Pentagon faces outrage for declaring Guantanamo art will burn

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20 December 2017

The Pentagon faces renewed outrage this month over human rights abuses at Guantanamo Bay, after reports that the prison will prevent the release of, and possibly incinerate, detainees' artwork.

While previously the prison allowed rigorously pre-screened artwork to leave with released detainees and to be given to lawyers and aid workers, Department of Defense officials have ordered Guantanamo to stop releasing cellblock art altogether, declaring it "property of the U.S. government."

This new policy is a reaction to the international acclaim garnered by an ongoing exhibit of 36 paintings, three model ships and another sculpture, opened in early October at New York City's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The exhibit, titled "Ode to the Sea: Art from Guantanamo," contains works from eight inmates, four of whom have been released, and only one of whom was charged with a crime.

The exhibit closed on December 11, after a threat was made to the exhibit on Snapchat, but has since reopened.

The artworks themselves are clearly a threat to the military and to the whole conduct of 16 years of the "war on terror." The paintings focus on the theme of the sea—always within earshot of Guantanamo prisoners, but often blocked from view from prison cell windows. The sea, to these prisoners, represents the hope of escape and the daily isolation they face, chained to the floor, separated from their families by thousands of miles of ocean.

Guantanamo instituted its new policy in secret, with no public announcement or notice to legal counsel. Only after attorneys noticed that no new art was being released from the prison did a Pentagon spokesman state the reason: "Questions remain on where the money for the sales was going." The statement refers to an email address on the exhibit's web site where those interested could inquire about buying prints.

The extent of Guantanamo's censorship is unclear. Earlier this month Ramzi Kassem, an attorney for several detainees, told the *Miami Herald* that if a captive is released, "their art would not even be allowed out with them and would be incinerated instead." Attorney Beth Jacob said that the remaining detainees were told "they could continue to make art. But the number of pieces each could have would be limited, and excess ones would be discarded."

The Ode to the Sea exhibit comes at an inconvenient time for the Department of Defense. On December 5, the pre-trial proceedings began against Mustafa Ahmed al-Hawasawi, who is being charged with aiding the September 11 attacks. His defense is attempting to argue that he is unfit for trial, due to the well-documented, years-long torture he endured at CIA black sites around the world and at Guantanamo.

The Pentagon has faced severe backlash from lawyers, civil rights groups, and arts advocacy groups—including PEN America, the College Art Association, the Media Freedom Foundation, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and the National Coalition Against Censorship. In response to the threat to burn the artwork, the Center for Constitutional Rights compared the Pentagon to the Nazis, tweeting, "Next it will be burning books," while detainee attorney Jay Wells Dixon highlighted the Pentagon's hypocrisy in a tweet comparing it to ISIS: "Let's see who can destroy works of art and culture faster."

Erin Thompson, a curator of the exhibit and professor of art crime, created a petition that, as of this writing, has received nearly 2,000 signatures. The petition declares that the "burning of art is only something done by fascist and terrorist regimes."

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In a statement from the Pentagon earlier this month, Army Col. Lisa Garcia of the US Southern Command told the *Miami Herald* that "Southcom is recommending to the prison that the staff archive detainee artwork rather than discard it."

Still, Pentagon spokesman Maj Ben Sakrisson recently told the *Guardian* that the prison "effectively eliminated transfer of detainee produced artwork from the detention facility," while attorneys for the detaineees revealed that finished artworks were being confiscated from their clients. Attorney Ramzi Kassem commented, "If no one gets to see the art, they might as well be incinerating it."

The Pentagon's drive to censor detainee art is an attack on one of the only ways these captives—who are interned indefinitely, abused and uncharged—can communicate with the world. It is an attempt to cover up the human rights violations at Guantanamo, to remove the prisoners from public view and from public sympathy as human beings whose lives have been destroyed by US imperialism, which seeks to depict them as inhuman monsters.

The horrors of the Guantanamo Bay facility are the product of the 2002 decision by the Bush White House to create an extralegal detention center outside of American or international law, as a prison for those who were victims of the CIA's international program of abduction, torture and human experimentation, referred to by the euphemisms of "extraordinary rendition" and "enhanced interrogation." At Guantanamo, detainees—labeled "alien enemy combatants"—are held indefinitely, without hope of trial and often without being accused of a crime.

These "enemy combatants" have been fisherman, children, cooks, letter carriers, resistance fighters against US-backed dictatorships, and members of Al Qaeda (now a key ally in US military operations in Syria). "High-value detainees" (those believed to have been in the leadership of Al Qaeda or who allegedly pose a threat to American security), many of whom were known to US intelligence agencies before the 9/11 attacks, were often moved between the CIA's network of black site prisons and Guantanamo, to avoid their being tried by US courts.

According to a *Miami Herald* report, of the more than 780 people who have been detained at Guantanamo, 41 remain, 26 of whom are labeled "forever prisoners" (uncharged but "too dangerous" to be released). Only seven have been charged by a US military tribunal. Nine detainees have died at Guantanamo since it opened, and many remain on hunger strike.

Abu Zubaydah, for example, was the first prisoner on whom the CIA tested its torture methods. Like many other detainees, he was tortured for weeks, deprived of sleep, chained to a wall, made to sleep naked, barred from bathing, confined in a coffin-like box, waterboarded 83 times, and was subject to techniques such as "walling," "insects," "mock-burial" and "stress positions." He lost an eye in CIA custody.

That the exhibit has garnered such attention despite a mandated lack of overt political content, is a testament to the resilience of the detainees, whose lives have been shattered by the duplicitous "war on terror." That the Pentagon deems this art dangerous enough to erase it from public view reflects the cowardice and increasing instability of the American military-intelligence apparatus.

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