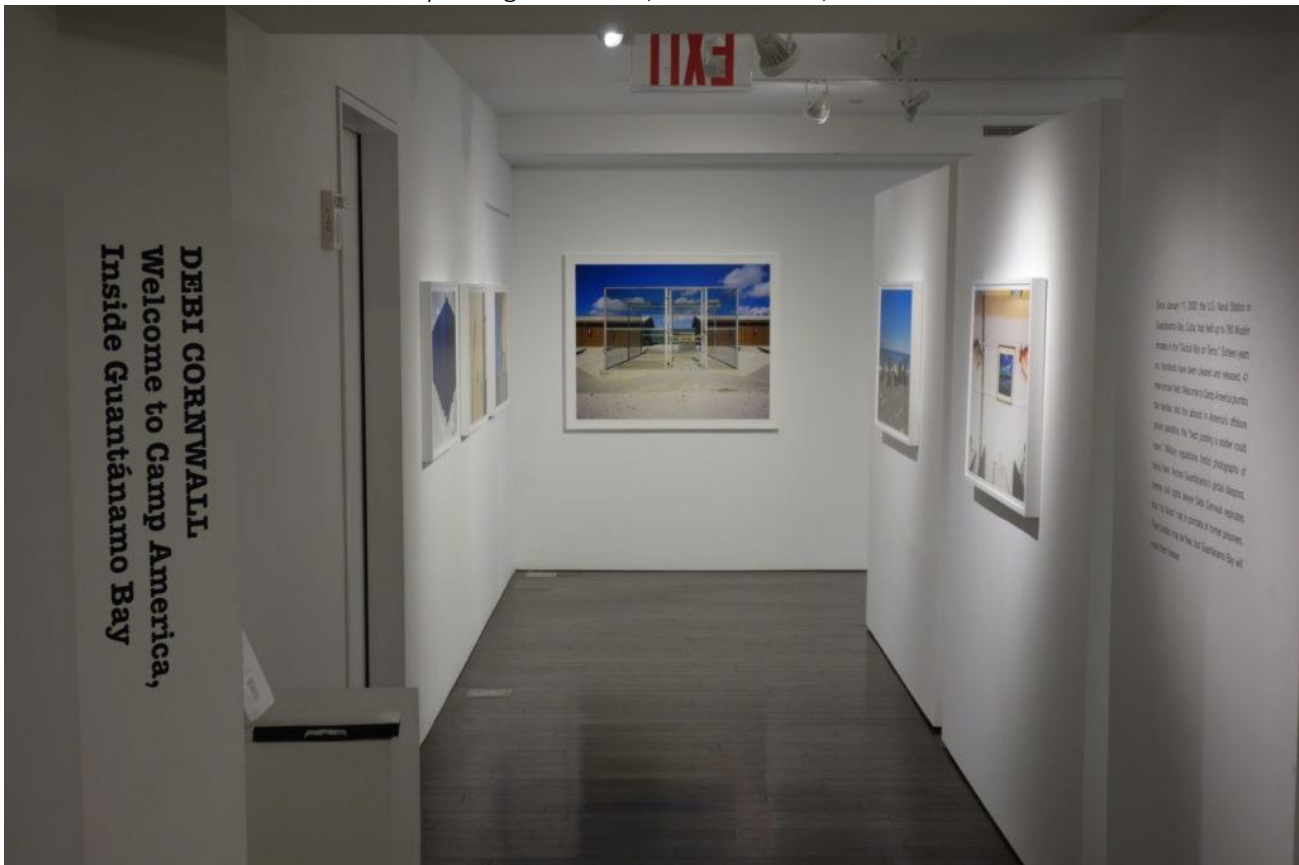


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DEBI CORNWALL: WELCOME TO CAMP AMERICA, INSIDE
GUANTANAMO BAY @STEVEN KASHER

By Loring Knoblauch, November 30, 2017



JTF (just the facts): A total of 27 color photographs, framed in white and unmatted, and hung against white walls (including partitions) in the back gallery space. All of the works are archival pigment prints, made in 2014 or 2015 and printed in 2016 or 2017. The prints from the various projects are sized 20×16 (in editions of 9+2AP), 39×26/32×26/30×26 or reverse (in editions of 6+2AP), or 40×50 (in editions of 3+2AP). The show also includes two folders of redacted interrogation files and notes, an audio collaboration made with poet Frank Smith (heard on headphones), and a copy of a monograph of this body of work published in 2017 by Radius Books ([here](#)).

Comments/Context: In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the United States naval station at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba became the primary detention center for those suspected of carrying out (or intending to carry out) acts of terror against America. For more than a decade (primarily during the Bush administration but continuing to a lesser extent through until today), the facility has held hundreds of detainees, nearly all of them Muslim, and for a period of time, subjected them to a now infamous array of “enhanced” interrogation techniques in the hopes of uncovering important and actionable

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intelligence. And while special military commissions outside the traditional legal system were set up to prosecute the alleged offenders rounded up and housed there, many of the suspects were and have been held without charge or recourse for years on end, living in an in-between limbo without obvious path to resolution or release.

Over the years, the continued attention on the mysteries (and injustices) of the activities at the prison at Guantánamo Bay has created an intense aura of intrigue around the place, but few have actually had a first hand look at life behind the base walls. The British photographer Edmund Clark spent time there in 2010 (as part of a broader series of investigations into state controls, terrorism detainees, rendition activities, and the extended network of bases and facilities used to support these various efforts), and he produced a notable series of images of the cells, holding facilities, and other details of incarceration (waiting rooms, shackles, riot gear, medical equipment and the like). His pictures are rooted in a consistent sense of alienation, where the menace is quiet and largely invisible but still powerfully disorienting.

Debi Cornwall's more recent body of work on view in this show (and in a well-made accompanying photobook) effectively picks up where Clark left off, retracing some of his steps inside the Guantánamo Bay base while expanding and enlarging the scope of the effort. The exhibit weaves together three separate but interrelated series, each working to unravel a portion of the complexity that the notorious place represents.

Gitmo at Home, Gitmo at Play takes a close look at the physical details of life at the facility, contrasting the spaces for prisoners with those for the guards and administrative staff. Like Clark's images of similar detainee locations, Cornwall documents the harsh emptiness of an outdoor "recreation" cage made of chain link fence on a concrete pad, the modest "comfort items" (including flip flops and toothpaste) arrayed in a single room cell with one narrow window slit, and the painted black arrow pointing to Mecca in an otherwise claustrophobic and featureless room.

The directness of these pictures is balanced by other images from the series that capture the realities of prison life with more subtlety and implication. There are the mops, rakes, and Swiffer needed for the clean up of unknown messes, the antiseptic blue-curtained hospital room for unspecified medical issues, the soundproof band practice room (to keep sounds in or out?), and the plush chair set in a tight corner with handy shackles chained to the floor designed for "compliant detainees". Each image has been seen with formal clarity, the pared down aesthetic forcing the viewer to imagine the processes and procedures not overtly shown in the pictures.

This series also includes photographs of the spaces inhabited by the guards, offering a glimpse of the unexpected resort-style leisure found in the context of a military base and providing a visual foil for the harrowing spaces used by prisoners. Cornwall shows us beach chairs near the water, an inviting "Seaside Galley" diner complete with fish decor, a golf driving range, a swimming pool with a concrete turtle for the kids, and a small stadium with rows of seats and a rally sign for "Team Gitmo". Perhaps the most striking of these images is one where a group of soldiers take a sun-drenched smoke break, their fatigues a strange match with the patio furniture and the glorious sparkling ocean in the distance. These relaxing details provide a jarringly incongruous juxtaposition with the realities of military prison and the unseen interrogation of some of the nation's most dangerous enemies.

This unsettling dichotomy continues on Cornwall's series Gitmo on Sale, where she has documented some of the items on sale in the base gift shop with product-shot precision. Her finds are head-shaking examples of ubiquitous American merchandising. For those looking for a souvenir of their stay at the base, there is a toddler t-shirt printed with "I Love Guantánamo Bay", the bobblehead of Fidel Castro on a boombox ("Rockin' in Fidel's Backyard"), and the crop tee (with or without teddy bear) affectionately emblazoned with "It Don't Gitmo Better Than This". The images smartly capture the

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uneasy balance of swaggering American humor and confidence and a frightening sense of tone deaf insensitivity to the perspectives of the detainees.

The third series of images in the exhibit is entitled Beyond Gitmo and tracks down some of the men who were once detained at the Guantánamo Bay facility. Having been freed or cleared, they have variously returned to their homes or moved elsewhere, now residing in Albania, Slovakia, Qatar, France, Egypt, Germany, and beyond. Cornwall's portraits document them in alleys, near trash-strewn vacant lots, in prayer on rocky hillsides, and looking into the distance, and in each case, the man's face is hidden, replicating the military restrictions on photographs taken in Guantánamo Bay. The mannered effect reinforces the idea that even though these men are once again out in the free world, the echoes and residues of their time spent in prison stubbornly remain.

Seen together, Cornwall's photographs provide a subtly layered study of an important chapter in American history. Intermingling investigative reporting with fine art aesthetics, her images constantly walk a knife-edge of interpretation, each a test of vantage point and state of mind, and it is this openness that makes the exhibit so thought-provoking and compelling. Her implied criticisms are measured, mixing the biting use of understated visual satire with a more sympathetic view of the plight of the detainees. While we never witness the horrors of torture that have become synonymous with the name Guantánamo Bay, the space in Cornwall's photographs allows the viewer to extrapolate from the available evidence and to draw their own conclusions about the implications. By choosing a more considered approach, she's allowed us to find our own way to certain nuanced truths and contradictions, offering us a line of thinking to follow that encourages active engagement and reconsideration.

Collector's POV: The works in this show are priced at \$2200, \$2800, \$3400, or \$4000, based on size. Cornwall's work has little secondary market history at this point, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.