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DEBI CORNWALL'S WELCOME TO CAMP AMERICA

By Zack Hatfield, February 25, 2018



For most Americans, Guantánamo Bay is defined by distance. As the US-controlled detention centre prefers to keep its activities secret, there is a visual inaccessibility: many photographs depict the facility from an aerial vantage, reducing a confusing and gruesome place to neat, monotonous geometries. When there is a lack of compelling imagery, emotional and political apathy is expected. There is also the physical distance, as the prison lies more than 500 miles from the tip of Florida.

Given all of these distances, it should be unsurprising that the wrath surrounding Guantánamo's human rights violations has cooled in recent years. Guantánamo's place in the public and political imagination is now dwarfed by other concerns

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and the entire operation seems more like an ignoble relic from the “war on terror” than an area where 41 detainees still live, held without a trial.

We should be grateful, then, for Debi Cornwall’s debut solo exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery, *Welcome to Camp America*, a series of photographs taken inside the Guantánamo Bay naval base and now displayed almost 16 years after the prison camp was authorised by the Bush administration. In 2014 and 2015, Cornwall, a former civil rights lawyer, was granted access to the site as long as she adhered to the military’s ample limitations. Perhaps the biggest challenge arose from the fact that the military forbade the photographing of prisoners and the identification of military personnel. These restrictions pose dangerous risks. How does a photographer maintain artistic integrity under such restrictive circumstances? What happens when Cornwall’s project receives the stamp of approval from the very sources of power she seeks to criticise?

Although Cornwall understands the gravity of her topic, she approaches these dilemmas with an imaginative playfulness. In the exhibit, which coincides with a photobook, we learn how the military wants civilians to perceive Guantánamo Bay – as a relaxing getaway for soldiers that positions itself between amusement and mundanity. There are cloudless skies, a golf course, a swimming pool, a placid sea with beach furniture. On a wall devoted to souvenirs, a Fidel Castro bobblehead, a beer bottle swaddled in a camo cozy and a newborn’s pink shirt that reads “It don’t GTMO better than this” are presented forensically, each object photographed alone against a white background.

A prison cell contains only a prayer rug and an arrow pointing towards Mecca. There is a sunny tableau of three soldiers in fatigues, posed so their backs face the camera; they behold a horizon of Caribbean Sea whose deep shade of azure is more commonly found in luxury cruise brochures.

Without access to the detainees, ominousness must be attained in less expected ways. For instance, Cornwall often portrays these settings and objects with an ironic symmetry. By imposing serene tidiness in a setting where moral ambiguity and violence reign, Cornwall invites viewers to match what we see against what we know about Guantánamo through investigative reports and personal testimony. Out of 780 detainees, 731 have been released without charges. Many of these prisoners endured torture.

While the series does not address these breaches of human rights visually, the fact lingers throughout the exhibition, from an image of an empty “recreation pen” or a still life of mops, to a children’s swimming pool decorated with a giant smiling turtle. The exhibition’s startling power derives from these jarring proximities: between pain and pleasure, boredom and entertainment, revealing and redacting, beauty and abuse.

Although the photos in *Welcome to Camp America* taken in Guantánamo Bay depict mostly unpeopled interiors, Cornwall also includes a few portraits of released prisoners in a series titled *Beyond Gitmo*. Some of these men, many of whom were cleared by President Obama in 2011, were exiled to Europe, to countries such as Albania, Germany or Slovakia, where they have no family and know no one. Others were sent home. That Cornwall tracked down these men is a feat in itself, but even more ambitious is her attempt to evoke an empathic presence without a face. They are photographed from behind, but their anonymity, Cornwall puts forth, is bestowed not by the camera, but by circumstance and indifference.

Cornwall could have photographed each ex-detainee’s face. She could have shown us their eyes and even, one presumes, physical wounds. Instead, she chose to compose the portraits in a way that complies with the rules she worked around in Cuba. The subtext: Guantánamo will always be an escapable part of former detainees, the memory an indelible scar.

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While this may be true, Cornwall's decision also endows her faceless subjects with an awkward universality that denies each man's individuality.

Still, the restraint displayed in Cornwall's project stirs a dark tension and the strongest images in *Welcome to Camp America* are the ones she does not show. This, it seems, was intentional. Rather than expose the goings-on of a particular place, Cornwall foments a complicated mood, an absence of answers and identities. Although she spent 12 years as a wrongful conviction lawyer, Cornwall resists the lawyerly impulse to weave grand narratives in her photographs of Guantánamo Bay. Perhaps she understands what Susan Sontag declared in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "Narratives can make us understand," she wrote. "Photographs do something else: they haunt us."