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Debi Cornwall: Welcome to Camp America, Inside Guantánamo Bay

Exhibition: October 26th – December 22nd, 2017

Opening Reception: Thursday, October 26th, 6-8PM

Steven Kasher Gallery presents Debi Cornwall's first New York solo exhibition, *Welcome to Camp America, Inside Guantánamo Bay*, a vivid and disorienting probe into the U.S. Naval Station on Cuba known as "Gitmo." The exhibition presents 29 large-scale color photographs as well as previously classified documents. After waiting for eight months to gain clearance, Cornwall was granted access to visit and photograph the secretive base on three separate occasions in 2014 and 2015. Cornwall confronts what George W. Bush called "enhanced interrogation techniques" of "enemy combatants;" and the place where Barack Obama admitted quite plainly, "We tortured some folks." Through intense examination of Gitmo and its contradictions Cornwall raises tough questions about all of our lives caught up in our so-called "war on terror." She examines the compromises we make between decency and fear in the post-9/11 era. Cornwall says, "My goal in making this work was to invite people to look at Guantánamo again after almost 16 years. Most of us have stopped looking."



Three bodies of work are on view in the exhibition. *Gitmo at Home*, *Gitmo at Play* portrays the residential and leisure spaces of both the prisoners and the guards, juxtaposing implied comfort and forced restraint. *Gitmo on Sale* depicts the commodification of American military power through Gitmo's gift-shop souvenirs. *Beyond Gitmo* investigates the lives after detention of 14 men once held as accused terrorists, now cleared and living in nine countries, from Albania to Qatar.

In order to finally secure access to the facility, Cornwall had to adhere to 12 pages of rules, including those prohibiting any photographs revealing the identity of detainees, military personnel or civilian staff. During her visits she was escorted around selected parts of the prison complex, at times accompanied by almost a dozen military officers. As part of the agreement, the officers conducted Operational Security Review of all of the photos directly from her memory cards and could delete any photographs that violated the rules. Only on her third visit in January 2015, after a passionate appeal to the Admiral, Cornwall was granted unprecedented permission to photograph using medium format film. In order to comply with the mandatory "Op Sec" review, Cornwall carried onto the base her own chemistry and set up a mobile darkroom in the bathroom of her bunk. To adhere to the regulations she developed her film under the watch of military censors.



Cornwall later continued her work outside of Gitmo, making 14 portraits of former detainees entitled *Beyond Gitmo*. After contacting the men through their lawyers or directly on social media, Cornwall photographed them with their backs to the camera, replicating the Guantánamo rule against photographing faces. In showing us only their backs, Cornwall reminds us that no matter where these men go after their release, their experiences during their imprisonment will continue to mark them. Whether in the trauma that persists after having been imprisoned for years without charge or trial, or in the roadblocks they face in reentering society, Guantánamo Bay will always haunt them,

even in the “free” world. For all of the men Cornwall photographed charges were never filed in the U.S. despite some of them being held at Guantánamo for over 10 years. Many men were not allowed to return home after being cleared, and were instead transferred to completely foreign countries such as Albania, Slovakia and Ireland, where they must remain. Captions for the *Beyond Gitmo* photographs identify the men by the length of time they were held, the date they were cleared of charges, their release date, their country of origin and where they were sent.

The exhibition launches the publication of Cornwall’s first monograph, *Welcome to Camp America, Inside Guantánamo Bay* (Radius Books, 2017). Using a variety of papers and inserts, and text in English and Arabic, the book includes once-classified government documents and first-person accounts alongside Cornwall’s photographs. The book also features essays by Moazzam Begg and Fred Ritchin. It was recently shortlisted for the 2017 Les Rencontres de la Photographie d’Arles Photo-Text Book Award.

Debi Cornwall returned to visual expression in 2014 after a 12-year career as a wrongful conviction lawyer. Trained in photography at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) while completing a Bachelor’s degree in Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, Cornwall went on to attend Harvard Law School and practiced for more than a decade as a civil rights attorney. Informed by her experience representing innocent DNA exonerees, her visual work marries empathy and dark humor with systemic critique. In 2016, she was nominated for the Baum Award for an Emerging American Photographer, and was awarded Duke University’s Archive of Documentary Arts Collection Award for Women Documentarians, and the Lianzhou Foto Festival’s Punctum Award. She is a 2017 Fitt Artist-in-Residence at Brown University and a 2017-2019 Center for Emerging Visual Artists Fellow. Cornwall’s work has appeared in solo shows at the Centre de la Photographie Genève, Switzerland and the BMW Photo Space at the GoEun Museum of Photography, Busan, South Korea, and in the group shows: *Something Fierce*, Lannan Foundation, Santa Fe; *2017 Aperture Summer Open*, New York; and *Bending the Frame*, Gulf + Western Gallery, New York.

Debi Cornwall: Welcome to Camp America, Inside Guantánamo Bay will be on view October 26th – December 22nd, 2017. Steven Kasher Gallery is located at 515 W. 26th St., New York, NY 10001. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10 AM to 6 PM. For press and all other inquiries, please contact Cassandra Johnson, 212 966 3978, cassandra@stevenkasher.com.