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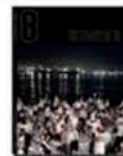
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GUANTANAMO: IF THE LIGHT GOES OUT

Max Houghton reviews Edmund Clark's recently published book on Guantanamo.



Edmund Clark's book on Guantanamo is befittingly strange. Its chilling power is achieved certainly via the photographs, which are spare, considered and precise, but also by the disorientating sequencing of the pictures, which follows the rhythm of a nightmare.

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Clark photographed the naval base and prison camps on Cuba, the names of which might inhabit a dread sci-fi novel – Camp X-Ray, Camp Delta – as well as the homes of eight detainees who have returned since their release without charge – nor recompense. For inclusion in the book, he has also scanned a series of letters of support sent to Omar Deghayes, a Libyan-born Muslim (all the detainees at Guantanamo were Muslim) who was locked up for six years, and finally released at the request of the British government in December 2007.

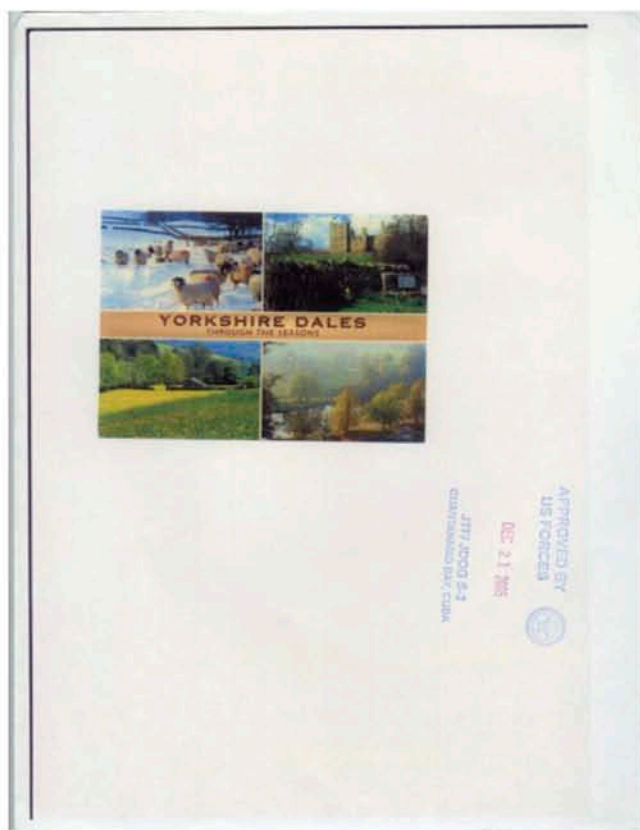


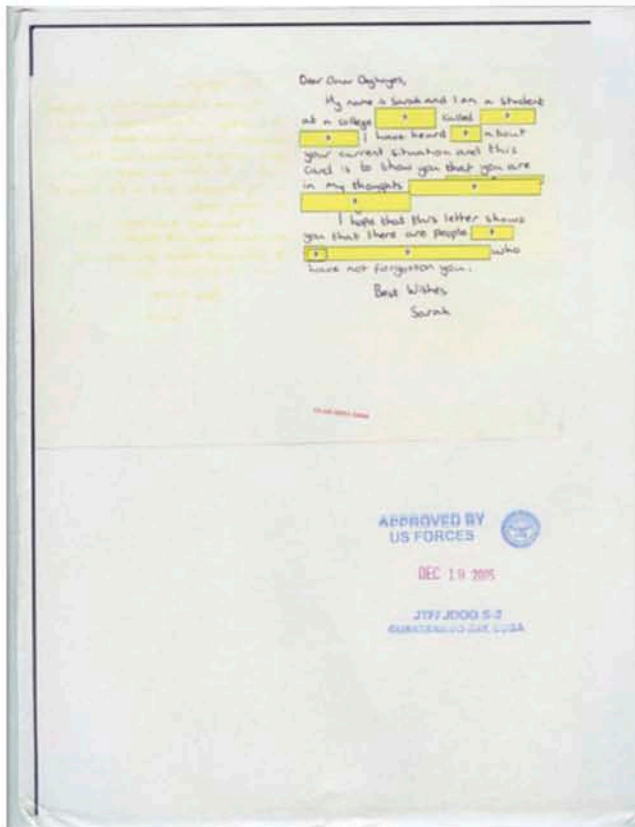
Backwards and forwards through these shifting scenarios, like exiting a revolving door at the wrong place every time, the viewer is taken on a journey beginning in a wire-covered enclosure. The colour of the floor covering of this place of incarceration – mid-green – will become a leitmotif, replacing Gitmo orange in the palate of torture. Images that suggest 'home' flash up, even a 'Welcome Home' pillow (its own greenness now rendered cruel), but we are never sure whose home we are looking at, or where it is. Cursory captions, positioned with thumbnails at the back of the book, alert the reader to whether the domestic scene that confronts them depicts a real home, or the quasi home of the prison. Clark has an eye for the uncanniness (which translates in German as *unheimlich* – unhomely) of these interiors. One room contains nothing more than a pile of sheets and blankets, more sheets covering the windows, flapping ghost-like in the wind. Another focuses on a

child's slide, newly cast into a sinister role.



The experience of men returning home to families they have become accustomed to not seeing in countries they no longer recognise has been cleverly captured by Clark and his precision pictures. The reproduced letters, frequently so heavily vetted, with so much text blocked out that they fail to make sense, add to the crescendo of threat. In his text, Deghayes reveals that the letters that sought to bring hope or comfort often seemed part of the terror campaign. Why would someone sign a letter to an incarcerated man 'Love from Sexy Leslie and Brian' while they were on a 'romantic' holiday? Why would someone choose a kitten card? *If The Light Goes Out* is full of unanswered questions, and the unreadable letters, the unheard screams and the invisible men offer no redemption.





A laboratory-like cleanliness evident in the photographs of the camp belies the degradation experienced at this extraterritorial prison. We are permitted to see restraining wrist or ankle shackles on chains, a force-feeding chair, and an isolation cell. What we don't see, of course, is the vomit or the piss or the shit or the blood that would tell the whole story. We know of the inhuman treatment that has taken place there, but it was not documented. So with these careful, beautiful photographs, Clark's work becomes the document, the evidence and the testimony. It is not enough. There is an inevitable disconnect that takes place when torture is the subject of an art book, but it is important to remember that it is not the book that is lacking.



As Clark states at the end of his essay, some 200 men remain in detention at Guantanamo. While it is of course under US jurisdiction, and responsibility falls to Barack Obama, not Pinky and Perky, to close the camp, the recent protests against tuition fees in our own Con Dem Nation have shown that people can be moved to

speaking out when they perceive an injustice has taken place. It's a sign of the times that the only thing that rouses people onto the streets is money. Clark's book, for all its subtlety and exquisite presentation, is nonetheless a powerful indictment against 'democratic' regimes that use torture. It needs to be widely exhibited.

Max Houghton



Guantanamo: If the Light Goes Out is published by Dewi Lewis and is available on the Foto8 online shop.

