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"Untitled (Alan Kurdi)" [Courtesy of Muhammad Ansi/John Jay College]

"Ode to the Sea: Art from Guantanamo Bay" opened on October 2 this year, in the President's Gallery, located on the topmost floor of Hareen Hall, John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. It is a nondescript building located in a well-to-do section of Manhattan's Upper West Side, with much of the facade and entryway currently hidden behind renovation screens.

The gallery itself is not much more than a hallway that opens up into various administrative offices. This unusual gallery space, is, however, the site on which the flotsam of a particularly brutal aspect of US geopolitical manoeuvring during the so-called "war on terror" has been made available to the public.

The exhibition features 36 paintings and sculptures made by detainees at the US prison at Guantanamo Bay, co-curated by art crime professor Erin Thompson, archivist Paige Laino and artist and poet Charles Shields. Following its opening in early October this year, "Ode to the Sea" began to receive overwhelmingly positive press.

By mid-November, seemingly as a direct result of the attention that this exhibition refocused on the detainees, the US Department of Defense (DoD) announced that it will suspend transfers of artwork out of Guantanamo by legal representatives. Air Force Major Ben Sakrisson, a Pentagon spokesman, declared all Guantanamo detainee art "property of the US government", and expressed grave fears about the financial proceeds of sales. The DoD also threatened to remove what it considers "excess" artworks and said it might destroy them.

Thompson informed me that camp officials recently seized a sculpture that one detainee, Moath al-Alwi, had completed after many months of work. He could only communicate his despair and frustration to his legal counsel.

Despite the [insinuation](#) that John Jay College, the curators, alleged al-Qaeda "terrorists" held at Guantanamo Bay, and their legal counsel may profit from sales, Thompson clarified that this is not the case.

The curators can be contacted if a member of the public is interested in purchasing the artworks; they will, then, connect the potential buyer with a lawyer for detainees who have been released. Since the lawyers work pro-bono for detainees, they, too, do not benefit financially. Only those detainees released, repatriated, or resettled in a third-party country, after a rigorous and years-long process of assessment of their individual cases, are able to receive monetary compensation.

Threatening to confiscate and destroy artworks seems contradictory to policies implemented at Guantanamo. Military officials had made concentrated efforts to improve conditions for prisoners - including providing the art classes in which these works were made - in an attempt to prevent prisoners from disintegrating into despair and resorting to self-harming actions (including suicide attempts).

Given those efforts, why attempt to control objects to which it paid little attention before, and threaten to destroy them? Why exactly are these works of art so powerful?

Guantanamo ships

The first object that greets visitors of the exhibition is an intricate model sailing vessel, replete with billowing sails, several masts and viewing turrets. Its massive body is on the way somewhere, directed and fully absorbed in meeting its goal. The winds, too, have blessed its journey: each square of sail is stretched to its full convex potential, moving the vessel forward. When we get closer and peer into the plexiglass box holding this ship captive, we see some other, curious details: a ship's wheel, in gold, and a little black anchor hanging incongruously from the vessel.

We realise that this is no ordinary model ship, made of the usual pre-fabricated, uniform pieces. Instead, each section is rough, the pieces slightly uneven; the materials - including string, wood, and what appear to be stiffened pieces of canvas (using glue, the stiffened rectangles of old t-shirts) - seem to be sourced from recycled debris. A few of the sails have a stamp that includes the following legend:

APPROVED BY US FORCES

AUG 05 2016

JTF7JOG S-7

GUANTANAMO BAY CUBA.

The date is stamped in red, while all other lettering is in fading black ink.



"Giant" by Moath al-Alwi [Courtesy of Moath al-Alwi/John Jay College]

This sailing vessel, titled "Giant", was constructed by Alwi, who has been "detained" at the US prison at Guantanamo Bay since 2002. It was shipped to the US - after extensive inspection and x-rays to ensure that it did not contain any contraband or hidden messages detrimental to US security - especially for this exhibition.

Thompson notes that although Alwi has constructed many seafaring vessels, he was very proud of this particular ship; when it did not appear in initial images she took of the exhibition (the special plexiglass cover for it was still being completed), he communicated his ire openly with his legal counsel. "Where is my ship?" he purportedly asked.

To Thompson, that Alwi was throwing a bit of a tantrum - that he was "acting like an artist" - was a positive development. For a man whose person has been systematically and brutally subjected, for over a decade, to a powerful empire's exercises of power, for a person who has "disappeared" in a torture camp, this ire - a display of ego - is a sign that no amount of machinations by the US has managed to fully to erase his subjectivity.

Because they were neither formally charged with any crime, nor afforded prisoner-of-war status according to the Geneva Convention, the men at Guantanamo came to be labelled "unlawful combatants" or "detainees", who have no legal protection within US or Cuban frameworks. In many ways, each of these artworks is evidence of an attempt to counter the US' elaborate methodologies of removing these men's subjectivity.

Creating these artworks is a profound act of non-erasure - illustrating will, longing, a desire to communicate both beauty and suffering, and to project longing onto a surface - to materialise their fantastical hopes where they, and others, can see them.

Many detainee-artists depict the sea or other bodies of water, and seafaring vessels, both great and small. Ghaleb al-Bihani's "Untitled (Red and Purple Boats)" shows two simple wooden boats listing in the water, while an agile sailboat speeds past in the distance.

Muhammad Ansi
painted the grand

Titanic

- that ill-fated ship - after he, and other prisoners, were permitted to watch the film. In his painting, the infamous ship - one that was sold to the world as so advanced and powerful that it was unsinkable - is propelling itself purposefully into a future that its makers and financiers imagined they controlled.



"Titanic" (Courtesy of Muhammad Arsi/John Jay College)



"I Intitled (Binoculars pointing at the moon)" (Courtesy of Ahmed Bahbani/John Jay College)