

By Alexandra Schwartz

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*"Untitled (Oasis)." / Art work by Muhammad Ansi*

Djamel Ameziane arrived at the detention center at Guantánamo Bay shortly after it opened, in early 2002. A citizen of Algeria, he had left his country during its civil war in the early nineties and sought refuge first in Vienna, where he worked as a chef, and then, when his visa expired, in Montreal. After his application for Canadian asylum was denied, Ameziane went to live in Afghanistan. By then, it was 2000. When the United States invaded, the following year, he tried to escape the violence by crossing the border into Pakistan, where he was captured by local bounty hunters and turned over to the American military for five thousand dollars. At Guantánamo, Ameziane was placed in solitary confinement and tortured. He was never charged with a crime; his lawyers insisted that he had been a victim of circumstance. In 2005, he filed a habeas petition. In 2008, he was cleared for release, but where could he go? The U.S. wanted to send him back to Algeria; as a member of the persecuted Berber minority, he feared for his safety there. Five more years passed at Guantánamo as Ameziane's lawyers fought the

American government's efforts to repatriate him in the country he had fled.

As Ameziane waited for a final decision, he made art. Two of his watercolors are included in “Ode to the Sea: Art from Guantánamo Bay,” a startling exhibit on display through January at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The first is a tranquil landscape of mountains and pines ringing a lake with a house on the far shore, reflected in the calm water. It's the sort of soothing, contemplative image that you might expect to find in the dining room of a country inn, not in a cell of one of the world's most notorious prisons. Ameziane's second painting, of a dramatic storm at sea, seems to speak more directly to his distress. Under bruised clouds, a battered sailboat is tossed on dark, frothing waves, about to capsize. The picture put me in mind of those moody, shipwreck-loving Romantics, artists like [Claude Joseph Vernet](#), whose paintings of sea storms revel in pathetic fallacy and the magnificent cruelty of nature's triumph over man—except for the eerie fact that in Ameziane's scene, nature has no antagonist, because no people are shown at all. He himself was the ship, he told his lawyers, buffeted by the waves, without a friendly shore in sight.



*"Untitled (Buildings on a Shore)." Art work by Djamel Ameziane*

[See more pieces here.](#)

"Ode to the Sea" includes work by eight Guantánamo detainees, half of whom have been released. The others remain there still. In all the years that they have spent living on the shore of the Caribbean Sea, they have seen the water only once, in 2014, when guards took down the green tarps covering the prison's fences to prepare for a hurricane. But water is everywhere in the exhibit, as its title implies. A livid sunset over a bridge that looks very much like the Golden Gate was painted by Abdualmalik Abud, a Yemeni held at Guantánamo for fifteen years and released to Montenegro, in 2016. An image of a lighthouse on a craggy, purple shore is by Ghaleb al-Bihani, also from Yemen. He was released to Oman, last January, as was Muhammad Ansi, whose work in the show includes a painting of a lemon-yellow bay with a hazy city just visible in the far background and one of a pink beach, complete with families gathered under sun umbrellas. "Everyone who could draw drew the sea," Mansoor Adayfi, a former detainee, [wrote](#) in a recent Op-Ed in the *Times*, describing his fellow-prisoners' rapture when the tarps temporarily came down. "I could see the detainees put their dreams, feelings, hopes and lives in them. I could see some of these drawings were mixtures of hope and pain. That the sea means freedom no one can control or own, freedom for everyone."

The sea can also mean danger, loss, and separation, or a difficult, uncertain journey, and not all the work in the show is so sanguine. Ansi's pieces—sixteen, the most of anyone—include a painting of the famous [photograph](#) of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian child who drowned off the coast of Turkey during his family's attempt to flee the war, as well as one of the Titanic, still intact and sailing toward its doom, which puzzled me until I learned that Ansi had been shown the James Cameron movie by a female interrogator who was trying to create a rapport with him. (The catalogue notes that he "was entranced by the film, but recognized the attempted manipulation of being shown sexual scenes while sitting beside a woman.") Erin Thompson, an assistant professor at John Jay and one of the show's curators, told me that the detainees have to be careful not to show anger in their art lest they compromise their chance for release, though some of the work does toe the line. In one of Ansi's paintings, a giant, kohl-rimmed eye—his mother's, he told his lawyer—weeps in the sky, while in another, the Statue of Liberty, painted black, turns her ashen back to the viewer. As in a seascape that shows shark fins slicing through the water, painted by Khalid Qasim, who is still in detention and on a gruelling [hunger strike](#), the symbolism speaks for itself.







~~Painted and Made by Guantánamo Detainees. The model is made of wood and is painted with red and yellow. It features two masts with red sails and a yellow sail at the stern. The boat is displayed on a white surface against a plain background.~~