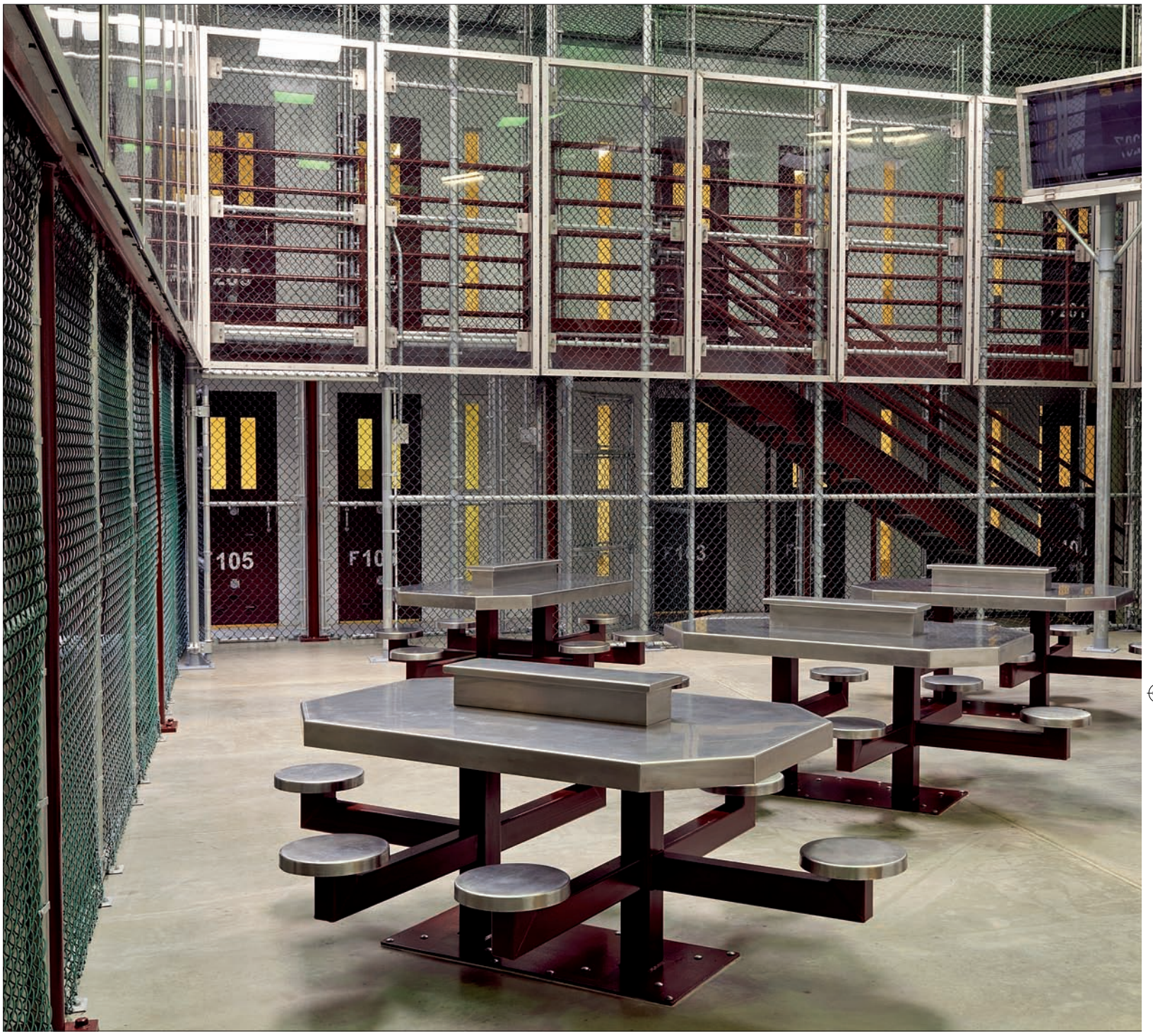

Inside Guantanamo

Edmund Clark's photographs of Guantanamo have won this year's *BJP* International Photography Award. He tells Diane Smyth what led him to the project, and why its effects are still being felt around the world

Of the 775 Muslim men brought to the world's most notorious prison in Guantanamo Bay, around 250 detainees remain, held without charge at the American naval base in Cuba. One of the three camps has now closed, and the US president has signed an order to shut the facility down altogether by the end of the year, but for those who have already returned, the experience is far from over. 'When you are suspended by a rope you can recover, but every time I see a rope I remember,' says Binyam Mohamed, Prisoner #1458. 'If the light goes out unexpectedly in a room, I am back in my cell.

Mohamed's words are taken from an ongoing project by British photographer Edmund Clark, *When the Light Goes Out*, which investigates the workings of the camp and its ongoing effect on both the former prisoners and the people who run it. Recording details of everyday life in the camp, the neighbouring naval base on which the guards live, and the homes of former prisoners, it's a subtle meditation on mental and physical confinement. 'There are a lot of complex issues surrounding the "War on Terror", but I want to bring it back down to a human level,' says Clark.

In particular, he wants to

challenge the dehumanised image of the detainees, demonised in the popular imagination as dangerous Islamic terrorists sporting beards and orange prison boiler suits. He's therefore deliberately avoided portraits in favour of shooting living spaces, both at home and in the camps. 'Portraits of guys with big beards are probably just going to reconfirm most peoples' stereotypes,' he says. 'Instead, I wanted to create imagery touching on everyone's shared experience of domestic life. Pictures of where detainees or ex-detainees eat, rest, sleep and wash are the last thing people are going to expect to see.'

Initially Clark wanted to focus on former detainees living in the UK, so 18 months ago he contacted them and their lawyers, to ask if he could visit. After six months, nine had agreed to let him in. The work was a 'natural evolution' from Clark's last project, *Still Life, Killing Time*, a study of life prisoners' cells, but it also bore hallmarks all of its own. 'Some of their houses were very ordinary, in others I found motifs of confinement and duress that spoke to me about their experiences in prison,' he says. 'For example, there's a shot of someone's living room with an exercise bar across the doorway. It's a normal white doorway with this silver-coloured bar across it – something that many people have but which in the context of everything he's been through brings you up sharp.'

After working on the project for a few months, Clark decided to see Guantanamo for himself, and started pitching for access into both the facility and the naval base that runs it. The press can take guided trips around the camps – AP's Brenan Linsley and Paolo Pellegrin have both been, for example – but getting access isn't easy and Clark estimates it took him six months (he says he phoned the head of media at Guantanamo nearly every day for three months). Eventually he got the green light, and the week before he was due to go heard he'd been given three-and-a-half days in the camps, instead of the usual two-day tour, and four days on the base.

Main image: *Camp 6 unused communal area*.

Top: *Camp 5 high security cell*.

Above: *Ex-detainee's bedroom*.

All images © Edmund Clark.

Total control

Security in the prison camps was tight. Clark was accompanied the whole time and had to shoot digital so that the guards could go through his images, deleting anything they chose. Determined to get away from the wide-angle lens, reportage approach of most images emerging from Guantanamo, he opted for a medium format Hasselblad. 'The security took three or four hours every night – the guards are used to downloading the pictures onto laptops and looking at them on-screen but the size of the files meant they had to go through them all on the back of the camera,' he says. 'It just took hours. One guard questioned a shot of some graffiti because it could be secret code, and I'm still not sure if he was joking.'

He was also given a long list of what he could and couldn't shoot, including everything from the security cameras and watch towers in the camp to the prisoners currently being held in it. Where he could and couldn't go was a matter of 'constant negotiation', and Clark says he was lucky that Carol Rosenberg, a journalist from the *Miami Herald*, was also on assignment on the base and camp, because 'she's been reporting on Guantanamo since Day One and she was able to provide help'. Even still, the eight days' shooting were intense, working with only two or three hours' sleep per night in extreme heat.

In the end, few of Clark's images were deleted though, because the guards were uninterested in, and at times bemused by, his shots of beds and dining tables. But these seemingly mundane details are indicative of the whole ethos of Guantanamo, he says, because every aspect of life within it was part of the prisoners' interrogation. 'Interrogators were completely in control of how much sleep the prisoners got, whether they got post, how often, whether they got originals or copies, whether they were moved from cell to cell,' he says. 'The air conditioning would be turned on or off at night, they'd have no blankets, the lights would be going on and off – it was a constant process of disorientation. I've seen tables which detail levels of compliance and things you're allowed to have at those levels, and it is so detailed it goes right down to the number of sheets of toilet paper you were allowed to have.'

Prisoners' letters were also

Top row (l-r): ***Camp 6 mobile force feeding chair*****;** ***Display of knots in the Fellowship Room, a meeting room in the church complex of the military base*****;** ***Sitting room houseplant at ex-detainee's home*****.**

Left: ***Film showing at open air cinema on naval base*****.**

restricted and censored, and one ex-prisoner's collection of photocopied, partially blacked out letters turned into a side project, *Letters to Omar*. 'It's a selection of the photocopied documents, letters and cards he was given,' says Clark.

'The backs and fronts of every envelope were also photocopied, and every single thing given an individual document reference number and stamped with the Guantanamo insignia. They say so much about the nature of military bureaucracy, but also about the individual messages people sent him.

'*Letters to Omar* was clearly a standalone project – it's got nothing to do with photography but it's really interesting visual material that says something about incarceration and its social and political implications.'

America abroad

At the naval base, meanwhile, Clark was faced with the supposed normality of small town American life. Despite being based in Cuba, the base comes complete with a baseball pitch, bowling alley, church, museum and even its own 'Irish pub', and is home to around 6000 people. It's bizarre, says Clark, but it still bears the trace of a wider political situation. His images include a shot of a film being played in the open-air cinema, for example, showing a woman apparently bound and in tears. Speaking volumes about patterns of domination and submission in American cultural life, it also suggests the cultural divide between Western and Islamic ideals of femininity. 'I felt that looking at the base was like looking at a microcosm of America in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks,' says ClarkeThere was lots of overt religiosity, but it's combined with militarism.

'There's a direct correlation between popular culture and the reaction to 9/11,' he continues. 'The author Philippe Sands interviewed the people who came up with the Guantanamo interrogation methods for his book *Torture Team*, and they talk about [the television show] *24* and how the lead character has carte blanche to torture. It was being shown in America when the war was happening and people were being taken to Cuba.'

An in-depth investigation of the topic, worlds away from straight reportage both stylistically and philosophically, *When the Light Goes Out* is the winner of the portfolio category in *BJP*'s International Photography Award this year. The work is already attracting interest elswhere, and Clark is currently considering offers from galleries to exhibit the work after the *BJP* show later this month, plus he's mulling options on publishing a book.

But, he says, it isn't over yet. Keen to show the broad range of prisoners held in Guantanamo, he's already shot former detainees' homes in Qatar and hopes to work in Kuwait, Chad, Sudan and Afghanistan in the near future. And while Guantanamo may close in 2010, there are also plenty more detainees out there.

'Reprieve [a human rights organisation which tries to help detainees] believes Guantanamo represents a small minority of the people being held in these conditions around the world, many of who are in prisons we know very little about,' Clark says. 'There are rumours about a new block being built at Kabul, and let's not forget Bagram, a big prison on the US airbase in Afghanistan. Legally and politically, the legacy of Guantanamo will live on.' **BJP**

On show

Edmund Clark's ***When the Light Goes Out*** is on show at the Association of Photographers Gallery in London from 24-28 November. The exhibition forms part of his prize as winner of this year's *BJP* International Photography Award. The work will be printed by Spectrum Photographic, and he also has £5000 to spend at Dorset-based retailer Robert White. For further information on the show, visit hub.the-aop.org. For more on Clark, visit his site at edmundclark.com.