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THE PHOENIX

At Brown, torture in watercolor



There Were Three Interrogators There, watercolor on paper, detail from book
Image Courtesy of the Artist and Cade Tompkins Projects

By PHILIP EIL | April 3, 2013

Stroll down College Street from Brown University during the next few weeks and you'll find Providence's iconic spires and skyscrapers slightly obscured by a banner hanging from a streetlight outside Brown's List Art Building.

The banner reads "DANIEL HEYMAN, David Winton Bell Gallery" and features a watercolor portrait of a man with his eyes closed. On the corresponding painting hanging in List's lobby, the man's head and shoulders are surrounded by hastily scrawled text.

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"THEY TOOK ME TO ABU GHRAIB," one section reads. "FIRST THEY GOT ME NAKED AND CHAINED ME TO THE CELL. I WAS TIED IN THIS WAY, FOR 6 MONTHS. IT WAS WINTER AND COLD AND THEY PUT A FAN ON AND SPRAYED ME WITH WATER. WHEN THEY CAME TO INTERROGATE ME THEY BROUGHT THE DOGS. SOMETIMES I WAS CHAINED ON THE GROUND. EVEN WHEN I HAD MY MEAL, MY HANDS WERE CUFFED IN FRONT."

"AFTER EACH INTERROGATION," the narrative continues later, "THEY CARRIED ME BACK BECAUSE I COULD NOT WALKED [sic]. THEY THREW ME PASSED OUT IN MY ROOM."

On the bottom corner of the page: "RELEASED MAY 2006. 30 MONTHS. THEY GAVE ME 20 DOLLARS."

The man is among the 50 Iraqis whom Heyman — a Guggenheim Fellow and critic in RISD's printmaking department — heard testify before human rights attorneys in Jordan and Turkey between 2005 and 2008. The interviews were for a lawsuit against American contractors hired to interrogate Iraqis. As the men described their ordeals, Heyman painted their portraits and wrote excerpts from their testimony in swirls of words beside the images.

These portraits — included in the exhibit "I am Sorry It is Difficult to Start" at List until May 26 — serve as a sort of companion piece to the recent "Costs of War" report out of Brown's Watson Institute for International Studies: a by-the-numbers compendium of the blood and treasure expended in the Iraq War.

The costs on display in Heyman's work are less quantifiable, but no less shattering. Visitors who enter the building are met by the artist's imposing, etching-on-plywood mural, "When The Photographers are Blinded, Eagles' Wings are Clipped," which Heyman created when he returned stateside. It features maimed and contorted bodies; a blindfolded photographer taking aim at his next shot; and eagles with deformed genitalia clutching rifles in their talons.

I caught up with Heyman over the phone from Pennsylvania, where he had just attended a symposium on the Iraq War at Haverford College. The interview has been edited and condensed.

CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE MAN IN THE EXHIBITION POSTER? I was never given any notes or anything about anybody or told much, but he was a guy that I was told had a very arduous history of being tortured. "Expect a lot," [they said.] So when I unfolded my book that morning — I was working on an accordion book — I opened it up to twice the amount of pages that I usually did. So I started painting him and I started taking notes. And he starts talking about his interrogation. When he started to tell us, he broke down and started to cry and left the room. We had no idea where he was; he didn't come back to the hotel for about five hours. When he came back he agreed to continue his testimony and I started a new painting. That's the painting in the poster. He never really looked up during that entire interview.

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WHAT WAS THE EFFECT OF SITTING IN ON THOSE 50 INTERVIEWS? Extremely sad. It made me very, very angry. Disbelief, depression. And also in a very weird way, [it was] extremely uplifting being able to be a listener for some people that have had a terrible thing

happen to them. Part of what's happened to them is that they've been silenced violently. Being a listener for that person is a very positive thing. [Witnesses] would tell us over and over again after they talked to us, "I cannot tell you how grateful I am that you listened to me."

I HAD TO CRANE MY NECK AND TWIST MY HEAD TO READ THE TEXT IN MANY OF THESE PAINTINGS. WAS THAT INTENTIONAL? Absolutely. I want you, the viewer, to participate in some way in this testimony. As an American society we paid for this war, propagated this war, we didn't protest this war (some people did, but not particularly effectively). In general, the war was extremely supported by Democrats as well as Republicans. And these results of the war should be known. And you don't just know things with your brain, you know them with your body. It was a struggle for these people to live through it and it was a struggle for them to tell me. And so it shouldn't be given to you in an easy way. It should be given to you in a way that makes you participate.

YOU MENTION PICASSO'S LEGENDARY MURAL "GUERNICA" ON YOUR WEBSITE, AND AFTER SEEING THE SCALE AND SUBJECT OF THIS PIECE, I WAS REMINDED OF THAT WORK. IS THIS A KIND OF AMERICAN "GUERNICA" FOR THE IRAQ WAR? I love "Guernica" and I adore Picasso and I always have. Picasso had this way of working on different aspects of his work in kind of bits and pieces. He would work out his ideas in smaller works and then from time to time, he would produce a summation picture, a kind of old-style masterpiece, something that [said]: "OK, now I've worked out a little bit about this new thing, Cubism, and now I'm going to make 'Les Demoiselles D'Avignon.' I'm gonna pull it all together." And I've always thought of that as a goal of my own: from, time to time, [to] sum it all up, bring it together and make a major statement. But "Guernica" is made by a Spaniard about his own country being attacked. And in that sense, I could never do that, unless I was working with 9/11 imagery or something. I'm a part of the country of the aggressor.

The Bell Gallery will host an opening reception for "I am Sorry It is Difficult to Start" on Friday, April 5 at 5:30 pm.