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MUGS, SHIRTS AND STUFFED TOYS: THE GIFT SHOP VIEW OF GUANTANAMO BAY

By Garry Maddox, May 11, 2018



Her personal favourite was a purple crop top with the catchy slogan "It don't GTMO better than this", \$US8.99 when purchasing a teddy bear.

"There was something about these objects that struck me as particularly American," Cornwall says. "If we can buy it and sell it, then on some level we're OK with it. So it made perfect sense to me to find the gift shop."

A former attorney specialising in wrongful convictions, Cornwall bought every souvenir she could during a closely monitored photographic expedition to the camp. Back in New York, she drinks her coffee every day in an "I Heart Guantanamo" coffee mug.

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While the town, naval base and camp attract few tourists, Cornwall says the gift shop caters to contractors carrying out construction and internet upgrades, civilians who work in other shops and the lawyers and journalists who visit.

An exhibition of her photographs, *Welcome to Camp America: Inside Guantanamo Bay*, is running during the Head On festival in Sydney.

As well as photographing souvenirs, which she sees as "the commodification of American power", she took surprisingly casual shots of the camp's residential and leisure facilities, more serious ones of shackles and wire fences, and portraits of detainees after their release.

But on an expedition that took nine months for military authorities to approve, 12 pages of rules prohibited Cornwall from showing any faces at the camp. "At the end of each day, military authorities would take the digital memory card out of my camera and review every part of every frame and delete whatever they found in violation of those rules," she says.

Of the hundreds of prisoners held over the years, including the freed Australians David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, Cornwall says just 40 remain, supervised by 1600 guards "at multiple millions of dollars a year per prisoner".

She hopes Australian viewers find resonances in her exhibition closer to home than Cuba.

"I see this work not just about Guantanamo but about systems across the global West, including Australia, that deny personhood to the 'other', to foreigners seeking to come in, to those who don't share our faith, to those we are afraid of for whatever set of reasons," she says.

Well before the camp attracted criticism from the likes of Amnesty International for Human Rights Watch over the treatment of prisoners, the area had a sunnier reputation.

Cornwall discovered it was once a popular R&R stopover for sailors who would send home postcards with cheerful messages that now seem blackly comical. "Hi honey, having a great time at Guantanamo," one said. "I think you'd love it here."

Welcome to Camp America: Inside Guantanamo Bay is at Paddington's Reservoir Gardens until May 20. Debi Cornwall will speak about the exhibition at Paddington Town Hall on Sunday.