



PHOTOGRAPHING TERROR

Edmund Clark's pictures shed new light on conflict and security



The war on terror continues to spark public debates about secrecy and security. It doesn't make news headlines like it used to but the military campaign rages on. Initiated by George W. Bush after the terror attacks in 2001, large numbers of mainly Muslim men have been detained, interrogated and tortured.

For the past 10 years, the British photographer Edmund Clark has documented some of the most controversial aspects of the fight against global terrorism.

His series Guantanamo: If the light goes out, Control Order House and Negative Publicity: Artefacts of Extraordinary Rendition, engages with state censorship to explore hidden experiences and spaces of control, and incarceration in the global war on terror.

This eye-opening work has been put on display in an ongoing exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, in London. "The rules are there to be followed, the rules are there to be played with and broken. I'm a photographer, some people call me an artist, I don't really mind," Clark told Artefact.

In the exhibition, it is clear that modern photographic practice in relation to conflict has moved beyond the concept of the frontline. This involves a reimagining of

conflict photography and changes our understanding of what war means, and looks like.

In 2001, the existing migrant detention facilities at Guantánamo Bay were repurposed to hold detainees in the war on terror. At the site located in south-eastern Cuba, leased by the United States, the detainees are not on US soil and therefore not covered by the US Constitution. Held in legal limbo for years and repeatedly interrogated, most of them have been released without charge. But despite Barack Obama's promise in 2009 to close the facilities, as of December 2016, it still holds 59 detainees.

In 2009, Edmund Clark was allowed entry to the site to photograph the facilities. His book Guantanamo: If the Light Goes Out explores three experiences of home; at the Guantánamo naval base, in the camp complex where the detainees are held and in the homes where former detainees, released without charge, are trying to rebuild their lives.

Clark creates a disjointed image narrative that evokes a sense of visual disorientation. "Disorientation is key to being held at Guantánamo, you are made to be disorientated so you become dependent on your interrogator," Clark explains.



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The second element in the book is a series of letters to Omar Deghayes, a former detainee. During his six years in the infamous prison, his case sparked a public debate and he received supportive letters from all over the world.

“Everything sent to him went through a process of scanning, redaction, archiving and stamping. These are images created by the bureaucracy of Guantánamo. Some of it was then used in a control process exercised over him. This added to his sense of paranoia and disorientation,” Clark says.

But if the secrecy and brutality of the Guantánamo Bay detention camp bothers you, then Clark’s book, Negative Publicity: Artefacts of Extraordinary Rendition co-authored with counterterrorism investigator Crofton Black, will make your blood boil.

The book published in 2016, displays how the CIA operated secret prisons around the world and transported detainees between 2001 and 2008 to these “black sites”, through so-called extraordinary renditions without legal processes or public records.

“We structured the book in a way designed to make the reader “investigate” rather than just read or look. We wanted to make people think about the forms of modern warfare, the role of outsourcing, the nature and meaning of complicity,” Crofton Black says.

Many of these prisons and sites have since disappeared and leave little evidence of their former use. But Clark’s photographs of what remains of them, presented alongside documents sourced by Black, ensures they won’t be forgotten. “All the material in the book is “unclassified”, it has been sourced through freedom of information requests, from corporate documents, from court cases, from NGOs and official bodies—there are no “leaks” in the book,” Black explains.

The images are nothing short of extraordinary. When the link is exposed, no single element is the weapon by itself—their power is the relation between them.

When viewing the work of Clark, this all becomes evident. One of the most striking things about his images is the fact that there are no people in them. “People who are in incredibly difficult political situations whose representation is fraught with issues of politics; I fear if you show that human form to people they have many preconceptions over what that person is or has been associated with in advance,” Clark says.

“They won’t change these preconceptions whereas if I’m not showing people, showing my audience different spaces, different ways of seeing these issues, it’s a way of trying to get people to reconfigure how they view these subjects,” he continues.

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“Censorship and control is a feature of my work whether it’s dealing with censorship of Guantánamo or whether it’s dealing with not being able to identify a terrorist suspect in the United Kingdom,” he says. “I do not tell people what to think about my work. I would rather do something which encourages people to draw their own conclusions,” Clark says.

As a result of 9/11, the US is the main actor in the war on terror; but it hasn’t happened without many Western allies. Even in the United Kingdom, there has been significant involvement.

In 2011, Clark had exclusive access to work in a house where a suspected terrorist had been placed under a

Control Order; these were introduced under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005.

Between then and 2011, 52 men suspected of involvement in terrorism were placed under Control Orders and subject to various constraints. These included the power to relocate them to a house anywhere in the country, to impose a curfew and to restrict communication electronically and in person.

“Controlled persons” were not prosecuted for terrorist-related activity, and the evidence against them remained secret. The three days and two nights in the house resulted in Clark’s book Control Order House.

Much of the work Clark does circulates around secrecy and state security, which is why I asked him about Edward Snowden and Julian Assange, and whether what they did was it the right thing to do?

“Personally I think what they’ve done is a good thing. I think it reveals tools of control which are operating around us which we’re not always aware of,” Clark says. “As it happens now with the Investigative Powers Bill which has been passed in parliament an act is coming to force in the UK so we have one of the strongest surveillance regimes in the world,” Clark says.

“And that is legal now. So I come to think that what Assange and Snowden have done has led to nothing. Or if it has actually led to the state introducing legislation so that it can do what it wants legally.”

The forms of control exercised over the general public are evolving, and the places where these experiences take place are usually inaccessible for reasons of security, too dangerous or unknown.

“People who are on the receiving end of those experiences are further away from us because we don’t see them. So it’s a challenge for photographers to keep trying on bringing these experiences to our audiences. Trying to investigate, visualise and represent these processes, experiences and places, is a way of making them a part of the discourse,” Clark says.

With numerous exhibitions around the world, Clark is successful in his work. The war on terror happens on our screens, it’s in the news, it’s controversial and we all know it is happening, but nobody is doing anything about it. Edmund, on the other hand, has decided to explore these issues in more depth, telling the public what the war on terror means for, mainly, Muslims in reality. “All I can really ask from people is to be interested enough in what I’ve done and the way I’ve done it to take the time to look at it and spend time with it. Hopefully, that will stimulate people to think about these subjects differently, and then it’s up to people what they do with that knowledge and the change of perception,” Clark says.

Edmund Clark has won many awards in his work. He has received worldwide recognition for his images and books, including the Royal Photographic Society Hood Medal for outstanding photography for public service and the British Journal of Photography International Photography Award.

It has also just been announced that he will receive an Infinity Award, a leading international prize, from the International Centre of Photography in America in April this year.

Having trained at the former London College of Printing, he is now a senior lecturer on the MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography course at London College of Communication. Edmund Clark: War on Terror is at the Imperial War Museum in London until August 28, 2017

