

Thinking images v.4: Edmund Clark's Guantánamo project

7 COMMENTS

November 7, 2010 · by David Campbell · [photography](#), [politics](#), [Thinking Images](#)

Thinking Images - an occasional series on a small selection of the week's visuals and the thoughts they prompt...

More documentary photographs in the mainstream press – *Guardian Weekend* has surprised us again! This week they have published work from a major project, [Edmund Clark's](#) "Guantánamo: If the light goes out."



Although *Guardian Weekend* has the all-important (sic) story of Take That's reunion on the cover, thereby demonstrating the power of celebrity, Clark's project is showcased from page 12 onwards with [text](#) by former detained Moazzam Begg – 21 of Clark's photographs appear across eight pages and are accompanied by an [online feature](#) that has interesting captions from Guy Lane. Other sites have given this project attention, among them [Lens Culture's](#) September [gallery](#) of 30 images.

I was prompted to think about Clark's powerful project when @martincoward tweeted this week that in Clark's photographs the "objects speak of their implication in political violence." Clark's portrayal of three experiences of home — the base where prisoners are detained and the American military community lives, as well as the houses where former inmates now reside – is concerned with the objects and spaces of home. Martin's remark calls attention, therefore, to the way situations do not need a face to convey their significance.

Welcome

"If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't reading enough" - Tod Papageorge

I analyse how documentary photography and photojournalism work, the opportunities multimedia bring, the challenges presented by the revolutions in the new media economy, as well as the challenges of international politics. My aim is to provide the context, and I am increasingly engaged in the production of new visual stories.

The [BIO](#) page tells you where I am coming from, and the [GUIDE](#) gives an overview of the information available here, the [COMMENTS](#) policy, and a [COPYRIGHT](#) statement.

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There are many aspects of Clark's project that provoke reflection, but his deliberate strategy of imaging spaces and their objects rather than people is an important place to begin. Clark [told](#) Culture 24 in October that before he began his project "the imagery I had seen from the camps contributed to the stereotypes of Guantanamo – defenders of freedom against pitiless terrorists; torturers against the abused; national revenge against human rights outrages. No-one seemed quite human." Yet to highlight humanity Clark avoided people. He elaborated the point in a recent [interview](#) on Spoonfed, where he was asked why the project had no personal portraits:

I find that a lot of photographic portraits, you're not really saying anything. All that's going to happen is that the viewer's preconceptions are going to bounce back at them. Some of the ex-detainees wouldn't have taken part if I wanted to photograph them. I was absolutely adamant that this wasn't journalistic; I just wanted to work in their homes. I also think if I produced a set of portraits of ex-detainees from Guantanamo, most of whom are of Pakistani, Middle Eastern, African origin, I think a lot of people would look at those and say, "ooh look that's what a terrorist looks like". The portraits would be completely dehumanised. They wouldn't actually say anything about the individual – the spaces are much more evocative. #

In the Guardian [gallery](#), alongside the photograph of the exercise cage at Guantánamo, Clark commented: #

We've seen lots of pictures of people in orange jumpsuits...and plenty of photojournalistic long lens imagery of Guantánamo, and I'm not really sure what that tells anyone. In a way it just reinforces our paranoia, our fear and our suspicion. I wanted to go and photograph areas of personal space ... and use that as a way of making people think beyond the representations, the demonisations, and the process of dehumanisation that these people went through. #

These remarks are, to me, incredibly important. Here is a photographer employing a deliberate aesthetic strategy — the exclusion of detainees and guards from the photos — in order to humanise the issue. He does so because the normal photographic strategy for humanisation (giving the issue a 'face') plays into stereotypes that drive the war on terror. For Clark, rehumanisation involves not showing people. His understanding of the aesthetic and political issues at play in this subject are I think a model example of the reflexivity that is required to make the best documentary work. #



Edmund Clark: [Camp 4 Mecca Arrow Shackle Eye](#).

Clark's aesthetic strategy has two other dimensions. One is its conscious relationship to art practice. As he [observed](#):

Still life imagery of personal space and possessions follows a long tradition of symbolism and metaphor. My work draws on the 'Vanitas' style of 17th century Dutch painting in which

objects like hourglasses, candles, skulls and flowers symbolized the passage of time and the transience of human existence. #

The second involves the edits through which he presents his work, where images of Guantánamo are juxtaposed with domestic pictures, using the narrative structure to make a substantive point: #

The narrative is confused and unsettled as the viewer is asked to jump from prison camp detail to domestic still life to naval base and back again. This disjointed edit is intended to evoke the disorientation of the process of incarceration and interrogation at Guantanamo and to explore the legacy of disturbance such an experience has in the minds and memories of these men. #

The conditions under which Clark worked in Guantánamo are also worth noting. Access to the camp is obviously restricted by the military so Clark had to cope with censorship. As he [told Spoonfed](#), “working in Guantanamo is a really pressurised time. It’s a constant process of negotiation.” Although he usually shoots on film, Clark had to use digital so his images could be inspected by the US military each day. He was forbidden to photograph many subjects, and some – such as [the chair used for force feeding inmates](#) – could only be pictured after long discussions with the authorities. This shows that even in tightly controlled environments it is possible, if the photographer is persistent and thoughtful, to make pictures that are anything but propaganda. (It was for this reason I thought Pete Brook’s [criticism of John Moore’s Detained project](#) as being a “product of US military deceit” was too strong. Moore’s project is good, if not as good as Clark’s, but if you [read Moore’s](#) description of his negotiations with the military you we can appreciate the limits he had to work with to get anything. Whatever has been excluded in each of these projects it is better that we get to see what Clark and Moore have been able to offer). #

Edmund Clark’s project is available in a book from Dewi Lewis, and has been part of [three exhibits](#) across the UK. I’m travelling to the Impressions Gallery in Bradford this week to review [one of those shows](#) for [Source](#) magazine. I am looking forward to seeing his images in that context. Along the way I will be thinking about the page one report (“[Iraqi prisoners ‘abused at UK’s Abu Ghraib’](#)”) from the Saturday paper that contained Clark’s project. Clearly there is much work still to be done.

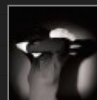
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7 Responses to “Thinking images v.4: Edmund Clark’s Guantánamo project”

[Lucy Carolan](#) November 8, 2010 at 3:10 pm

[REPLY](#)

Isn’t this strategy complimentary to rather than an absolute alternative, to other ways of responding to issues, as its ability to successfully incite an audience to humanise relies on our ability to project onto the images what/who we have seen elsewhere on the same or similar subjects?



[David Campbell](#) November 8, 2010 at 4:45 pm

[REPLY](#)

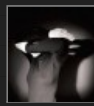
Lucy; I think that any discussion of visual strategy, such as this one, is context-dependent. I don’t think Edmund Clark is suggesting that the avoidance of people and the focus on objects is an absolute alternative for all cases. I certainly wouldn’t argue that. Instead, it’s an alternative in the context of Guantanamo given the stereotypes in circulation. So, yes, in this context the strategy depends on our ability to recall the other images in relation to Guantanamo, but I take that to be Clark’s point, as he details in the interviews.



[Lucy Carolan](#) November 8, 2010 at 5:31 pm

[REPLY](#)

Hi David, I wasn't being critical of the strategy (by Edmund Clark specifically, or any of the other photographers I can think of who also work in this way), which I think is a valid alternative approach. I just find its reliance on an audience's existing background knowledge and 'vocabulary' very interesting.



David Campbell November 8, 2010 at 7:09 pm

[REPLY](#)

No problem Lucy, I didn't read it that way...it was a good point and helped clarify that these strategies are context dependent, and that the audience plays a role in the construction of meaning too, which is another good point.



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[...] Campbell has an interesting piece here on Edmund Clark's Guantánamo exhibition and book. I'd seen some of the photographs [...]

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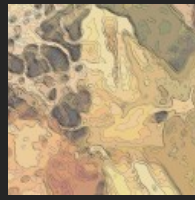
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David Campbell - Photography, Multimedia, Politics

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