

Drawing conclusions about Gitmo: Steve Mumford at Postmasters

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Steve Mumford, 5/16/13, Restraining chair for force feeding, Detainee hospital, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; ink and wash on paper, 13.75 x

18 inches

In 2003, Barbara Streisand wanted the California Costal Records Project (CCRP), a group that takes aerial photos of the California coastline, to remove a photo of her Malibu home from its website. After a cease and desist letter and a failed lawsuit, the photo remained online. An otherwise boring spat, the entertainer's litigious streak led to the photo being shared countless times and the previously-small CCRP website exploded in popularity. And thus the "Streisand effect" entered the cultural lexicon: the phenomenon where an individual attempts to hide or censor some piece of information, but in doing so calls great attention to that which they were trying to hide.

The Streisand effect has been around for a while—musicians being blacklisted, books being banned, etc.—but it is hard not to think of it in a more serious manifestation when visiting “Steve Mumford: The Snow Leopard,” on view at Postmasters gallery through November 23. Mumford made two trips to Guantanamo Naval Base last winter to illustrate [a story for Harper’s](#). The series of the twenty-three ink wash works at Postmasters is the final result of his February and May trips to Cuba.



Steve Mumford, 5/16/13, Abandoned interrogation huts, Camp X-Ray, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; ink and wash on paper, 14 x 36 inches

Mumford may be a familiar name to readers—he was included in “[The Joe Bonham Project](#),” a 2011 show at Storefront Bushwick curated by TNC’s James Panero that featured wartime illustrators documenting the rehabilitation of wounded soldiers.

The most striking thing about Mumford’s illustrations is what they don’t show: namely, the Guantanamo detainees. Unlike Ms. Streisand, the U.S. government has been more than effective at secreting away the individuals they hope to keep hidden, but hopefully Mumford’s work will ensure continued public debate over America’s most controversial military prison.

The unsettling nature of many of the pieces in “The Snow Leopard” comes from the places Mumford depicts. Cells, interrogation huts, and recreation areas are all vacant, the reason for their existence looming as a white elephant locked away behind heavy steel doors guarded by military personnel.



Steve Mumford, 5/15/13, Cell 103, Block Delta, Camp 6, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; ink and wash on paper, 13.375 x 18.375 inches

Especially haunting is 5/16/13, *Restraining chair for force feeding, Detainee hospital, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba*. In the middle of a cold room—part hospital, part military base, part asylum—a lone chair on a dolly faces away from the viewer, restraining straps dangling at its sides. On a tray next to it rest a series of hastily sketched instruments, mostly indistinguishable but whose unknown uses only lend to the horrifying scenes our imaginations conjure. Just as *2001: A Space Odyssey* is rendered more powerful by the fact that we never see the aliens, so too is the tension in Mumford's work augmented by only hinting at what we already know happens in these places.



Steve Mumford, 5/15/13, No detainees here. I'm not allowed to see them, Communal Pod, Cell Block Delta Camp 6, Guantanamo Bay,

Cuba; ink and wash on paper, 18 x 13.75 inches

The omission of detainees has an interesting effect on those subjects that are included in these illustrations: the soldiers. Without prisoners to escort, suspects to interrogate, or inmates to guard, the soldiers are rendered useless—and it shows. In Mumford's illustrations they mill aimlessly about, often sitting with their heads slumped on their hands, trying to do their best at doing nothing. If a soldier's life is long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror, we see none of the latter here. In fact, the subjects look rather un-soldierly, though this isn't to slight them. Quite the opposite—their palpable boredom causes the viewer to sympathize with them. Regardless of what one thinks of Guantanamo, we can tell that these men and women don't want to be there, the stagnation and tedium of their work painfully obvious.



Steve Mumford, 5/17/13, Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba; ink and wash on paper, 13.375 x 18.375 inches

The only thing more conspicuously absent from these illustrations than the detainees are the areas that have been actively censored. In several pieces, Mumford’s ink abruptly stops at the edge of certain locations he was forbidden to draw, these gaping white spaces labeled “Secret” and “Classified,” set off with a note to “Draw no further than here.”

Of these self-redacted works, the most striking is 5/17/13, *Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba*. A coastal landscape with scraggly flora in the foreground recedes into small buildings. Across the bay, plains recede into blue green mountains and a sky dotted with a few fluffy clouds. Birds circle close to the viewer. All this would make for an idyllic scene were it not for a bare, geometric block of white at the edge of the page. Labeled “CLASSIFIED” and abutted by a fence, a void—a spotlight? a guard tower?—rises above the space.

Another piece, 2/5/13, *Exterior Commission, Permitted view of legal complex, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba*, divides the page into thirds. The outside sections are blank, with light-poles delineating the boundaries of which view is drawable, and which are verboten. The “permitted” view doesn’t offer much: a patch of grass labeled “OK TO DRAW,” orange plastic barricades, chain link fencing covered in green tarps that hide whatever might be inside, and lots and lots of razor wire.



Steve Mumford, 2/5/13, Exterior Commission, Permitted view of legal complex, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; ink and wash on paper, 18.125 x

14.75 inches

These illustrations say a lot about Washington's attitudes towards Gitmo: They'd like it to be out of sight, and out of mind.—behind tarps, behind doors, behind a "Draw no further" line. (While on the topic of Washington, it's worth noting that President Obama signed an executive order to close the facility within one year—on January 22, 2009. Needless to say, business as usual continues at Guantanamo more than four years later.)

Much more serious than some celebrity's house, Mumford's powerful images serve as an important reminder to what the U.S. is doing in Cuba, and demand that we confront the difficulties of dealing with terror suspects in the post-9/11 world. Let us hope that the government's work to keep certain items out of these illustrations only serves to make the issues at Guantanamo all the more visible.

"Steve Mumford: The Snow Leopard" opened at Postmasters gallery, New York on October 19 and remains on view through November 23, 2013.