  
and sticker on paper mounted on panel, 24 × 19 in.

many works throughout my time in prison, I find that people (in the free community) are usually amazed to discover that I use such nontraditional materials. The works possess a raw grittiness that I think could not be achieved if not for the materials and manner in which they are used. The process of finding what I consider useful becomes in itself an act of mental gymnastics. “Okay, is this or that material considered contraband? Do I go for it?” you ask yourself. In the end, the risks far outweigh the repercussions. My work is my buoy. I guess I am most creative when my options are limited and I’m told I cannot.



Spel, *with each day*, 2021. Hand-torn toilet tissue wrapper soaked in instant coffee, floor sealer, marker, 5.5 × 5 in.