

By Carol Rosenberg

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*The military provides art classes but is now changing its policy about what happens to the art that is made./* By Justin Azpiazu [See photos of the artwork in the original article.](#)

Hollywood actors Ben and Casey Affleck got one each for Christmas last year. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Taylor Branch has four hanging in his home. The actress who played the “Gossip Girl” grandma wept, then bought one. Some students and teachers have acquired the artwork as well, including a former CIA analyst.

Call it blowback: A year after the Defense Department banned releases of art made by the 40 prisoners still at Guantánamo, detainee artwork that got out before the ban is emerging as a collectible with a bit of cachet.

“I find it inspiring that people in the worst moments of their lives, the darkest days, could still remember the beauty in this world and depict it in some way,” said [Gail Helt](#), a former CIA analyst who recently purchased a piece of art from freed Yemeni detainee Abdul Malik Wahab al Rahabi.

Helt, an outspoken critic of the post-9/11 detention and interrogation policy, is now director of the Institute for Security and Intelligence Studies at King University, a Christian school in Tennessee.

She plans to show it to students in her intelligence ethics class as she talks about Guantánamo, and “what it was we did during those years, and who was detained there.” Why? “To let them come to grips with that and see their own common humanity.” Between classes, she said, it will hang in her home.

For years, Guantánamo art had a small audience. Captives gave it to their lawyers as gifts or to send to family. The prison showcased it on reporter visits.

Then late last year New York City's John Jay College of Criminal Justice put some captives' art on display. The exhibit "[Ode to the Sea](#)" drew a modest audience, some media coverage and, eventually, the ire of the Defense Department. The Pentagon declared that any art still at the military prison in Cuba was U.S. government property and [banned further releases](#).

That, naturally, was when interest in Guantánamo art started to surge.

"The ban, which was meant to bury this art, ironically enough brought it to the attention of millions of Americans," says [Erin Thompson](#), the professor who set up the show with lawyers for Guantánamo detainees. Her specialty is art theft and destruction.

Christine Affleck says she was unaware of the controversy when she heard about the artwork last year as she began to think about Christmas presents for her famous sons, and bought one for each. "They're kind of hard to shop for," she said.

Affleck said she found the art interesting — peaceful images of boats and sea — from a place of where people are imprisoned but haven't been charged or tried.

"I'm horrified by it, in a humanitarian sense. So there was an urge to try to support the people there," she said. "One sort of gleam of light in the whole situation was they were allowed to paint. The art sort of showed the human side, even if I don't know these people at all, what they are like."

Guantánamo prison introduced art classes a decade ago to reduce friction between bored, angry or isolated detainees and their guards. Inmates who behaved were taken, in shackles, to a cell block — chained by the ankles to the floor — and got to color, paint or sculpt.

The Afflecks' paintings cost \$550 each. They were done at Guantánamo by Yemeni Mohammed al Ansi, whom the U.S. military held for more than 16 years as a suspected member of Osama bin Laden's security detail but never charged. In January 2017, a month after a parole-like board [approved his release](#), the Obama administration sent Ansi to resettlement in Oman.

"I don't want to speak for my kids," Affleck said, adding that her thoughts on incarceration may not be theirs. But what did they think of the gift? "Really cool," she replied.

Branch, the historian who wrote the American civil rights epic "[Parting the Waters](#)," and TV and stage actress [Caroline Lagerfelt](#) bought Ansi's art too. Theirs hang in their homes in Baltimore and Santa Monica, California, respectively.

"I didn't think they were the most brilliant paintings in the world," Affleck said. "But the combination of what they were painting and who they were — incarcerated persons thousands of miles from their homes and families, from anything — was emotionally powerful."

The reaction came as no surprise to Professor [David Gussak](#), chairman of the Art Education Department at Florida State University whose specialty is art therapy in forensic settings.

"We're fascinated by their art because these are people who are locked up," he said. "The art provides them an opportunity to escape. It re-humanizes the dehumanized. It creates a bridge between the inside and outside culture."

For the very same reasons, he said, some people are repulsed by prison art. Or fear it.

Some people feel, "How dare we think of them as real people," he said. "Because it's so much

easier to control them when we think of them as monsters.”

The only art to leave Guantánamo in 2018 was taken home by a confessed al-Qaida terrorist, Ahmad al Darbi, as [a reward](#) for testifying against two men at Guantánamo. The Trump administration repatriated Darbi to a rehabilitation center in Saudi Arabia in May.

That exception aside, the ban on the release of Guantánamo art remains. Captives can no longer give away their art to make room for more.

A prison spokesman, Navy Cmdr. Adam Bashaw, said the military has an undisclosed limit on how much artwork a captive can keep in his cell. Overflow goes to a storage facility. Once a limit in both sites is reached, the detainee can “choose which artwork to discard.” First, he said, the artwork is photographed and the captive is given “a printed copy.”

Bashaw did not disclose how much art has been destroyed. Nor would the prison release photographs of “discarded artwork.”

Lagerfelt said her \$550 purchase of “The Red Door” was definitely an expression of her disgust with Guantánamo detention policy. So much so that she’s having it re-framed so visitors can see the backside, which has prison stamps of approval for release — something Branch said he had done with one of his paintings too.

Lagerfelt is a Swedish-American actress who played the role of a British human rights attorney in an Off-Broadway 2004 show about Guantánamo, “Honor Bound to Defend Freedom” and may be best known as Serena van der Woodsen’s grandmother in the TV drama “Gossip Girl.”

She was particularly touched by a model boat that prisoner Moath al Alwi crafted from prison art supplies and cellblock scraps.

“It made me cry. I was so mortified. I was so embarrassed. I just stood there. I couldn’t believe

that this man shackled to the floor found little objects and created this little sculpture. It's stunning."

To her the art show demonstrated a "strength of spirit, that these guys were despite everything able to do this."

Branch said he and his wife, Christina Macy, discovered Guantánamo detainee art through the New York show. They'd read about it in late 2017 and found themselves alone in the gallery outside the school president's office at John Jay, amazed at what they saw. The ban and controversy had yet to ensue.

Now, four Ansi artworks that sold for around \$2,000 in total hang in the sun room of their home.

"I think the water is a symbol of escape and being lost," Branch said. "There's a boat that's adrift and one that's abandoned on the shore."

A red seascape they own strikes Macy as "full of rage. It's beautiful but very, very intense."

One reason the Pentagon was alarmed by the New York show, a military spokesman said at the time, was because of the sales. Defense officials wondered where the proceeds were going. The lawyer for one captive said her Yemeni client assigned the money to his mother's medical care.

Rahabi, who was held by the U.S. military for more than 14 years as a suspected bodyguard for Bin Laden, told McClatchy he was [selling his art](#) to support his wife and daughter as he navigates life after Guantánamo. They were reunited in Montenegro and now live in Khartoum, Sudan.

Yale Law student Georgia Travers, who has attended a military commission hearing at Guantánamo, bought three Ansi artworks last year, before the Pentagon ban. She gave one to her

sister, a master's student in Arts and Religion at Yale Divinity School.

“Even if you assume the worst — that they’re all hardened terrorists — it forces us to look through the eyes of these people and consider the humanity of someone we reflexively hate,” she said. “The detainees, in many cases, whether or not they’re guilty, may have been tortured. And that forces you to interrogate your own humanity — which makes the paintings effective as art.”

Once the Pentagon halted releases, she speculated, ownership of Guantánamo became “more desirable. Because it’s politicized.” By declaring Guantánamo captives’ creations U.S. government property, she noted, “The government was saying, ‘Oh my gosh, we’re so afraid of this art.’ That made it way more valuable.”

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