

IF THE LIGHT



Just having won the editorial prize in the International Photography Awards for *Guantanamo: If the Lights Go Out*, his monumental project on America's post 9/11 internment camp on Cuba, Edmund Clark is shortlisted for International Photographer of the Year. He speaks to David Land

This spread: All from Guantanamo: If the Lights Go Out. Above: Naval Base, Galley (canteen). Right: Camp 6, Mobile Force Feeding Chair. Far right, top: Original, hand-censored letter to a detainee from his daughter. Far right, below: Home, Part of the kit issued to detainees on release.

“I wouldn't say that I consciously apply politics to my photography”, says Edmund Clark, “but the kind of issues I tend to find interesting revolve around people's experiences. I am interested in people who are slightly on the margins, who are different to the mainstream.”

I put it to Clark that his photographic practice is unique, certainly in a contemporary context, in its rigorous, analytical and historical approach.

“There are elements of that”, he says, “but rigorous tends to imply that there's a clear approach, that I know exactly what I'm going to do and at what time. I wouldn't say that's necessarily true, because my work is much more a personal response to the situation in which I find myself. It's not rigorous in the sense that I approach it with a certain theoretical

analysis; it is very much me responding as an individual and an artist.”

Clark has just won the editorial prize in the International Photography Awards. for *Guantanamo: If the Lights Go Out*, his monumental project on America's post 9/11 internment camp on Cuba. He came into photography relatively late, first doing a history degree, and spending some time at the Sorbonne in Paris, before working as international researcher in product development and advertising.

“I didn't become interested in photography until my late 20s”, he says, “when I was working in Brussels. Photography was a much more current part of the cultural scene there, which coincided with my growing disaffection with working in the organised commercial sector.”

HITS GO OUT



"I started to look at different photographers. I was drawn to photojournalism, because it seemed like a way of engaging with the world, looking at current events and how the world works.

"I went travelling and taking photographs and, as a result, decided that I wanted to give photography a go, to see if I could make some kind of living from it.

"Doing a history degree, working in research, and being a photographer are slightly connected: they are different ways of looking at patterns of behaviour, how society changes, what we're interested in, and what affects people's lives. My father was a painter, so I grew up surrounded by art, and I've always had an interest in imagery and how it works.

"If you want to study fine art, there is a certain amount of practical training that you need to do, whereas, with photography, because it's basically a mechanical process, you don't necessarily need to have that training in order to reach a reasonable standard.

"In some ways, if you study photography and come out the other end as a photographer, you may end up

with a fairly narrow view. It's tricky. I've always felt a bit of an outsider. Having come into photography quite late, I don't have a great deal of theoretical background. I know a lot about photographers, and I know a lot of work, but I haven't had that theoretical structure that people may get when they do a degree. I'm certainly not convinced that you need to do a photography degree to be a photographer however, and I would encourage people to get as much experience at other things as possible."

Returning from Brussels, Clark took two courses at the London College of Printing (now Communication): Professional Photographic Practice, and the Postgraduate Course in Photojournalism.

"It was very intensive", he says. "I learnt not only how to take pictures, but how to think properly when using a camera; how to research; how to analyse what it is you want to photograph; how to gain access; how to approach the subject; what kind of subjects to think of; and how the editorial market worked at the time.

Overleaf:
Left: Dental Treatment Room, from Still Life, Killing Time.
Right: Ryan-Caitlin, from Baby Fathers.



“At that point I hadn’t started looking at issues to do with prison, incarceration and confinement, but there were a number of projects I did at college that involved working with a group of young offenders who had been involved in car crimes, so my interest in criminality and punishment did start at college. I was always interested in those kinds of issues, but I wouldn’t say it was a political engagement; it was more that I was interested in the kind of people that find themselves in those situations.

“My interest in crime and punishment grew, and when I left college, I did quite a lot of work for *Community Care* magazine, and a couple of commissions in prisons. Then I did the exhibition *Baby Fathers*, as part of London Underground’s Platform for Art, which was a portrait series about teenage fathers with their children. At that point, I’d seen a lot about teenage mothers, but never anything about teenage fathers.

“Out of that group, I found a group of fathers, some of whom were in young offenders’ institutions, who desperately wanted to play a positive part in their child’s life, but found it really difficult. I photographed them using a magazine portrait style: medium format, colour, lit, in domestic environments where they or their children lived, in situations of parental intimacy with their child. They were the kind of situations you don’t expect teenage boys to be in, but they were very natural and strong portraits. That was how I started working in prisons, and I began to make some contacts within the prison service.”

A discussion about the ageing population of prisoners in the US and Britain led to Clark finding out about a wing in a British prison, set up just for long term prisoners in their 60s or upward. After a long process of negotiation, Clark spent almost two

years working on a project that became his first book, *Still Life Killing Time*.

Guantanamo, If the Lights Go Out, Clark’s most recent project, looks at the American prison camp on Cuba where suspected enemy combatants are held. It is unusual, in looking at the staff’s quarters, and the homes of former detainees released without charge, as well as at the internment facilities.

“Once I’d done one book about prison, Guantanamo seemed an obvious progression”, says Clark. “It struck a chord with me. I wasn’t sure initially how I would deal with it, but I was interested in the way that its inmates had been demoralised through representation.

“Guantanamo was such a symbol, and these people had gone through that, and been told that they were the worst in the world. Yet here they were released without charge. I was initially interested in exploring the mismatch between the way they had been represented and the normality of their lives.

“That’s why I thought of just photographing where they lived, because it plays on our shared experience of personal domestic space. We all have somewhere we eat, sleep, wash and relax, and I was intrigued by what these spaces would look like to people who had been through that experience.

“I started by trying to contact them through their lawyers. After I explained what I was doing, that I wasn’t a journalist and didn’t want to photograph them, they slowly began to meet me and give me access to their homes. That’s how it started. It was an interest in personal space, and what that space could say about the individual, but also how that might reflect on a wider theme as well.”

Getting access to Guantanamo was a long administrative process. Then when he was there, there was a further process of negotiation each day







**Above: Jessie Merrick,
from Centenarians.**

about what Clark could and couldn't do. He shot all the work in former detainees' homes on large format colour film. Those photographing in Guantanamo have to shoot digitally, so that the authorities can view and censor their imagery, so while working in Guantanamo, Clark shot on a Hasselblad H2D-39.

"I spoke to the lawyers", he says, "and I spoke to some of the ex-detainees, about what I should be looking for. The force feeding chair was one suggestion that was made, and when I was there I asked if I could photograph it. The camp was in a post-Bush phase, and it was trying to promote the idea of transparency. In the camp hospital, there was a display of the products that were used for force feeding, which was presented as, 'This is what we do to make sure the men are fit and healthy, that they don't starve'. Once you see that, you ask if you can photograph the chair, and they can't say no."

As an intelligent, active member of society, I say,

Clark is doubtless going to have opinions about the 'war on terror', and the camp at Guantanamo, but what's the relationship between those opinions and his work?

"I don't think it's my place to say", he says. "It's for the people who look at the work to judge. I don't want to cloud their judgement about the work by saying how I feel. The kind of subjects I get involved with, the way I look at them, the images should speak for themselves.

"I feel a great sense of responsibility toward the men who allowed me into their homes, to do their situation justice. They spoke to me about their experiences, and gave me access to intimate parts of their lives at a difficult time.

"On another level, I am interested in the aesthetics of the way I take pictures, and try to create imagery to make people think. I could have done a much simpler piece of work about Guantanamo Bay, if I had photographed only the prison camps, and presented it as a set of documentary pictures.



**Above: Kieran-Chloe,
from *Baby Fathers*.**

“I’ve tried to create something that has nuance, by also photographing the American spaces at Guantanamo the naval base, and by including imagery from the homes of people who have been through the camp and are now readjusting. I’m piling complication upon complication, which doesn’t necessarily make the work easy, but I am interested in how people deal with complex issues through photography.”

Given the depth and complexity of the message Clark wants to get across, I ask if he has considered making films.

“I would be interested in using film if it would add something to what I was trying get across,” he replies, “but I would be less interested in going down the film route to produce straight documentary. A lot of people have told me that I should be making documentaries, because of the subjects I’ve got involved with.

“I have been working with Anna Stevens, a multimedia editor/producer, on an audio visual piece for the Guantanamo work. We are combining images with

a soundtrack made up of music played at Guantanamo during interrogation sessions, to disorientate and stress people, and ensure they can’t sleep.

“The music runs from thrash metal through to disco, so there is an interesting range of sounds. We’re not just putting images to a soundtrack; we’re exploring how you can use the editing process to create a sense of disorientation.”

“I tend to get involved in long term projects, which means I’m not as productive or prolific as some photographers, so I don’t have masses of new work coming along all the time. The Guantanamo project is self-funded. It has cost me a lot of money from savings, but I’ve been fortunate in having a publishing grant from the Roddick Foundation.

“I hope to use the raised profile this project has given me to generate money and opportunities to keep doing this kind of work. I’m testing the waters, but certainly as far as museums and galleries go, the work is of interest.”

David Land

*Guantanamo: If the Lights
Go Out*
Dewi Lewis Publishing
ISBN 978-1-904587-96-5

Still Life: Killing Time
Dewi Lewis Publishing
ISBN: 978-1904587538
£16.99

www.edmundclark.com