EDMUND CLARK

there's no place like home

ANDREA BLANCH: ***How did you gain access to Guantanamo Bay?***

EDMUND CLARK: I applied to the Pentagon to do a body of work about the American experience at the camp. Very few people knew about the camp until the news coverage began. All we were seeing were pictures of people in orange jumpsuits in cages. I wanted to show a wider perspective of the place.

AB: ***What restrictions were placed on you?***

EC: The restrictions were different depending on whether you were on the naval base itself or in the prison camps within the naval base. When I was with the naval base, there were escorts everywhere. You were told what to photograph and what not to photograph. In the prison camp, it was much more prescriptive and restrictive. You were escorted everywhere and before you went you had to agree not to photograph certain things. No security cameras, no unmanned watch towers, not more than one watch tower in an image, and no identifiable faces. You weren't allowed to have the sky and the sea in the same picture. Subsequently, I have found pictures with obvious infrastructure deleted.

AB: ***Did you work around the restrictions to get the kind of photographs that you want? The pictures I saw were quite powerful, poignant and surprisingly artful.***

EC: I knew the kind of imagery I didn't want to take at Guantanamo. The photographs I had seen before going were nearly all by news agency photographers. They were pictures of men in shackles, men out of focus through cell windows, backs of people's heads, even the military guards were presented in disembodied ways, as camouflaged presence without faces. All those pictures were contributing to this narrative of dehumanization, regardless of whether you thought of it as a good or bad place. I didn't want to perpetuate that way of seeing the place. The pictures I took inside of Guantanamo itself were of the spaces of detention and the objects of the people who were detained or in the act of detention. They were part of a wider body of work that also looked at spaces of occupation in the naval base and consequently the spaces where people were living once they had been released from Guantanamo without charge in the United Kingdom or in the Middle East. I was looking at the issue of Guantanamo through these three notions of personal space, home, and domesticity. I was trying to look at this event through imagery that spoke about the everyday, about home. I was trying to re-contextualize the event, which is all about dehumanization, and get people to identify in terms of their own daily experiences.
I'm not in Guantanamo to be a photojournalist and take news pictures. Is it art? If that's what people want to see, then that's fine by me. I think the point of that work is to use imagery as a way of re-contextualizing this place in a way that engages people enough to want to stop those things. I think that is the point of art: to create something that engages people and then gives space to reflect.

AB: ***With Guantanamo and almost with all your other work, you photograph spaces rather than people. What do you feel space reveals about the people occupying it?***

Following spread: Edmund Clark, *Naval Base.*


STOP

EC: In the personal spaces, I wanted to photograph homes that people didn't expect to see in relation to detainees at Guantanamo Bay. I concentrated on people in the UK and Europe or people living in the Middle Eastern countries that have a strong link with America. I didn't go to Afghanistan or Yemen, to photograph in those homes because that's the kind of place people expect to see. That kind of experiential distance between people living in the West and people living in villages in Afghanistan would just serve to further the disconnect between them. I photographed in homes in developed Arab cultures that have the furniture and fittings and decorations that can identify a Western presence there. I wanted to show what small-town America looked like in relation to these places. I want the spaces I photograph to show ordinariness and normality, because introducing those in relation to Guantanamo Bay is not what people expect.

AB: ***What, if anything, did you find at Guantanamo Bay that surprised you or changed your preconceptions of it?***

EC: I tried not to go there with preconceptions. The American side of the naval base rather than the prison camps themselves was what I found the most unexpected. I was interested in the naval base because I found out it was a base outside of America that's been there for over a hundred years, existing behind this big razor wire fence and minefields. I was surprised, and this might sound naive, to find the Americanness of the place - to find a McDonalds restaurant and a Subway. It was incredibly interesting to see this microcosm of a place that has effectively been part of America for a hundred years even though it's not America. To see so many motifs and reflections of militarism, spirituality, consumerism, and confinement going on in this little world that's like the Western world, but in this geopolitical event of the prison camps.

AB: ***Despite promises and attempts from President Obama, America has yet to close the prison in Guantanamo Bay. In your opinion, what are the reasons for this?***

EC: I'm not a politician. For what I am, I feel there has been perhaps a lack of political will to push it through on the part of the Obama administration. I think perhaps they missed a golden opportunity at the start of the president's first term in office. This was the first thing he said he was going to do when he came into office. You know he could have tried to relocate some of the prisoners to American soil as early as possible. I think the passage of what he wants to do is being blocked by Congress not giving him the budget, not giving him the chance to relocate people at Guantanamo to American territory, and it clearly became a symbol in America for 'you're with us or you're against us'. America doesn't have the appetite to do it. There's little awareness in the West about what happened at Guantanamo, who's there and why they're there. It's painted with the brush of "They're all terrorists; they get what they deserve." It's been simplified.

AB: ***"Control Order House" is another series in which you explore incarceration, though a much different form of it. What drove you to incarceration as a subject?***

EC: It's because incarceration has been a response to what's known as the "War on Terror." It's about the use of incarceration in Guantanamo and Control Order represents the exercise of state power over the individual at its most profound form. You have people who are detained without due legal process, without proper evidentiary process. Individuals have their liberty taken away from them and are put in situations where they don't have the opportunity to prove their innocence. For a country like America to pay bounty money to people in Afghanistan to detain people without due process, yet claim to be the beacon of honesty, democracy, and fair play is a fundamental change in the West. Guantanamo Bay is an example of the spaces that will be seen in years to come as these epoch-changing definitions of what we're prepared for the state to do to individuals.

AB: ***Being an American living four blocks from the World Trade Center, seeing the plane go into it and both buildings tumbling down, you feel that you want to do whatever it takes so that doesn't happen again. I say that in an abstract way. I'm not talking about someone being detained illegally.***

EC: It was an appalling and obviously indefensible act of terrorism. But my work is not campaigning. My work is as much producing objects and documents of history as anything else. I have a lot of sympathy with the administrations in America and Britain that had to respond to the events of 9/11 and the events of the London bombings. I think with the passage of time and history, in hindsight people will look back on

Edmund Clark. Top: *Camp X-Ray, interrogation huts*. Bottom: *Naval Base*. Following spread: *Camp 5, detainee's cell*.


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things like Guantanamo Bay, and realize that they are far from being exercises that produced intelligence and prevented attacks like 9/11. Guantanamo Bay has become a symbol of injustice and resentment around the world, and has actually perpetuated the probability of threats, making us less certain rather than more certain. I'm trying to do something that chrysalises these events and a way of looking at these events that takes away from all the political rhetoric, all the drama around them, to look at them with more perspective.

AB: ***Your bio says your work links history, politics, and representation. How do you feel you have linked your background in history to your photography?***

EC: It's realizing that the visual document has surpassed the textual document. It used to be that things were written down. You can call me a photographer, but in a sense it's more about how I use the pictures. I'm interested in how imagery can explore ideas and say things about experiences rather than being seen as single images telling a truth. I don't believe that images tell a truth. You create documents and bodies of work that explore ideas. The series called "Letters to Omar," they're not even photographs. They're scans of this man who was held in Guantanamo Bay, and you see the messages and cards he received. He never received anything original because he was at the highest level of non-compliance and he wouldn't abide by the camp rules, so every part of his life was controlled by his guards and interrogators. The material sent to him was scanned, redacted, stamped, given a unique archive number, and then given to him as a scan. The documents represent the aesthetic choices people make for a card or message, then they have the images created by the bureaucratic process, which then got used as part of control process exercised over the individual, and then added to his sense of paranoia and disorientation: the key precepts of the process of detention and interrogation at Guantanamo. Those are historical documents, but they are also images created by Guantanamo. They're testimony to the experience of degradation and control.

AB: ***Why did you decide to become a photographer after studying history?***

EC: I initially was interested in photojournalism and the idea of using a camera to look at the world. I went off to do a post-graduate course, and soon realized that I didn't think photojournalism was the way I wanted to work. It was slightly outdated. I'd say it took me ten years to understand how what I could do with images. I've been working for about 20 years.

AB: ***Why do you think photojournalism is outdated?***

EC: When it's good, it's interesting. I think the place for it has gone. The idea of the photographer who works for a magazine and gets sent out to shoot something we wouldn't see otherwise, that way of working and a way of showing an audience has gone. The audience is much more cynical than it was in the heyday of journalism. The people and the places that were going to be photographed are much more widely known and sophisticated and aware of how they are being represented. I'm not saying it's dead. Sometimes people talk about photojournalism as though it were a thing that tells us ways of seeing, representing, modes of believing, what's true and not true. To people who don't know anything about photojournalism, it's a little bit like portrait or fashion photography. It's something they understand as a category of photography. As a practitioner, claiming that I'm a photojournalist that's going to show a true thing is quite limiting. There's much more complexity in how you can use images. I use painting. I use poetry. I use sculpture. For me, it would be like being a painter but owning a palette with only five colors. Of course you can recreate your own colors from the five colors but if you're not allowed to make those mixes you're only going to use those five colors.

AB: ***I think that's a good analogy. With Mountains of Majeed, you turn your focus to Afghanistan. What did this local painter Majeed and his work represent to you?***

EC: I was in Afghanistan to do some work on another project. I was initially there to photograph it as an extension of what I'd done at Guantanamo, to look at these enclaves of Western technology and life. The vast majority of people who go to serve in places like Afghanistan never actually leave the base. The base is surrounded by mountains. I hadn't expected the proximity and size of the mountains. I found them interesting and threatening. The mountains would come and go during the day depending on the amount of dust or light, but you knew they were always there. I realized that this is the background of Afghanistan for

Edmund Clark. Top: *Camp X-Ray, interrogation huts*. Bottom: *Naval Base*

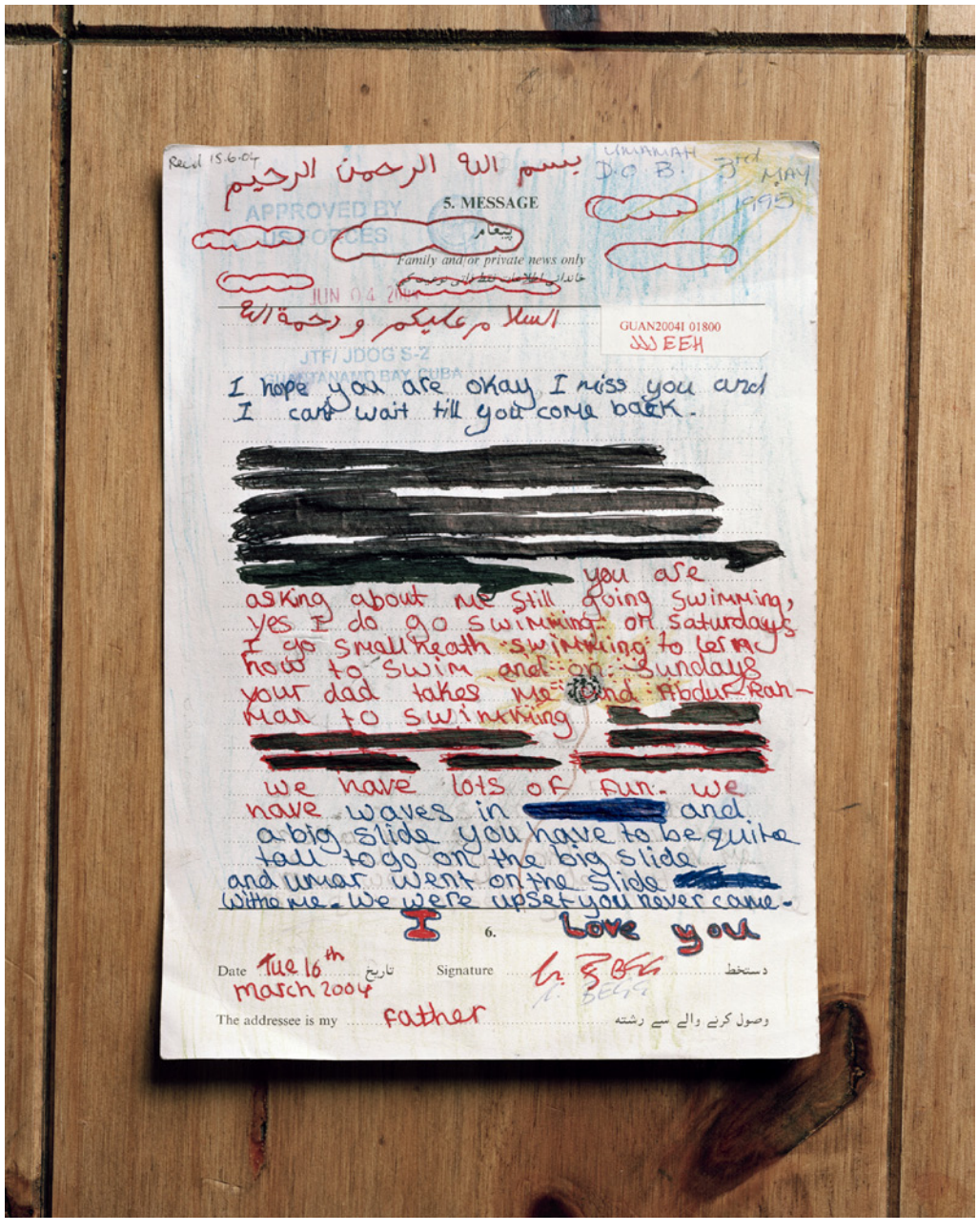
Edmund Clark. *home*.

Edmund Clark. *Camp 6, mobile force feeding chair.*

the people who live there and never leave that base. Within the base, you come across other representations of Afghanistan, whether it be through murals in meeting rooms, or as I found in this dining facility, a series of paintings by a local Afghan called Majeed, which were interesting because of where they were, screwed to the wall of a dining facility, seen by tens of possibly tens of thousands of pairs of eyes of people serving in this enclave. They were idealized scenes, and I was interested: were they like postcard images for a Western eye, almost like a tourist eye, or were they an Afghan artist reflecting on idealized landscapes of his own country at a time of war and destruction? I was interested in the contrast between the Westerner in this enclave photographing with a state of the art digital camera and an Afghan artist creating simple paintings. It was a way of including the "Other" into our discourse about the war, an Afghan perspective by an Afghan artist, to make his representation as relevant as my representation. In the book, I also use Afghan poetry.

AB: ***What's next for you?***

EC: I'm close to completing a project about extraordinary rendition: the process of picking people up and flying them around the world to either be interrogated in black sites run by the CIA or detention centers run by other countries.



Edmund Clark. *Original, hand-censored letter to a detainee from his daughter.*

Edmund Clark. Top: *Model of 1990s Refugee Camp in Naval Base Museum*. Bottom: *Camp 1.*; Following spread: *Camp 1, exercise cage.*