

Intimate Violence: Artists Respond to Illegal Detention and Torture (excerpts, footnotes omitted)

©Susan Noyes Platt published in *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Spring 2013, pp. 163-183.

“At the center of our moral life and our moral imagination are the great models of resistance: the great stories of those who have said ‘No.’” Susan Sontag (2007)

From the outset of the declaration of the War on Terror, former President Bush declared that international law would be ignored in order to exact retribution for the attacks on the United States. For prisoners arriving in the U.S. Naval Station at Guantánamo Bay on the Island of Cuba, Guantánamo was a “law- free zone,” “free from court scrutiny, free from the constraints of the Constitution, and free, sadly, to violate people’s rights with impunity.” Special Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) interrogators were immediately authorized to use whatever means necessary to extract information or to send prisoners to third-party countries where the practice of torture, was well known, a practice known euphemistically labeled as “extraordinary rendition.”

When confronted with an Iraqi insurgency in the late summer and fall of 2003, the U.S. Army rounded up thousands of Iraqis on the streets of Baghdad in a desperate attempt to gain intelligence. Between July and October, the population of the Abu Ghraib prison outside of Baghdad escalated from 25 to 18,000. Major General Geoffrey D. Miller was sent from Guantánamo to Abu Ghraib to “Gitmoize” the Iraqi detention center. “This meant ‘facilitating’ interrogations by having low-level military police guards “soften up’ the prisoners, ‘enabling’ the intelligence interrogators to get confessions, apparently by any means necessary, ignoring the Geneva Conventions.” Testimony by prisoners released from Guantánamo confirmed that they were also tortured without any regard for internationally recognized human rights.

Military police and private contractors photographed the acts of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison during October and December 2003, as a deliberate means to further humiliate Muslims. Specialist Joseph M. Darby delivered a CD with the images downloaded from the computer of one of the perpetrators, Charles Graner, Jr., to the Army Criminal Investigation Division. By the spring of 2004, these images, along with the Army's "Taguba Report" that documented in detail many forms of torture at the prison, had been disseminated all over the world. The traditional press was virtually supplanted by the public's direct access to information and imagery on the Internet.

Brian Wallis states that the photographs contradict established conventions of war photography: "the studied heroics of twentieth century war photography . . . designed to make war palatable—the heroic flag raisings, the dogged foot soldiers close to the action, the sense of shared humanity among combatants, and the search for visual evidence that war is universal and inevitable—the often banal JPEGs from Iraq proffer a very different picture: war is systematic cruelty enforced at the level of everyday torture."

Major news sources picked up the story. 60 Minutes II ran a report on 28 April 2004. Seymour Hersh wrote a lengthy exposé in the *New Yorker* based on the "Taguba Report" in May 2004. Susan Sontag contributed a strongly worded article in *The New York Times Magazine* the same month. The visual responses multiplied worldwide, particularly in response to the most famous image of detainee Abdou Hussein Saad Faleh wearing a cape-like blanket, his face covered with a hood, and standing on a box with electrical wires attached to his hands. It This photograph generated dozens of responses among visual artists ranging from the "old master" modernist Richard Serra's Stop Bush poster to iRaq a parody of "iPod" advertisements by anonymous artist collective Copper Greene, named after the Pentagon code name for detainee abuse in Iraq.

Torture as a practice is not new to the U.S. military, and neither is public outcry about it. In 1898, the United States intervened in the Filipino war for independence by forging an alliance with Emilio Aguinaldo to oust the Spaniards and establish him as President of the newly independent Philippines. U.S. forces then declared sovereignty over the Islands, and Aguinaldo rapidly became the enemy. As the United States fought to “free” the country from Aguinaldo, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos died and atrocities proliferated. Soldiers’ testimonies revealed details of the practice of waterboarding.

Even more shocking is Alfred McCoy’s crucial book *A Question of Torture, CIA Interrogation from the Cold War to the War on Terror*, published in 2006, partially as a result of the Abu Ghraib photographs. He documents that the CIA first scripted many of the procedures in the photographs during the Cold War.

Visual artists also immediately began to create artworks that reveal the larger historical and political context of the dehumanization, trauma, and power relationships of torture at both Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo. This article discusses the work of five artists who protested these acts of illegal detention and torture of innocent people.

**“I offer this exhibition as a metaphor for the impending threat posed by current times.” – Roger Shimomura (2007)**

In a five-part series titled, *American Infamy* (2006–2011), Roger Shimomura (born 1939) directly connects contemporary detainment to his personal experience of an earlier, racist, war-driven detention in the United States. The artist and his family were interned as a result of Executive Order 9066, issued in February 1942. It authorized the U.S. Army to “remove all persons of Japanese Ancestry from the entire state of California, the coastal portions of Oregon and Washington, the entire territory of Alaska, and a small portion of Arizona.” Along with almost 13,000 other persons of Japanese ancestry from Washington State (a total of 110,000 nationally, two-thirds of whom were American citizens), his family

was forced to leave their home to relocate first to Puyallup State Fair Grounds where they lived in a “cage ringed with barbed wire and guard towers manned by armed soldiers whose guns were pointed inward.” They lived in “jerry-built wooden barracks . . . divided into seven one-room ‘apartments,’ each lighted by a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. There was no running water. Wood stoves provided heating. There was one window at the back wall of each unit . . . All ate in mess halls designed to feed 500 . . . and used grouped toilets and showers that were segregated by gender but otherwise offered no privacy.”

In August 1942, they were transported to Minidoka, a specially constructed internment camp in the desert of Southern Idaho with similar conditions of guard towers and barbed wire, barracks of plywood and tarpaper, group toilets, and mess halls. This image of the camps is the basis for the American Infamy series, distilled in Shimomura’s work over many years to iconic images “scraped from the linings of my mind—not necessarily what I remembered specifically, but what I respond with when I think of camp.” The diaries of his grandmother, Toku Shimomura, also profoundly inspired his work, as well as photographs of the camps by anonymous onlookers and well-known artists such as Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams.

The detention of Japanese Americans entailed a more subtle day-to-day torture and trauma than the extremes of Abu Ghraib. For these middle-class Japanese Americans, none of whom had committed any crime, suddenly being forced to live in a desert in a tarpaper shack with only the possessions that fit into two suitcases, to sleep on a hard mattress, to use a communal toilet, to eat American food such as hot dogs, and to be confined by barbed wire enclosures, created enormous psychological stress. Starting in 1978 in his *Minidoka Series* and continuing in three more series of paintings, as well as in theater performances and installations, Shimomura has returned repeatedly to the experience of the camps,

often pairing his work with quotes from his grandmother's diaries. He draws on aesthetic traditions ranging from Japanese Ukiyo-e prints to U.S. pop art and modernism.

The artist lived in these camps as a very young child, from age two to four, so the imagery of his earlier series often portrays the ground level perspective of a child looking up at adults. Some pieces depict daily acts, such as doing laundry by hand. He pairs this image with a quotation from his grandmother, who had been a professional nurse and midwife before internment: "How monotonous life is here. Again another day passed wastefully doing laundry and miscellaneous things." Other images zoom in on particular individuals, for instance, well-dressed women standing outside a public toilet.

*American Infamy* draws on the earlier series as it still represents the Minidoka camps as tarpaper shacks in a vast desert surrounded by barbed wire. But now, the perspective has dramatically shifted to that of the soldiers looking down on the detainees from the watchtowers. The detainees are distant ciphers. . . .

As Shimomura warns, it is not a long step from the inhumanity of the World War II detentions of Japanese Americans to that of the detentions in the twenty-first century U.S. War on Terror. Both are driven by racism. . . .

**"Lust for power and territory is the same lust that kills man, women, children and the land itself" – Selma Waldman (2002)**

Selma Waldman (1931–2008) carefully presented the specific acts of torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo so that their brutality is unavoidable. *The Black Book of Aggressors* (2006–2008) consists of 150 expressionist chalk and charcoal drawings on black notebook paper. Each drawing includes a quotation from public accounts of the depicted torture. The individual drawings are framed in groups and hung contiguously to create a single large wall of imagery.

These drawings are a continuation of the artist's lifelong commitment to the representation of injustice in her art. Growing up in the only Jewish family in Kingsville, Texas, she learned early on about racism and injustice through both her own experience and that of the Chicano children of the King Ranch employees. While on a Fulbright grant in Berlin from 1959 to 1960, she began to more fully grasp the horrors of Hitler's Germany.

The Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, which left 69 black protestors dead at the hands of the South African police, shocked her into committing her life to a "struggle to end genocide and racism." Waldman depicted the atrocities of apartheid in South Africa with a series of drawings addressing genocide, funerals, detentions, political prisoners, township sweeps, police brutality, and political mobilization. For example, *The Torture of Steve Biko* includes two-dozen drawings of the beating, and torture of Biko, one of the most inspirational leaders of anti-apartheid activism in South Africa.

The artist worked in charcoal because she believed that the fragility of charcoal parallels the fragility of human life. It is strong and resilient, yet easily crushed. In her commitment to Expressionism, she consciously worked in the tradition of the great German Expressionist artist Käthe Kollwitz. Waldman deeply admired Kollwitz as a fellow graphic artist who also celebrated resistance to oppression and emphasized the devastating impact of war on the human psyche. Although Waldman's art relies, like that of Kollwitz, on the power of line, it is also based on newspaper photographs as visual source material. In creating these works of art, Waldman also conducted intense research in dozens of books. Her intricate and detailed notes survive on dozens of small pieces of paper.

Her charcoal drawings unrelentingly confront the seductive power of war, the perpetrators of war, the addiction to war, and the link between war and sexual energy. . . .The atrocities at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo irrefutably exposed the truth of her theme of the intimate relationship between war, sex,

sadism, and violence. In what would be her last cycle of drawings, she represented the victim as well as the perpetrators at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo.

*The Black Book of Aggressors*, when completely installed in a gallery, creates a long four foot wall of vertical panels each framing three drawings. The black paper highlights the blackness of the crimes being committed while intense colors such as blue and red underscore the horror. Waldman describes her work as a depiction of “torture and abuse by naked perpetrators,” stating, “By confronting the aggressors as naked archetypes, I have wished to subvert the act of mere anti-war illustration, hence the ironic slash in naked/aggression.” The soldiers are highly energized, looming, and terrifying. The artist includes specific quotations describing particular tortures, which she found by scavenging for information in newspapers or from listening to National Public Radio. Her archives contain an extraordinary amount of information on topics such as CIA Black Sites, specific tortures, and quotations from individual experiences of victims and perpetrators. . . .

**“Has our submersion in a society awash in porn, comfortably distant from the atrocities of war, rendered us completely incapable of grasping what modern day sexual torture is?” – Coco Fusco (2008)**

Coco Fusco (born 1960), a well-known performance artist and theorist, brings to the foreground the complex role of women as perpetrators of sexual humiliation and its relationship to the myths and realities of women in positions of power. In her performance, *A Room of One’s Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2006–2008), and in her book, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, Fusco provides a stunning analysis of female sexuality as a weapon in the War on Terror. She begins:

“Once upon a time . . . Virginia Woolf wrote that every woman had to have a room of her own if she was going to show her strength. Now at the onset of the new millennium, American women finally have what they need to demonstrate their valor. The War on Terror has provided a great opportunity to the women of this country. Our nation has put its trust in our talents and is providing the space and support we need to prove that we are powerful forces in the struggle for democracy .

American women are using their minds and their charms to conquer our enemy. American women in uniform are leading our nation's efforts to save the civilized world from the threat of terrorism."

In this highly ironic statement, she, in her persona as Sergeant Fusco, exposes the contradictions of women's roles in the military and their relationship to historical feminism. . . .

Fusco places her reenactment within overlapping systems of oppression for both those in the military and those incarcerated. Her emphasis on women in the position of authority in the practice of sexual humiliation of a prisoner points to the ambiguity of the term "freedom" for women in the military. They must follow orders; they are also imprisoned. But just as the rules of engagement for combat in Iraq were usually nonexistent, inside the prison, in the interior "women's domain," female individuals were encouraged to harass prisoners with ploys of feminine seduction, exposure, sex acts, and other types of objectification of their own bodies in order to humiliate Muslims.

In order to better understand what military women experienced as part of the process of administering torture, Fusco joined a training workshop run by a private firm in what is called "survival, evasion, resistance and escape" (SERE). The workshop is intended to help U.S. personnel survive if they become prisoners of war of enemies who do not follow the Geneva Conventions. Many of the methods for which the workshop teaches survival tactics are the very same procedures used at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib: stress positions and aggressive behavior, waterboarding, excessive light, and loud music to prevent sleep.

Anyone can sign up for these Team Delta workshops, run by former military personnel and interrogation experts. Using a hidden camera, Fusco filmed the six women who had agreed to participate with her. The resulting work *Operation Atropos* (2006) is a curious genre: a documentary of real actions, experienced as performance. Since Fusco had no control over what she was asked to do by the



workshop leaders, she did not “stage” the performance, but she always knew she had chosen to participate and was not a prisoner.

Fusco blurs the distinctions between performance, simulation, recreation, and documentary. She explores the contradictions between the image of women in the military created by corporate news, military recruitment media, and commercial filmmaking and the ambiguous realities of their experiences—ranging from the identity as “one of the boys,” only tougher, to the constant threat of sexual harassment, to the intentional use of sexual relationships as a means of protection. Finally, there is the exploitation of female bodies as a means of “coercive interrogation.”

At Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, sexual debasement was escalated for Muslim detainees: female interrogators were ordered to use their sexuality in specific ways in order to extract information. In her *Field Guide* mimicking an Army Field Guide format, Fusco briefly describes and illustrates 16 tactics that female soldiers “have been reported to be using. All the scenes in the illustrations are based on the testimony of detainees and eye witnesses.” In other words, the *Field Guide* is invented, but the tactics depicted come from participants’ reports. Innocuous sounding approaches like “Direct Questioning” or “Establish Your Identity” are already creating an aggressive power relationship. In *No. 7 Mutt and Jeff* (the British military term for good cop/bad cop), one woman orders the prisoner, while the other, half-dressed, sympathizes with him. Much more offensive tactics were used as well, including more undressing and even smearing (fake) menstrual blood on the prisoner.

These tactics demeaned the female soldier as well as the prisoner. In the Abu Ghraib photographs, there were no visual records of these sexual tactics. But women, notably Lynndie England, Sabrina Harmon, and Janis Karpinski, dominated the media coverage in imagery and in reporting. As the major role of female military personnel in the torture scandal came to light, these women received heavy punishment.

Ultimately, these women, no matter how they played the game—as “one of the boys” like Karpinski, doing

what they were told to do like England, or indulging personal fantasies like Harmon—all were embedded in a system that trained them to accept torture as a necessary evil. The scandals exposed that women are just as willing to participate in enabling and practicing torture as men are. At the same time, the media exposure was selective—images of male soldiers sexually molesting prisoners were suppressed—intended to soften the image of torture by presenting only a few bad apple women. . . .

**“Each victim talked about his or her torture in their own way, some recounting every detail, and others spoke around things, as if the worst of the torture was left out. In most interviews, the full brutality was laid out bare.”—Daniel Heyman (2007)**

Unlike any of the other artists previously discussed, Daniel Heyman (born 1963) based his artwork on individual encounters with detainees released from Abu Ghraib. . . .

Heyman met with released detainees during several long interviews in Istanbul between 2006 and 2008 to prepare for a class action legal case. His artwork includes verbatim statements and intimate portraits of the released prisoners, honoring their survival of the unspeakable degradation to which they were forced to submit. Heyman engaged one on one with these prisoners. None of the detainees were ever formally accused of any crime. He describes the process of creating his work: “I sit in this hotel room and draw the face of an Iraqi who is telling the most humiliating and degrading story of his life. I try to disappear.” The prisoners spoke about the techniques used to torture them in many different ways. As Heyman explains, “Each victim talked about his or her torture in their own way, some recounting every detail, and others spoke around things, as if the worst of the torture was left out. In most interviews, the full brutality was laid out bare.”

The narratives are written around the portraits themselves; the large heads of the former detainees are almost like dense landscapes. As the texts wind around the limbs, heads, and shoulders of the victims—

sometimes in bright watercolor hues—they seem to envelop the person in his own story, like a type of porous covering . . .

Heyman gives a voice to the voiceless, a face to the faceless—moving beyond the media snapshots of hooded prisoners to people whose lives have been ruined by illegal detention and torture. He helps us to understand that these victims of torture are ordinary people caught up in a frantic, racist pursuit of information by U.S. soldiers acting under orders.