



DANIEL HEYMAN

I am Sorry It is Difficult to Start

أنا متأسف، البداية صعبة

THE INFAMOUS photographs of abuse and torture committed by US military personnel at Abu Ghraib Prison, which surfaced in 2004, sent shock waves through America's psyche and redefined our self-image. They opened a discussion of torture and death at the hands of private contractors and of the systemic disregard for human rights on the part of the US government. In its zeal to fight "the war on terror," an enemy not connected to a specific country or regime, our government had rewritten the rulebook, betraying our trust and the Geneva Convention.

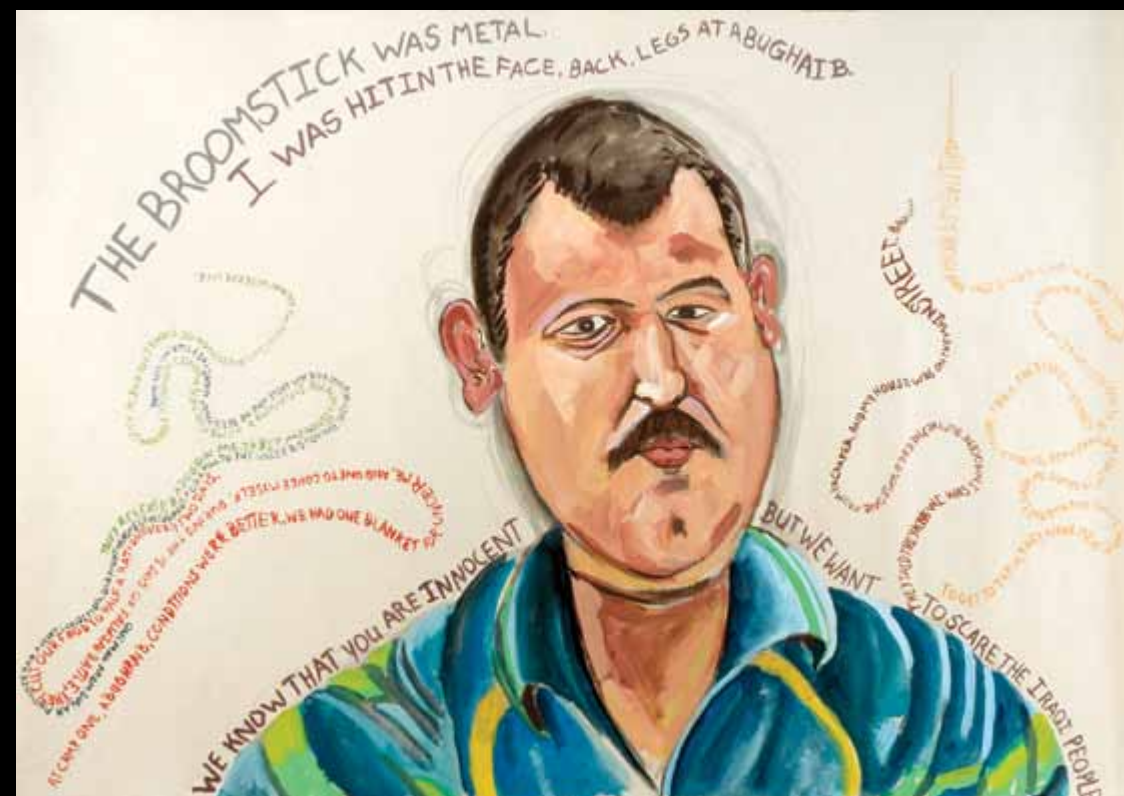
In the fury over the abuse, little attention was paid to the victims, their identities, or their alleged crimes. Daniel Heyman's *Iraqi Portraits* serve as a corrective, giving voice to the former inmates of Abu Ghraib Prison. In contrast to the anonymous figures in the photographs—hooded and caped, or naked in piles—Heyman presents us with individuals and allows them to speak directly to us.

In 2006, Heyman traveled to Amman, Jordan, and Istanbul, Turkey, with American lawyer Susan Burke to witness the testimonies of former prisoners held at Abu Ghraib, all of whom were released without charges.⁴ Burke was building a case in US federal court against private contractors who provided interrogation and translation services, and were involved in the torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib and other military prisons.⁵ Heyman accompanied her team on five trips between 2006 and 2008, meeting with forty former detainees of Abu Ghraib's notorious "hard site," and later with witnesses to the Blackwater / Nisour Square shootings that left seventeen Iraqi civilians dead and twenty injured.

The detainees met with lawyers, translators, note takers, and Heyman in hotel rooms. While lawyers

collected statements for a class action lawsuit, Heyman sketched the likenesses of the witnesses. He was immediately moved by the power of each detainee's words. Recognizing the inability of portraiture to contain the specificity of the testimonies, he began transcribing the victim's words directly onto his images. In his experience, while listening to the testimony "the room fills up with the thread of words coming out of the person's mouth. The words become a physical thing and weigh people in the room down. So, I wanted the words to feel like an imprisonment, like a cage surrounding a person. At other times I wanted the words to feel like a stream pouring out of a person."⁶

Heyman's portraits capture the humanity of these innocent Iraqis. We meet individuals: farmers, doctors, shopkeepers, teachers, taxi drivers, husbands and fathers who fear for their families. They pose naturally, dressed as they were at the time of the interviews, most in western-style clothing, a few in *keffiyeh* and *thwab* (the traditional Middle Eastern headdress and robe). The texts surrounding the portraits are heartbreaking. They detail the trauma, overwhelming fear, and humiliation that detainees experienced at the hands of Americans. They document the changing attitudes of some Iraqis towards Americans, who they first viewed as liberators and later as occupiers. They tell of the horror of being dragged from one's bed in the middle of the night. And, they make specific and personal the litany of abuses that have come to be associated with Abu Ghraib Prison: rape, threats of rape, and other forms of sexual assault; being forced to watch family members being tortured and abused; being hung by their arms for days until the pain from their dislocated shoulders made them lose consciousness;

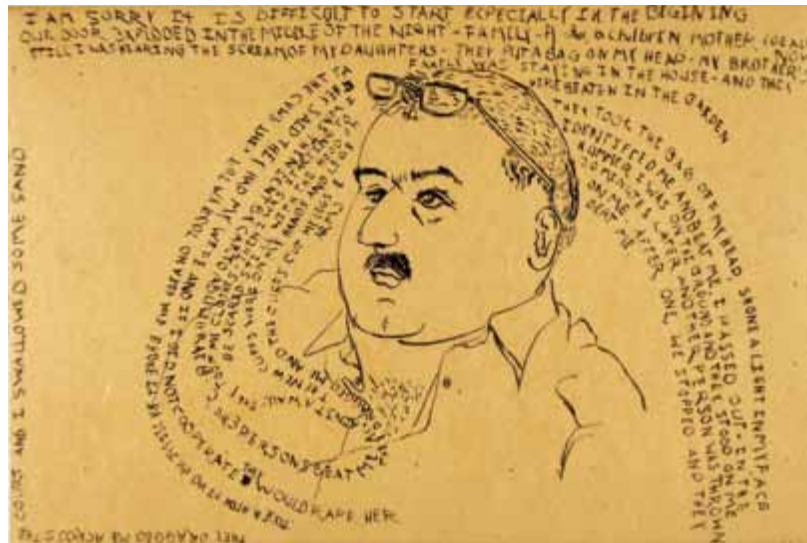


I sit in this hotel room and draw the face of an Iraqi who is telling the most humiliating and degrading story of his life.

I try to disappear. I draw, first a small sketch on a scrap of paper, and then a copper plate using a stylus.... As I listen and draw, I am also inscribing the words I hear into the copper, backwards.

I have to write very quickly, so that I do not lose the thread of the story.

I need to evaluate what I hear—is this the part I will transcribe, is it a story that condenses the whole experience, or through it will a viewer understand what this is about? So it is a game of waiting and listening. I also have to judge how long the interview will go on to leave enough space for an upcoming story.... I have done very little editing, hopefully it will retain the freshness of the interview.¹



I am Sorry It is Difficult to Start... from the Istanbul Portfolio, 2006. Drypoint and chine collé, 22" x 15 1/4". Lent by the artist, courtesy of Cade Tompkins Projects.

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Detail from *First Untitled War Series*, 2004. Gouache and ink on Mylar, 64" x 80". Lent by the artist, courtesy of Cade Tompkins Projects.

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It is this juxtaposition of portrait and testimony that makes Heyman's images so powerful and disturbing. The victims are no longer anonymous or the actions abstract; we are presented instead with individuals with detailed knowledge of facts, and we are compelled to confront the brutalities of Abu Ghraib on a personal level.

During his first trip Heyman began by making drypoints, and as the plates were quickly completed in the flurry of interviews, he moved to watercolor and then gouache. His style is painterly and expressive. Flesh tones are rendered in colorful layers of rose, ochre, turquoise, grey, and white, and testimonies, painted in various colors, create patterns that snake around the speaker. These lively depictions draw viewers in. Then, as one begins to read, the gravity of the images takes hold. References to [Private Charles] Graner — the ringleader of the small group of military police who were convicted for their

*This man is so sad . . . I want to explain to him that Americans are good people and that what happened was a mistake, that somehow we as a nation didn't mean it. I want to say that all Americans would be ashamed if they knew what our country did to people like him. But in the back of my head I do not believe it. Americans really don't care about the Iraqi victims of this war. Not really, or maybe not enough.*²

Pairs of feet —“boots on the ground”—line the bottom of the composition, some missing one leg.

A large depiction of a crumbling house of cards sits at the center of the work and makes the connection to Iraq specific. The cards are faced with images drawn from Assyrian reliefs, as well as a ziggurat, car bombs, and a text recording the civilian death count in Iraq. A burning mosque references the 2006 bombing of the Shiite Al Askari Mosque in Samarra. Blamed on Al-Qaeda, the bombing destroyed the mosque's golden dome and triggered sectarian violence that led to the death of as many as 1000 people over the next few days.

The final, key element is a series of images of eagles. A symbol of imperialism since the time of the Romans and today the official emblem of the United States, they perch on limbs or fly with broken (clipped) wings. The eagle motif that drives home the message of the work replicates the Great Seal of the United States, used to authenticate official documents and Presidential papers. In the familiar coat of arms, the eagle's wings rise upward in flight. One talon clutches an olive branch and the other thirteen arrows, representing the power of peace and war (and the thirteen original colonies). In Heyman's version the eagle is grasped at the neck in a potential strangle hold and the wings are flaccid—the eagle no longer flies. Most unsettling are the eagle's malformed genitalia: multiple breasts and a misshapen penis. Heyman has redefined the traditional symbol of female fecundity (multiple breasts), combining it with a malformed penis to create a representation of genetic deformity. The symbolism of the motif and message of the work unite to address the systemic deformation and decline of American democracy that Heyman sees reflected in the US actions in Iraq.



Detail from *When Photographers are Blinded, Eagles' Wings are Clipped*, 2010.

Heyman's works have added substantially to the conversation surrounding the War in Iraq. Through a traveling exhibition of his Iraqi images entitled *Bearing Witness* and the acquisition of his prints and drawings by collecting institutions, he has documented and distributed the voices of the victims, assuring that they will be heard and remembered.

Jo-Ann Conklin

Director, David Winton Bell Gallery

- 1 Heyman website. <http://www.danielheyman.com/press.htm>
- 2 Heyman online journal, 2/12/2006. http://www.danielheyman.com/pr_journal_031206.htm
- 3 Heyman website. http://www.danielheyman.com/projects_works_iraq.htm
- 4 According to Seymour Hersh, the Taguba Report found that "more than sixty percent of the civilian inmates at Abu Ghraib were deemed not to be a threat to society, which should have enabled them to be released." The report was the result of an official military inquiry into the Army's prison system. Not meant for public release, it was obtained by Hersh and formed the basis of his breaking article in *The New Yorker*, "Torture at Abu Ghraib," May 10, 2004.
- 5 The companies—CACI International Incorporated and L-3 Communications (formerly Titan)—were charged with torture, war crimes, crimes against humanity, sexual assault, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The lawsuit worked its way to the Supreme Court, which in July 2011 rejected the plaintiffs petition to hear the case, thereby ending the case.
- 6 John Feffer, *Interview with Daniel Heyman*, 10/17/2008. http://www.fpfif.org/articles/interview_with_daniel_heyman
- 7 Bartlett, *Detainee Project*. <http://www.detaineeproject.org/#/Detainee%20Portraits/Chris%20Bartlett/1>
- 8 Heyman in Peter Brook, *Prison Photography* blog, 4/23/2011. <http://prisonphotography.org/2011/04/23/watercolours-are-vital-accessories-to-commentary-on-infamous-abu-ghraib-photos/>
- 9 Heyman, in Cade Tompkins, unpublished essay, March 2001.

When Photographers are Blinded, Eagles' Wings are Clipped, 2010. Etching on plywood, 10'6" x 15'. Installed at Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University. Lent by the artist, courtesy of Cade Tompkins Projects.

DANIEL HEYMAN

Painter and printmaker Daniel Heyman lives in Philadelphia and teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design and Princeton University. He received an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania and an undergraduate degree from Dartmouth College. An exhibition of his Iraqi War images entitled *Bearing Witness* traveled throughout the states between 2010 and 2012, and his work has been exhibited in major institutions including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Princeton University Museum of Art, and New York Public Library. Heyman is the recipient of grants from the Guggenheim and PEW Foundations, and has held residencies at the Yaddow Colony and the MacDowell Colony. His work is in the collections of Yale University Art Gallery and Beinecke Library, Yale University; Baltimore Museum of Art; Hood Museum of Art and Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College; Davidson Art Center, Wesleyan University; Davis Art Museum, Wellesley College; Getty Research Institute; Library of Congress; Mead Art Museum, Amherst College; New York Public Library; Portland Museum of Art; Princeton University Art Museum; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, among others.



Ali Came Back in the Shop, from the *Blackwater Portfolio*, 2007. Multi-plate drypoint print on cotton paper, 30" x 22". Courtesy the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects.

I'm not a lawyer. But I've learned this much: the Iraqis I interviewed, released by the American military after many months or years of detention, were never formally accused of a crime, brought to trial or given legal representation. When they left Abu Ghraib, many were given a \$20 bill and dropped off in the middle of the night in a random Baghdad neighborhood—this was called “the happy bus.”³

COVER IMAGE *There were Three Interrogators*, from the *Istanbul Accordion Book: Do You Remember This Night?* 2007. Gouache, watercolor, sumi ink, and pencil, 34" long. Lent by the artist, courtesy of Cade Tompkins Projects.

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