

## 'WELCOME TO GUANTANAMO: BEYOND GITMO' EXHIBIT ARRIVES AT UNIVERSITY

By Connor Sullivan, September 19, 2017



Playful photographs of Guantanamo Bay gift shop items and plaintive portraits of former inmates are strikingly paired in the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage's latest installation, "Welcome to Camp America: Beyond Gitmo." An exhibition by photographer and former civil rights-lawyer Debi Cornwall '95, "Welcome to Camp America: Beyond Gitmo" employs these darkly comic contrasts as critical commentary.

Cornwall's photographs explore life within the United States' Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Welding together politics and aesthetics, the exhibition comes as the next installment in the John Nicholas Brown Center's tradition of displaying politically charged art. The exhibit, which seeks to reveal injustice and mistreatment, joins two other public programs focused on investigating the military prison's history, legacy and future. The center is the second institution in the United States to display Cornwall's installation.

The John Nicholas Brown Center "is really interested in how culture and art intersect to address social activism and social justice issues," said Marisa Brown, assistant director of programs at the center. "Debi's work is one of the best examples of how you can use art to address these issues."

Cornwall explicitly centers her art around activism. The photographer spent 12 years working as a civil rights lawyer, using DNA analysis to free wrongfully imprisoned people. Though Cornwall parted ways with the occupation in 2014, she utilizes her art as a vehicle through which to call into question power structures' unwarranted assaults on individuals' civil rights.

"After stepping away from the life of a litigator, I was still consumed with the same kind of questions regarding power and its effects on individuals," Cornwall said. "But I wanted to explore it in a very different way that invited connection and inquiry."

STEVEN  
KASHER  
GALLERY

“Guantanamo was an obvious choice for me,” Cornwall said. “The innocent men held for years there without charge are very similar to my exoneree clients in the United States. But unlike those DNA exoneree clients, the men in Guantanamo never receive a piece of paper saying they didn’t commit the crime.”

Reflecting a law that explicitly prohibits taking photographs of current Guantanamo inmates’ faces, Cornwall sticks strictly to photographing her now-released subjects’ backs. For Cornwall, the artistic decision underscores the dehumanizing toil inherent in incarceration at Guantanamo.

“One artist that informs my work is Trevor Paglen,” Cornwall said. “He similarly finds way to visualize the inherently not-visual.”

The inmates’ anguish is juxtaposed with flippant gift shop items on display, including a stuffed turkey vulture and a bobble head modeled after the likeness of Fidel Castro, creating a jarring effect for the viewer. The bleak back portraits contrast further with photographs that depict the comparatively relaxed lifestyles of military men on duty in Guantanamo.

“It’s really interesting work,” said Esther Whitfield, associate professor of comparative literature and Hispanic studies. “It strikes me as a subtle commentary on the politics of Guantanamo and as a moving tribute to the communities that formed there, as well as to the way people look for home in places that are far from, and very unlike, their homes.”

Cornwall credits the development of her artistry to Brown, where she graduated with a double concentration in political science and modern culture and media.

“I’m happy to see that Brown has become more of itself since I was last here,” Cornwall said. “The students and professors I’ve spent time with this week are as thoughtful and engaged as ever. And I’m happy to (see) more engagement with communities outside of Brown — engagement that addresses issues of national concern.”