

## Engaging with the prison through art

What does the US military prison at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba look like? The answer is undoubtedly different for the detainees held captive there, the military personnel working there, and the limited numbers of lawyers, journalists, artists and other civilians who have been afforded restricted access on tightly controlled visits to the site over the last twenty years.

In addition to photos of the base released in the public domain, all subject to military review and censorship, Guantánamo also looms large in many people's imaginations. Myriad artists, among them current and former detainees, have used art as a means to depict, critique, escape or otherwise engage with Guantánamo through visual, written and experiential mediums. To mark the grim 20-year anniversary of the prison's operation in the disastrous "war on terror," ECCHR has produced five videos featuring different artistic engagements with Guantánamo, in conversation with the artists themselves.

This section of the anthology introduces the five artists featured in the online exhibition and offers a glimpse into their different images and imaginaries of the notorious detention camp. It highlights the artists' different approaches in using art to address injustice, to share stories and emphasize the humanity of those held captive at Guantánamo, and to inspire individual and collective conversation, imagination and action. Before these artist profiles, the section opens with a reflection piece by art scholar Sebastian Köthe, discussing unconventional ways in which art from Guantánamo manages to circumvent censorship to reach the public.



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"GUANTÁNAMO IMAGES  
AND IMAGINARIES"  
ONLINE EXHIBITION HERE

## Sebastian Köthe Art From Guantánamo: Circumventing Censorship

Together with their allies, the men detained in Guantánamo Bay have found numerous ways to testify to their torture, to demand justice and to renounce their image as "enemy combatants." They have testified in international newspapers and through written memoirs. They won several landmark cases before the US Supreme Court. They have gone on multiple mass hunger strikes and committed self-harm while addressing the public with open letters. In 2007, the human rights lawyer Mark Falkoff edited a book with 21 poems written by men detained at Guantánamo, which became a worldwide bestseller. In 2017–18, the exhibition *Ode to the Sea*, curated by Erin Thompson, Paige Laino and Charles Shields, exhibited around 40 pieces of artwork by former and current detainees, generating international attention. While the detainees' protests garnered almost no attention during the Trump era, the exhibition of detainee artwork broke the barrier of silence around the camp: sculptures of ships made from repurposed bits and pieces; lush landscapes and deserted towns; still life paintings and images of the sea. In the catalogue, the artists explained how they appropriated materials, transformed their cells through makeshift windows or fled the camp by making art. They voiced a strong humanistic message and spoke directly to a US-American audience "Displaying the artwork is a way to show people that we are people who have feelings, who are creative, that we are human beings,"<sup>1</sup> said Djamel Ameziane. Moath al-Alwi testifies in a similar manner: "We only make beautiful things. We love life, we love everything and people. We are not extremists, we do not hate nice things. I want [an American audience] to think about us in this way."<sup>2</sup> Creativity, beauty, humanity, art, love—the artists inscribe themselves in categories with a universalistic appeal.

All the images presented in *Ode to the Sea* have gone through the censorship apparatus of the detention camp; stamps like "Approved by US Forces" remind the viewers. The curators were able to choose from over a thousand artworks. Yet, there is a corpus of art from Guantánamo that did not go through the usual path of state-regulated art censorship procedures. In the following pages, I want to talk about those images, their differing aesthetics, and their ways of circumventing Guantánamo's censorship.

Sami Alhaj was a Sudanese cameraman covering the war in Afghanistan for Al Jazeera before being detained and handed over to US forces. Alhaj spent six years in Guantánamo without ever being convicted. He was on hunger strike for more than 500 days, until he was released in 2008.<sup>3</sup> During the strike-periods, he drew a series of five images called *Sketches of My Nightmares*. After being unable to get the drawings through censorship, Alhaj wrote descriptions of the images for his lawyer Cori Crider, who was able to de-classify them. The

organization Reprieve then commissioned British cartoonist Lewis Peake for the reconstruction of the originals.<sup>4</sup> The images show Guantánamo as a landscape of death: the camp's insignia are a skull and bones, the hunger strikers appear as skeletons. None of them are moving or standing, everybody is sitting or lying down. A two-part drawing called *The Inflatable Man* shows a skeleton being force-fed on a scale while a group of soldiers and doctors is standing around it. At first, the skeleton is thin and frail. Then, it's pumped up, but still appears to us without fat, flesh, or skin. In another image depicting his force-feeding, Alhaj comments, "My picture reflects my nightmares of what I must look like, with my head double-strapped down, a tube in my nose, a black mask over my mouth, strapped into the torture chair with no eyes and only giant cheekbones, my teeth jutting out—my ribs showing in every detail, every rib, every joint."<sup>5</sup> Sami Alhaj's *Sketches of My Nightmare* are a visual testimony to the hunger strikes and force-feedings, an artistic self-questioning, a savvy transmedia endeavor to smuggle truth around censorship. The shape of a human figure is in question here. While uncovering the purportedly "humane" practices of force-feeding as a form of necropolitics, the images figure as a tactile self-questioning of the transformations of a tortured and resisting body.

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Ahmed Rabbani, who is still being held at Guantánamo without having ever been convicted of a crime, has written detailed descriptions of his paintings and handed them over to his lawyer, Clive Stafford Smith, who in turn let them be reconstructed by art students in Dorset. One of Rabbani's descriptions reads, "There is a pit, perhaps 20 feet deep, holding the prisoner. There is a grill at the top, with fluorescent lights casting a shadow down on him. A single twisted rope runs down from the center of the grill to the iron bar, suspended over the prisoner's head. His wrists are shackled by handcuffs, spread-eagled, on the iron bar, so he can just stand on his toes to reach it. The prisoner has on a light blue t-shirt, and long, straggly black hair. All around the pit, and its square of light, is darkness."<sup>6</sup> Instead of being a victim of torture, Rabbani becomes a witness to it. The description has a forensic quality, yet it is also an image to be realized by its readers/viewers. They are called upon to paint their understanding of Rabbani's testimony, they are being involved and hindered from detaching themselves or reducing torture to mere facts. Rabbani uses the censorship to indicate that the testimonies from Guantánamo must be more than simply read: they must be imagined and felt. As journalist Philip Gourevitch has put it in another context, this is about the "the peculiar necessity of imagining what is, in fact, real."<sup>7</sup>

Abu Zubaydah was the first person to be subjected to the CIA's so-called "enhanced interrogation program" in 2002. His torture came to be one of the centerpieces of the Senate's 2014 landmark *Report on Torture*. While the accusations against Abu Zubaydah have dwindled, he is still held at Guantánamo Bay. The CIA headquarters promised its agents that "[he] will never be placed in a situation where he has any significant contact with others and/or has the opportunity to be released [...] [he] should remain incommunicado for the remainder of his life."<sup>8</sup> Testimonies by Abu Zubaydah have been scarce. Yet, the 2019 report *How America Tortures* by Mark Denbeaux and his team combined a presentation of Abu Zubaydah's torture along with his written testimony and eight of his drawings.<sup>9</sup> Together with eight more drawings released in 2018 by *ProPublica*<sup>10</sup> and eleven more released by *CNN* in 2020,<sup>11</sup> this material constitutes one of the most challenging oeuvres from the Guantánamo detention camp.

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Since the success of *Ode to the Sea*, the military does not allow for any artwork to leave Guantánamo. Thus, the images published by Denbeaux and CNN were released as juridical materials. They depict what can be understood as a grammar of torture.<sup>12</sup> This grammar declines the violent relations between the body and various means of torture—waterboards, boxes, ventilators, walls, cells. It is a hand-drawn counter-investigation of the black sites. But the images are not only cataloging the means of torture, they also—not unlike Alhaj has put it—explore Abu Zubaydah's own contorted body, his expressions of pain, his loss of sensorial perception. By rigorously depicting the twisting of his body, they draw an image of torture in its etymological sense; "torture" derives itself from the Latin "torquere," which means to twist, turn, wind, wring, distort. But they also remind us that the torture apparatus is, as former detainee Mansoor Adayfi has put it, more than the shackles or the orange colors, but that "it was a life there."<sup>13</sup>

Sociologist Lisa Hajjar and legal scholar Hedi Viterbo have pointed us towards important aspects of these drawings and their function as testimonies.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to conventionally realistic representations of torture, the "surreal" style in Abu Zubaydah's drawings enables him to highlight the impossibility of fathoming torture. Unlike most camera-based or textual evidence, they are neither made by the torturers themselves nor based on their accounts. Hajjar and Viterbo point to an epistemological injustice that privileges seemingly objective, but exclusive (expensive, advanced, power-based) tools such as cameras in contrast to first-person testimonies in verbal or pictorial form. Epistemic justice would mean that everyone has access to acknowledged tools of knowledge production.

Queer scholar Michelle C. Velasquez-Potts has highlighted the use of sound in Abu Zubaydah's drawings. She argues that we should not reduce the drawings to mere representations:

“Listening to an image is not about fixing the represented subject in place, but rather about holding open the possibility of movement and the self-transformation of that subject. [...] These drawings allow access, though not total, to the life that at times must stay hidden.”<sup>15</sup> By following the invitation of the drawings, they might enable us “to commit ourselves to relational approaches to pain and suffering that facilitate abolitionist imaginaries, as opposed to merely empathetic ones.”<sup>16</sup>

Such drawings challenge us to reflect on the importance of art and evidence, testimony and aesthetics. They challenge us to confront state power and our two-faced democracies. They challenge us to find meaningful ways to see or hear or touch them, to be moved by them. They challenge us to build new relations based in creative self-expression, in shared cultural forms, but also in silences, pain and injustice. Rebecca Adelman reminds us that the anger of the detainees is often voided in liberal discourses about Guantánamo.<sup>17</sup> The satirical drawings by Sami Alhaj, the invitations by Ahmed Rabbani, and Abu Zubayah’s grotesque yet precise drawings have found ways to circumvent state censorship—maybe they can also circumvent our own.

**SEBASTIAN KÖTHE STUDIED CULTURAL HISTORY AND THEORY, PHILOSOPHY AND SCREENWRITING. HE COMPLETED HIS DISSERTATION “WITNESSING GUANTÁNAMO” AT THE RESEARCH TRAINING GROUP “KNOWLEDGE IN THE ARTS” AT BERLIN UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS IN 2021.**

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