EXHIBITION PROSPECTUS:

Art From Guantánamo Bay
STAFF

Curator:
Erin Thompson, Associate Professor of Art Crime at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York

As America’s only full-time professor of art crime, Prof. Thompson studies the damage done to humanity’s shared heritage through looting, theft, and the deliberate destruction of art. She has discussed art crime topics in The New York Times, CNN, NPR, and the Freakonomics podcast, among other publications, and has been invited to lecture at MIT, Carnegie Mellon, and Columbia, as well as many other venues. Her book, Possession (Yale, 2016) explores the history of the private collecting of Greek and Roman antiquities; NPR said that it “realigns our own sensibilities about art” and named it a Best Book of 2016. Currently, she is researching the ways in which terrorist groups both sell and destroy art to support their genocidal campaigns, as well as the legalities and ethics of digital reproductions of cultural heritage.

Exhibition Manager:
Sam Monaco, Fine Art Consultant, Brooklyn

After a decade of living in New York City and working with dozens of visual artists and galleries, Sam Monaco has developed a wide-ranging mastery of fine art management. Receiving his training in digital photography at Sarah Lawrence College, his work has since been featured in the New York Times, Hyperallergic, and Interview Magazine, among other media outlets. Beyond handling the documentation of artwork, his one-man operation quickly expanded to include essential marketing expertise in web design, social media and mailing list management, and book/apparel design, as well as the myriad other crucial logistical skills involved in exhibiting and selling fine art. He has assisted in the production of more than 40 art exhibitions locally, domestically, and internationally, with clients ranging from emerging artists and galleries all the way up to contemporary masters and world-class establishments. Throughout his work, his passion lies in equipping artists working outside the mainstream contemporary art world with the tools to put their best foot forward and make their voice heard.
ARTISTS

ABDUALMALIK ABUD
Abdualmalik (Alrahabi) Abud, originally from Yemen, was detained at Guantánamo for almost 15 years before being released to Montenegro in 2016. He began creating art during his last years at Guantánamo. Whenever he thought of his wife and daughter, he would begin to draw, in order to forget that he was imprisoned. He frequently drew the complex architecture of Sana’a, Yemen.

MANSOOR ADAYFI
Mansoor Adayfi was born in a village in the mountains of Yemen. He was detained at Guantánamo for over 14 years, and now lives in Serbia. He taught himself English at Guantánamo and began to write a memoir, Don't Forget Us Here: Lost and Found at Guantanamo, which was published by Hachette in 2021. He has also published essays in the New York Times and narrated audio documentaries for the BBC and CBC: https://www.mansooradayfi.com/

MOATH AL-ALWI
Moath Al-Alwi, originally from Yemen, remains at Guantánamo, where he has been detained for over 15 years, despite being cleared for release. He paints as well as creating elaborate models of ships from scraps of material, including cardboard, old t-shirts, and parts of the plastic housing of shaving razors. His works are intended as presents for his lawyers and family.

SABRI AL QURASHI
Sabri Al Qurashi, a citizen of Yemen, spent 14 years at Guantánamo before being transferred to Kazakhstan. Although most of his works are peaceful landscapes, he also produced images with unusually direct depictions of life at Guantánamo and political allusions, such as a painting of the Statue of Liberty wearing detainee constraints.

MUHAMMAD ANSI
Muhammad Ansi, originally from Yemen, was detained at Guantánamo for almost 15 years before being released to Oman in January 2017. He learned to paint and draw at Guantánamo, working mainly in landscapes and still life. His art often features cities seen from far away, paths without beginning or end, and empty boats adrift at sea. These images are most often imagined – based on photographs and scenes glimpsed in movies or on television, rather than directly observed by him, such as a depiction of the Titanic, remembered from being shown the movie during an interrogation. Ansi sometimes refers to his family in his work, with his siblings symbolized as flowers and his mother mourning for him in the form of a disembodied eye.

AHMED RABBANI
Ahmed Rabbani, a citizen of Pakistan, remains at Guantánamo, where he has been detained for over 15 years, despite being cleared for release. His paintings of empty glasses and tables set for tea, but with empty chairs and plates, can be read both as memories of his absent family and as references to his hunger strikes, undertaken to protest conditions for prisoners.
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Installation views and selected press

Installation at the Baron and Ellin Gordon Art Galleries, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, 2022.
Photo Courtesy of Old Dominion University.
Installation at the Baron and Ellin Gordon Art Galleries, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, 2022. Photo Courtesy of Old Dominion University.
Installation at the Baron and Ellin Gordon Art Galleries, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, 2022. Photo Courtesy of Old Dominion University.
Art created by Guantánamo Bay detainees to be shown in new ODU exhibition

By SALEEN MARTIN
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | JAN 27, 2022 AT 5:29 PM

Ahmed Rabbani, Untitled (Grape Arbor), 2016, Acrylic on paper, 12 x 18 inches. (Courtesy of Old Dominion University)
A prayer cap.

Prayer beads.

A sponge.

Cardboard.

For the average person, these items are easy to come by.

That wasn’t always the case for Moath al-Alwi, a Yemeni citizen and prisoner at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp at the U.S. naval base in Cuba. He had been captured near the Afghanistan border in December 2001, a few months after 9/11, and arrested but never charged with a crime. He was suspected of working for al-Qaida.

While imprisoned, al-Alwi and other detainees sang, and some taught themselves how to draw, paint and build furniture. Al-Alwi used prayer caps, cardboard and acrylic paint to create intricate miniature ships; some of the materials were traded among prisoners, said Cullen Strawn, Old Dominion University’s
executive director for the arts.

The work of al-Alwi and five others is part of “Art from Guantánamo Bay,” a show at the university’s Baron and Ellin Gordon Art Galleries on view through May 7. The show includes 101 pieces from al-Alwi and Ahmed Rabbani, who are current detainees, as well as former ones.

Work from Mansoor Adayfi is also on display. He was detained for 14 years and released in 2016. He wrote a 2021 memoir “Don’t Forget Us Here” about his experience, including torture. Adayfi participated in the university’s October literary festival and Strawn was able to talk to him about art and life after his release.

In January 2018, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to keep the prison camp open indefinitely. Three years later, President Joe Biden said closing the prison camp was his goal.

Jan. 11 was the 20th anniversary of the opening of the facility.

Some of the artwork was released to the detainees’ attorneys, but not before the pieces were combed for hidden messages. Cleared
items were marked with an “Approved by US Forces” stamp.

In a sense, the stamp ruins the art, Strawn said, but it’s also part of the story.

“Some works have multiple stamps of approval on it, so if it’s a two-dimensional work, like a painting or a drawing, they might stamp it on the back and the ink might bleed through to the front.”

Strawn said materials were more accessible at one point — **around 2012 in Camp VI**, the maximum-security detention facility at Guantánamo. He called it a “golden era” because detainees could congregate, get a few more materials for their work, eat better food and have calls with their families back home.

“Good cardboard and other materials became their currency,” he said. “Moath might sell a chair or a shelf that he made to someone for a certain amount of cardboard.”

Also on display are handwritten copies of “Yemen Milk & Honey Farms Limited: A Self-Sustained And Self-Sufficient Project,” a business plan created by five Yemeni detainees. The copies are inside the university’s MagicBox, an interactive display.
with a touchscreen that visitors can use to read it. Saifullah “Shasha” Paracha, a Pakistani businessman and detainee, taught fellow prisoners English and business and encouraged them to write the report. The detainees are not allowed to return to Yemen so they haven’t been able to start the project, Strawn said.

Music from the detainees’ countries, including Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Pakistan and Tajikistan, also plays throughout the galleries.

“Music adds sensory depth to the exhibition and offers a window into detainees’ aesthetics and humanity,” Strawn said.

Strawn wanted to bring the show to ODU after finding out about the artwork a few years ago. They were on display at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. He reached out to art crime professor Erin Thompson in 2017, visited, and asked if they could work together and expand it into a traveling exhibition. He also worked with attorney Beth Jacob, who represents al-Alwi. Al-Alwi and four other men were approved for release by a government review panel this month. The New York Times reported that their release will likely take some time because the Biden administration has to find nations
willing to take them.

Strawn thought the show would be a good fit for Old Dominion because it has multiple colleges, departments and programs. In addition, part of the galleries’ mission is to show contemporary art, including self-taught artists.

He said art creates a “rich discussion” around these topics.

“Art from Guantánamo Bay” offers a glimpse into the fears and hopes of the detainees as they waited to rejoin the outside world, Strawn said.

Muhammad Ansi painted a piece in 2016 that was inspired by the sea. Originally from Yemen, he was detained for nearly 15 years before being released in January 2017. ANSI learned to paint and draw while at Guantánamo. His painting, “Hands Holding
Flowers through Bars,” speaks to endurance, physical and mental crises, and hope, Strawn said.

The men were held near the sea but their cages were covered by tarps, Strawn said. The tarps were removed for safety reasons in 2016 as Hurricane Matthew threatened Cuba. The detainees finally saw the ocean.

Art became a way for the men to temporarily forget the torture and incarceration, and discover ways to express themselves creatively.

Al-Alwi used soap as glue. He’d make chairs, tables and bookshelves and adhered them to the wall, Strawn said. He believes viewers will be impressed by the artwork, particularly al-Alwi’s ships.

“When you walk up to them, they’re just so
magnificent,” Strawn said. “When you think of the materials that they had access to in order to make that, it’s very evident how inventive he is.”

A design for one of his ships was inspired by an eagle he saw flying as he looked out of a window.

“That became such an important symbol of freedom to him,” Strawn said. “In a lot of Muslim, Islamic cultures or societies, one is not really supposed to represent a living being, which is why you don’t see depictions of Allah like you see depictions of Jesus. This eagle was so important to him as a symbol of freedom
that he negotiated that with himself and included the wings. That personal negotiation of religion is very interesting.”

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If you go

When: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday through May 7; reception at 6 p.m. Jan. 27

Where: Baron and Ellin Gordon Art Galleries, 4509 Monarch Way, Norfolk

Cost: Free

Details:
tinyurl.com/GordonArtGalleries,
artfromguantanamo.com,
gordongalleries@odu.edu or 757-683-6271

Topics: Moath al-Alwi Guantánamo Bay Cullen Strawn Old Dominion University Art from Guantánamo Bay Baron and Ellin Gordon Art Galleries Ahmed Rabbani Muhammad Ansi Abdulmalik Alrahabi Abud Sabri Al Qurashi The Milk and Honey Farms Feasibility Report Erin Thompson Hands Holding Flowers through Bars Don't Forget Us Here Saifullah
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.
“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.

With one exception, the detainees represented in the show were allowed to enroll in art classes, where they used National Geographic and other approved magazines for material. (The exception is Ammar al-Baluchi, a high-value detainee and nephew to Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, who is charged with aiding the 9/11 attackers; he served as the basis for the character tortured on a C.I.A. black site in “Zero Dark Thirty.” He painted “Vertigo at Guantánamo,” a cone of swirling, colored dots, to help his lawyers understand the symptoms he experiences as a result of a brain injury that he suffered during interrogation.) The source material explains the detainees’ surprising depiction of American scenes that they have never laid eyes on: picture-postcard landmarks like the Statue of Liberty and the Golden Gate Bridge that might be seen anywhere in the world, but also subtler motifs, like the cacti and
desert shrubs of the Southwest. There is an uncanny familiarity, too, in the style of many of the works—that particular aesthetic shared by art students who are growing more comfortable with their materials, learning how to shade and crosshatch, how to use line and color, how to show the way that light bounces off the curve of a glass in a still-life.

The work in the show came to Thompson through the detainees’ lawyers, who have held onto them for safekeeping as their clients waited for release. It is fortunate that they did. A few weeks ago, the government, apparently reminded of the existence of the detainees’ art by press coverage of the show, declared it government property and therefore subject to destruction, a policy that Thompson, in a *Times* Op-Ed, denounced as petty and cruel.

“I didn’t want to manipulate their work, so I kept asking them through their lawyers, ‘What do you want from displaying your art?’ ” she told me. “And they all kept telling me, ‘We want people to look at our art and recognize that we’re human beings.’ ” It is confounding to try to fathom the lives that these detainees have had, the conditions that they have endured in our name while hidden from our view. Is that fathoming more or less difficult while looking at the pictures that they have made of the ocean, of buildings, of trees and flowers and the moon, ordinary subjects rendered extraordinary by the circumstance of their creation that have, against the odds, washed up on the shore of our city like messages in a bottle? I don’t know, but the sense that I had, at “Ode to the Sea,” was of real contact being made. Art is created for every reason under the sun, but surely the most basic, the most elemental reason of all, is to mark the fact of one’s own existence in the world, to send a sign of it out like a flare so that others might see.

My favorite pieces in “Ode to the Sea” are not paintings but sculptures: model ships made from scavenged materials—trash, essentially—by Moath al-Alwi, who is still in detention. (It seems that his latest project, still in progress, has been confiscated as a result of the government’s new policy.) They are fanciful treasures of ingenuity and imagination, the work of countless careful hours. Al-Alwi made his ships’ sails from old T-shirts and their wheels from bottle caps; their rigging comes from the nets that line Guantánamo-issued prayer caps. On the basis of a picture, he constructed a Venetian gondola with painted sponges for seats and lanterns whose glass is the plastic cover of a shaving razor. There is something magical about these ships, built in captivity, which have now improbably come to dock on Tenth Avenue. Their prows are all graced with cardboard eagles’ wings, like the ones on Hermes’ sandals, speeding them ahead on their unfinished journeys.

*Alexandra Schwartz is a staff writer at The New Yorker.*

*Read more »*
Art from behind the walls of Guantanamo

A 2016 view of the Statue of Liberty by Guantanamo Bay detainee Muhammad Ansi.

"Ode to the Sea"

On Display in New York: art from "Beyond The Walls" of a prison -- which in the eyes of critics, makes it art that's beyond the pale. Tony Dokoupil takes a look at the art ... and the controversy:

If you didn't know better, "Ode to the Sea" at New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice might look like a rather ordinary art exhibit. Even co-curator Erin Thompson will admit, the Metropolitan Museum it is not.

The gallery is a hallway. "A glorified hallway," she laughed, "that has 36 pieces by eight individuals."

An exhibition of art by Guantanamo detainees at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.
But take a closer look at the signatures, and you'll see these aren't ordinary artists.

"242" is the prisoner number for Khalid Qasim, a suspected fighter for al Qaeda, held at the military prison in Guantanamo Bay for more than 15 years, and counting.

Dokoupil asked, "At what point did you realize that this could be something significant?"

"It was really when I saw the art," Thompson replied. "Because I found it so beautiful and so confusing. Why are people in these circumstances painting flowers and beaches and these very calm scenes?"

All 36 pieces on display here, including landscapes, tableaux and a few sculptures, were made by detainees inside Guantanamo.

One piece of art, a model of a ship, was made by a man who is still detained at Guantanamo.

"He makes it essentially out of trash -- bits of cardboard that the guards give to him," Thompson said. "The sails are T-shirt pieces, stiffened with glue."

Correspondent Ton Dokoupil, with co-curator Erin Thompson, examines Moath al-Alwi's model ship, "Giant."

Al and Maureen Santora lost their son, Christopher, a firefighter, in the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. They believe this art has no place being shown here.
"To have a public university sponsor this, I think is absolutely outrageous and reprehensible," said Maureen. "We are now giving them a forum which they should not have. They should have no voice, because they snuffed out the voices of almost 3,000 people on September 11."

But whatever your opinion on the decision to display this art, the defining image of the exhibit may surprise you, because it represents something these prisoners aren't ordinarily allowed to see: water.

"The prison is only a few yards away from the sea, but they can't look at it," said Thompson. "There are tarps covering all of the fences. Only once, when a hurricane was approaching, did the tarps come down. And they spent those days just looking at the ocean.

"And after the tarps went back up, they started to paint and sculpt ships, boats, ocean, just to recapture the feeling of peace from those days."

The Pentagon has allowed detainees this artistic freedom for years, but in apparent response to the debate over this exhibit, it says the release of new artwork from Guantanamo has been suspended, and that all existing Guantanamo-made art remains the property of the U.S. government.

Of the eight artists with work in the exhibit, four were freed in recent years, but four others are among the 41 men (down from a high of 775) who remain at Guantanamo Bay -- men like Ammar al-Baluchi, charged with helping arrange the 9/11 attacks.

His painting titled "Vertigo at Guantanamo," a swirl of color depicts his experience of the brain injury he claims he suffered when he underwent so-called "enhanced interrogation" (like waterboarding) by the CIA.

Thompson said, to her, it was the most important work in the show. "It's the most-clear link we have to the mind of someone capable of terrorism," she said.

To judge by the lingering visitors, it's also one of the most popular artworks.

"It's like trying to describe something that no one can understand, especially not in my world," said one student, Xander.

But even with al-Baluchi (who has never formally plead guilty), the link between detainees and terrorism is hazy. Although none has been convicted, none has been declared innocent, either.
"As an advocate who's been working on this issue for years, that's really the question we want people to ask: who are these people at Guantanamo?"

said Aliya Hussain, a human rights advocate at the Center for Constitutional Rights, which has worked with two of the released detainee artists.

Neither artist attended the exhibit, and none ever will, because released detainees are barred from traveling to the U.S.

But Hussain believes they do have the freedom to display their work, even sell it ... a notion that doesn't sit well with Maureen Santora: "If it's being offered for sale, there is going to be somebody in this world who is going to buy this. It should not be offered, and it should belong to the United States government."

Dokoupil asked one visitor to the exhibition, Phyllis Rodriguez, "Would you hang one of these pieces in your house?"

"Oh, sure," she replied. "They're done under circumstances that are very dehumanizing, and yet the human spirit comes up."

Rodriguez is also mourning her son, Greg, who died on 9/11. But she says all this art by men suspected of killing him leaves her feeling re-assured. "To me, they give hope, because we all have these things in common," she said.

**For more info:**

"Ode to the Sea" exhibition, President's Gallery, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York City (through January 26)
Catalogue: Art From Guantanamo (pdf)
Aliya Hana Hussain, Center for Constitutional Rights
I. Introduction Part 1: 
Making Art at Guantánamo

How and why was art made by detainees? Drawing exercises (color studies, still lives of fruit, and shading studies of vessels) illustrate how artwork was made in an official art class, taught by military authorities. Other works serve as examples of the limitations and rules, like the lack of art supplies and the requirement to use soft, non-toxic materials. The artists’ limited subject-matter and dependence on their own memories and imagination is introduced with drawings of the interior of a cell, of an artist’s own foot, and paired renderings by different artists of an Arabic coffee pot brought in by an instructor.
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Studies of Objects), 2016
Graphite on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[A69]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
*Untitled (Study of Art Supplies)*, 2016
Graphite on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[A72]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

*Untitled (Shore with Tree in Foreground)*, 2015
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[A75]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Study of Art Supplies), 2016
Graphite on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[A217]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Empty Vase Against Cloth in Greens), 2016
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 9 ¾ inches
[A257]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Still Life of Apples and Grapes in a Glass Bowl), 2016
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
8 ½ x 11 inches
[A271]
SABRI AL QURASHI

*Untitled (Coffee Pots on a Fire)*, 2010

Oil pastel on paper (framed)

9 x 12 inches

[L77]
SABRI AL QURASHI

Untitled (Study of Fruits), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L91]
SABRI AL QURASHI

Untitled (Study of Objects with a Vase of Flowers), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[L94]
SABRI AL QURASHI
*Untitled (Palms on a Shore)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L102]
II. Introduction Part 2:  

*Leaving Guantánamo*

How did these artworks end up in this exhibit? The reverse of several works are shown to demonstrate the system of clearance by the military authorities, with stamps signifying that the works have been scrutinized and cleared for release to lawyers or family members. A painting of a wall and a series of innocuous flower paintings allow for discussion of the rules – which works wouldn’t have been cleared for release? Since suggestions of escape were disallowed, including ladders and walls, for a time, only the most abstract works were cleared. A model ship illustrates the source of most of the works in this exhibit – it is a gift to the detainee’s lawyer – as well as the scrutiny, since it was X-rayed before release.
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Walls with Ladder), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[A90]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Winged Heart in a Hand), 2016
Acrylic and graphite on paper (framed)
12 x 16 inches
[A128]
MOATH AL-ALWI

Untitled (Model Gondola), 2016

Mixed media (Cardboard, plastic, sponge, and acrylic paint)

12 x 20 x 5 inches

[A385]
ABDUALMALIK ABUD
Untitled (Flat-Roofed Building Complex), 2016
Photocopy on paper (framed)
[with "To Mr David from your client Abd Al Malik" written in ballpoint pen on verso]
8 ½ x 11 inches
[H16]
SABRI AL QURASHI

Untitled (Vase of Flowers), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches

[L82]
III. Longing For Nature

When detainees first began to make art, they favored images of nature, and also asked lawyers to bring them photographs of nature scenes, to relieve the dusty barrenness of the prison camp. A section of peaceful landscapes and explorations of beauty, painted to open windows in windowless cells.
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Dark Landscape with Break in the Clouds), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
14 x 17 inches
[A40]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
*Untitled (Landscape with Trees and Palms)*, 2015
Acrylic on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[A56]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Desert Shore with Mountains), 2015
Acrylic on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[A159]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Lake with Snow-Covered Mountains in Background), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[A191]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Stream with Snow-Covered Mountains in Background), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[A192]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

*Untitled (Flowers in a Glass Vase)*, 2016
Watercolor on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[A208]
MOATH AL-ALWI

*Untitled (Bridge Over Stream)*, 2017

Mixed media sculpture (Cardboard, rope, acrylic paint)

11 x 12 x 1 ½ inches

[E10]
AHMED RABBANI
*Untitled (Grape Arbor)*, 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 18 inches
[180]
AHMED RABBANI
*Untitled (Vase with Cloth)*, 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 18 inches
[I106]
SABRI AL QURASHI

Untitled (Waterfall), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[L80]
SABRI AL QURASHI
*Untitled (Tree in a Clearing)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[L81]
IV. *Ode to the Sea*

Seascapes, and a discussion of the complex meaning of the sea to detainees, who live so close to it without being able to see it.
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Red Shore with Palms), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
8 x 12 inches

[A52]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Black Shore with Boat Drawn Up), 2016

Acrylic on paper (framed)

11 x 8 ½ inches

[A66]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

*Untitled (Shore with Stormy Waves and Cliff)*, 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches

[A78]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Three Sailboats and Palm-Fringed Shore), 2011
Watercolor on paper (framed)
8 ½ x 14 inches
[A157]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
*Untitled (Sunbathers), 2016*
Acrylic on paper (framed)
18 x 12 inches
[A360]
MOATH AL-ALWI

Untitled (Model Clipper Ship), 2015
Mixed media (Cardboard, rope, fabric, plastic, and acrylic paint)
24 x 24 x 6 inches
[A384]
MOATH AL-ALWI

*Untitled (GIANT)*, 2017

Mixed media (Cardboard, rope, fabric, plastic, and acrylic paint)

27 x 32 x 7 inches

[E9]
SABRI AL QURASHI
*Untitled (Figure Looking at a Sunset)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L76]
SABRI AL QURASHI

Untitled (Sails in Front of a Sunset), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L79]
SABRI AL QURASHI
*Untitled (Shore with Sails in Distance)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L86]
SABRI AL QURASHI

*Untitled (Ship in a Storm)*, 2010

Oil pastel on paper (framed)

9 x 12 inches

[L109]
SABRI AL QURASHI

*Untitled (Underwater Scene)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[L113]
SABRI AL QURASHI

Untitled (Wave), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L115]
SABRI AL QURASHI
*Untitled (Surf)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[L116]
MANSOOR ADAYFI

Untitled (Clouds Over Water), 2015
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[N3]
V. Memories and Visions

A selection of the sometimes subtle ways in which memories and visions of home and family appear in detainee artwork. There are symbolic portraits of missing family members as empty glasses, vacant seats, or uneaten fruit, produced by artists unwilling to have their emotions read and exploited by scrutinizing authorities. There are visions of mosques and desert landscapes. And there are cities the artists wish to visit, depicted as inaccessible.
AHMED RABBANI

*Untitled (Table Set for Tea)*, 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 16 inches
[A21]
AHMED RABBANI

*Untitled (Still Life of Glassware)*, 2015
Acrylic on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[A22]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Symbolic Portrait of Artist’s Mother and Siblings), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
17 x 12 inches
[A103]
MOATH AL-ALWI

Untitled (Interior with Fireplace), 2017

Mixed media sculpture (Cardboard, plastic, rope, acrylic paint)

11 x 12 x 1 ½ inches

[E21]
ABDUALMALIK ABUD

Untitled (Walled City), 2015
Colored pencil on paper (framed)
14 x 17 inches
[H13]
AHMED RABBANI

*Untitled (View Over Mosque Roof), 2016*

Acrylic on paper (framed)

17 x 12 ½ inches

[I92]
AHMED RABBANI

Untitled (Marketplace), 2016

Acrylic on paper (framed)

16 x 12 inches

[I124]
SABRI AL QURASHI

*Untitled (Dunes)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L100]
VI. *Abstractions and Experiments*

Artists rebelling against the limitations of the art supplies provided, to make works out of scraps of cardboard and other trash. Other works are in traditional materials, but with abstract patterns – sometimes accidentally, as when one artist, beginning a seascape, painted waves upon waves all up the canvas, forgetting what he had intended to paint in the delirium of what was then-untreated diabetes.
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Dark Landscape with Break in the Clouds), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
14 x 17 inches
[A40]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Field with Windmill), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
14 x 17 inches
[A45]
MUHammad ANSI

Untitled (Faceted Landscape), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches

[A182]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

*Untitled (Red and Yellow Waves)*, 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
15 x 11 inches
[A313]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Waves), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
18 x 24 inches
[A379]
AHMED RABBANI

Untitled (Concert Hall), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
14 x 17 inches
[I96]
SABRI AL QURASHI

Untitled (Landscape in Purples), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L84]
SABRI AL QURASHI

*Untitled (Snowy Peaks)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L89]
SABRI AL QURASHI
*Untitled (Seascape)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L99]
SABRI AL QURASHI

*Untitled (White Palm Tree), 2010*

Oil pastel on paper (framed)

12 x 9 inches

[L105]
VII. The American Dream

One of the main sources for imagery for the artists were the stacks of *National Geographic* magazines in the prison library; ironically, their work often seems to be reproducing the American dream of the wild west or the little house on the prairie.
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Monument Valley), 2016
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[A76]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Monument Valley), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
8 ½ x 14 inches
[A139]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Barns in Purple and Red), 2010
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[A142]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Two Small Houses in Yellow Landscape), 2011
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[A155]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Sunset Over Monument Valley), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
11 x 8 ½ inches
[A227]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

*Untitled (Monument Valley Landscape with Cacti)*, 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
14 x 17 inches
[A345]
ABDUALMALIK ABUD

Untitled (Sunset with Bridge), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 18 inches

[G2]
ABDUALMALIK ABUD

Untitled (Desert Landscape), 2015
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 18 inches

[G3]
ABDUALMALIK ABUD

*Untitled (Monument Valley)*, 2015

Acrylic on paper (framed)

12 x 18 inches

[H11]
SABRI AL QURASHI
*Untitled (Sunset with Lone Tree)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches

[L92]
SABRI AL QURASHI
*Untitled (Sunset with Rocky Landscape)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[L93]
SABRI AL QURASHI

*Untitled (Bent Trees)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches

[L95]
SABRI AL QURASHI
Untitled (Valley with Wildflowers), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches
[L96]
VIII. *Protest*

One artist was able to take with him, when he was released, a number of strikingly direct images of protest against the conditions at Guantánamo. Others have had to be more circumspect, cloaking their protest in metaphors and symbols or disguising it with cheery colors.
MUHAMMAD ANSI
*Untitled (Monument Valley), 2016*
Acrylic on paper (framed)
17 x 13 inches
[A34]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
*Untitled (Field with Figure)*, 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
14 x 17 inches
[A46]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Crying Eye), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 8 inches

[A85]
MUHAMMAD ANSI

*Untitled (Walls)*, 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches

[A90]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
Untitled (Candle and Heart), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
16 x 12 inches
[A123]
AHMED RABBANI
Untitled (Binoculars Pointing at the Moon), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
18 x 24 inches
[E8]
ABDUALMALIK ABUD
Untitled (Sunset with Bare Trees), 2015
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 18 inches
[H4]
AHMED RABBANI

Untitled (Rainstorm Over Mosque), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
12 x 16 inches
[I104]
SABRI AL QURASHI

Untitled (Flooded Mosque), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches
[L78]
MANSOOR ADAYFI

*Untitled (Bound Hearts)*, 2016
Watercolor and pen on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches

[N1]
MANSOOR ADAYFI

Untitled (Figure), 2016

Watercolor and marker on paper (framed)

11 x 8 inches

[N2]
MANSOOR ADAYFI

*Untitled (Divided Flower)*, 2016
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches

[N11]
IX. Conclusion:

The Future of Art from Guantánamo

These works show some of the visions for their own futures held by the artists – starting a dairy or a buffet restaurant, owning a car, or facing a dark, uncertain path. One was made after the artist was released from Guantánamo. The exhibit will conclude with a discussion of where each artist is now, whether released (four of the artists) or still detained without charge (two of the artists).
MUHAMMAD ANSI

Untitled (Black Landscape with Road and Punctuation), 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
17 x 12 inches
[A38]
MUHAMMAD ANSI
*Untitled (Forked Road)*, 2016
Acrylic on paper (framed)
11 x 17 inches
[A43]
AHMED RABBANI

Untitled (Courtyard), 2017
Acrylic on paper (framed)
21 ½ x 29 ¾ inches
[I144]
SABRI AL QURASHI

Untitled (Barred Window), 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
12 x 9 inches

[L87]
SABRI AL QURASHI

*Untitled (Watermelon)*, 2010
Oil pastel on paper (framed)
9 x 12 inches

[L114]
MANSOOR ADAYFI, ABDUALMALIK ABUD, SAEED, AND KHALID QASIM
Yemen Milk & Honey Farms Limited Feasibility Report 2013
Hand-lettered and hand-illustrated manuscript
8 ½ x 22 inches
[M2]
Installation at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, 2017
Installation at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, 2017
The American prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba — where men suspected of terrorism are for the most part being held indefinitely without trial — has long been a stain on this country’s human rights record. Now the military has stumbled needlessly into a controversy over, of all things, art.

The Pentagon allowed its nose to be knocked out of joint by a free exhibition in Manhattan: a display of 36 paintings, drawings and sculptures that eight Guantánamo prisoners produced in the last few years.

Since early October, these works have lined walls outside the office of the president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice. “Ode to the Sea,” they are collectively titled, and appropriately so, given that most of them have river and ocean themes. The exhibition is scheduled to continue deep into January.

Erin Thompson, a curator of the exhibition and a John Jay professor of art crime, said she had been contacted by a lawyer for one of the prisoners and asked if she wished to show the artwork. Her reaction, Ms. Thompson recalled was: “What are you talking about? There’s art from Guantánamo?”

Indeed there is. Art classes have been held there for at least eight years, if only to give prisoners something to do and perhaps reduce tensions with their jailers and among themselves. The paintings are unthreatening, having been vetted for hidden
messages and inflammatory political statements. Elaborate ship models made by a Yemeni man out of cardboard and glue-stiffened cloth were X-rayed to ensure they contained nothing untoward. Their sails are stamped, “Approved by U.S. Forces.”

Prisoners were permitted to give their works to their lawyers, sometimes as thank you gifts. But now the Pentagon says that, while the art instruction will continue, any new creations will go nowhere. They will stay at Guantánamo, a spokesman said, and “remain the property of the U.S. government” (even though some materials were supplied by detainees’ lawyers, not the military).

There has been no claim of a security breach or risk to Americans. The military, it would seem, is simply unsettled by the attention that the John Jay exhibition has drawn from news organizations. It may also be annoyed that some paintings are for sale — not by the college but by a few of the artists and their representatives. Of the eight men, only four are still detained, three of them without any formal charges having yet been brought; they are among 41 men still being held at Guantánamo. The other four artists have been cleared and released, and thus are free to do as they wish, including sell their work.

Ramzi Kassem, a law professor at the City University of New York who represents three detainees, said it isn’t “the art exhibit per se” that offends the Pentagon. “It’s that prisoners take control of their own narrative,” he said, describing the new policy as “a kneejerk ‘let’s stomp it out’ approach.”

An inevitable question is whether unseen art is, in fact, art. For Ms. Thompson, there’s another consideration. “We spend years trying to get inside their minds,” she said of the prisoners, adding that the art is one way for interrogators to gain possible
insights. And the viewing American public reasonably gets a peek behind the curtain that has long enveloped Guantánamo.

She added, “Why cut off the information?”

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A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 4, 2017, on Page A20 of the New York edition with the headline: Art, Freed From Guantánamo

READ 97 COMMENTS
The art of the Guantanamo Bay detainees

Nov 20, 2017 6:20 PM EDT

A new exhibit in New York shares art from an unlikely place: Guantanamo Bay Detention Center. Current and former detainees have created work that represent their experiences as prisoners -- even episodes of torture -- often using whatever nontraditional materials they can find. Special correspondent Arun Rath reports.

Read the Full Transcript

Judy Woodruff:

And finally tonight- a look at works of art from an unlikely source, the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

A new exhibit in New York hosts art made by current and former detainees.

Special correspondent Arun Rath has this story.

Arun Rath:

The artwork at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan reflects what is studied here. Galleries take on themes related to crime and the law, human rights and dissent, art that reflects justice and injustice.

The entrance is lined with work depicting 9/11 first-responders.

Upstairs, in another exhibit, a piece of art from a man who's on trial for his alleged role in supporting the attack. "Vertigo" by Ammar Al-Baluchi is not about 9/11. It reflects his torture at the hands of the CIA, which was documented in a Senate report.

Erin Thompson:

It's just a swirl of lines and dots, and he drew it to show his lawyers what happens when he experiences vertigo, when he can no longer see, which is the result of a traumatic brain injury he suffered during interrogation.

Arun Rath:

Erin Thompson is an art professor at John Jay, and she's studied the strange intersections of criminality and art, but art from Gitmo detainees was a surprise.
Erin Thompson:

One of the lawyers for detainees approached me and said, I want my clients’ art to be exhibited. I said, what do you mean? There’s art made at Guantanamo?

What hit me at first was how normal they seem. Shouldn’t their drawings be so much more angry? And it took me a long time to realize that they — that these artists want to show beauty.

Arun Rath:

There's art from 12 Gitmo detainees in the exhibit. Baluchi is the only one of them who's been charged with a crime.

The rest are ambiguous cases.

Ahmed Rabbani claims to be a victim of mistaken identity. He was tortured by the CIA, and his supporters claim his confessions of ties to al-Qaida were a product of that torture. He's spent years hunger-striking to protest in Guantanamo and has been subjected to force-feedings.

His painting, a scene of empty plates and glasses.

Erin Thompson:

To me, the show is of interest, no matter what side you fall on, no matter what you believe about these men. Is it that you want to see the humanity of them as victims, or do you want to understand better the enemy? You can do either by looking at these works.

Arun Rath:

The artwork had to pass through a security review to make sure there were no coded messages.

Security restrictions on Guantanamo also limit art-making material. To get creative, prisoners have to improvise.

Erin Thompson:

He created his own surfaces by picking up rocks and gravel from the surface of the exercise yard.

Arun Rath:

Two of the artists are now former detainees. Abdul Malik Al-Rahabi was in the first group of prisoners sent from Afghanistan to Guantanamo in 2002.
Abdul Malik Al-Rahabi:

I hope that people think about other people, because they give us bad reputation about us there, all of us. I don't know terrorists or criminal or — but we are human beings. We have feelings. And we have family. We have wife. We have daughters, all of us.

I hope people think about that. There is no difference between us.

Arun Rath:

A review board deemed him suitable for release in 2014, and he's been living in Montenegro since 2016. We spoke over Skype.

He asked that we not show his face. He doesn't want the stigma of Guantanamo to follow him into his new community.

Do you see your art right behind me?

I took him, virtually, on his first tour of the gallery where his art is on display. He is barred from visiting the United States. He showed me dozens of other paintings he still holds onto.

There is a common theme in the art from the seaside facility.

Abdul Malik Al-Rahabi:

I think about the sea. It was a big sea. And I imagine one day maybe the boat — boats will come. And I imagine my life in Guantanamo like I am in the sea, in the middle of the sea. One day, I will go out.

Arun Rath:

Moath Al-Alwi, a detainee from Yemen, has actually been building ships, these extraordinary miniatures made from cardboard, painted with stains made from coffee grounds, sails from old shirts, rigging from unraveled prayer caps.

Al-Alwi and al-Rahabi were friends inside the prison.

Have you seen the ship models before?

Abdul Malik Al-Rahabi:

Oh, this for Moath, yes. He's a good one. And I hope someday he will be released.

(LAUGHTER)
Al-Alwi has made another ship, apparently even more impressive, but it may be destroyed before anyone else gets to see it.

The base has now suspended all transfers of detainee art, pending further review. Detainees were informed that they could keep a limited number of pieces, and that excess art would be discarded.

The exhibit, Art from Guantanamo, will run through January.

For the PBS NewsHour, I’m Arun Rath in New York.

Judy Woodruff:

Remarkable story.
Art from Guantanamo Bay

by Jeff Maisey | Jan 19, 2022 | Art, Art News, Art Previews, Current Exhibits

Muhammad Ansi, Untitled (Hands Holding Flowers through Bars), 2016, acrylic on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches
By Betsy DiJulio

Six artists. Over 100 artworks. Fifteen years, give or take. The artists in this rare exhibition include both current detainees at Guantánamo Bay (Moath Al Alwi and Ahmed Rabbani) and former (Muhammad Ansari, Abdualmalik Alrahabi Abud, Sabri Al Qurashi, Mansoor Adayfi), none of whom were or have been charged with a crime. In the following Q & A, Cullen Strawn, ODU's Executive Director for the Arts, looks beyond the numbers to share why, in terms of both context and content, this collection of work from a distant island is richly relevant to citizens of Hampton Roads and beyond.

Betsy DiJulio: Why was this exhibition the right exhibition at the right time? That is, how does it dovetail with your Gallery's mission and why was this the right moment in which to share this work vs. any other work?

Cullen Strawn: I have worked toward the exhibition for five years and consider it an appropriate choice for an educational gallery. Within the University we collectively study most facets of human life such as sociology and criminal justice, and expressive culture through arts and humanities relates to all of it. Part of what the Baron and Ellin Gordon Art Galleries regularly present is self-taught or folk and traditional art. Our Art from Guantánamo Bay exhibition will open days after the 20th anniversary of Guantánamo opening, a time when the detention camp and its detainees likely will be discussed in the news and other forums with increased frequency.

BD: Let's take a look at the artistic dimensions of this exhibition including media, process, style, and training, e.g. To what materials do these artists have access? When, where, and how do they work? How would you characterize the range of styles? And what, if any, levels of formal training do they have?
CS: Detainees made art since arriving at Guantánamo with methods such as using their fingernails to draw on foam cups in which tea was served, and as far as we know, all “unofficial” art was discarded. In early 2009 after President Obama took office, the Joint Task Force Guantánamo announced a new art program to provide intellectual stimulation for detainees and to allow them to express creativity. At first they could make art only during the program and eventually were allowed to do so in their cells. There have always been strict rules regarding art supplies – detainees are given only a few types of soft, non-toxic materials like charcoal, acrylics, watercolors, and oil pastels, which could not be used to harm themselves or others. Restrictions on content have been less defined, and fluctuating over time. One former detainee reported that he was not allowed to draw or paint pieces with a political or ideological message, or that referenced camp security.

The range of work spans two- and three-dimensional pieces, with drawings, paintings, and sculpture. Some of it is very detail oriented while other pieces are more abstract. Detainees have received some instruction through the art program, and over time some such as Moath Al-Alwi who has been detained for over 19 years have continued practicing and making works such as ship models with increasing complexity from available materials including cardboard, t-shirts, prayer caps and beads, mops, and the plastic housing of shaving razors.

BD: In terms of content, will you share with us your insights into the range of subject matter represented in the show? I am curious about what common threads are woven through the work, if any, and whether the themes tend to be universal, personal, socio-political, or some of all? Additionally, are influences of other artists or artistic movements evident in the work?

CS: Drawing exercises have included color studies, still lives of fruit,
and shading studies of vessels. The artists’ limited access to subject matter and dependence on their own memories and imaginations are reflected in the interior of a cell, an artist’s own foot, and an Arabic coffeepot brought in by an instructor. Memories and visions of home appear in symbolic portraits of missing family members as empty glasses, vacant seats, or uneaten fruit. There are visions of mosques and desert landscapes, as well as cities the artists wish to visit, depicted as inaccessible. There are dreams of starting a dairy or buffet restaurant, owning a car, and visiting the sea, which surrounds them but also remains inaccessible.

Abdualmalik (Alrahabi) Abud was detained for almost 15 years, and when he thought of his wife and daughter he would draw the complex architecture of Sana’a, Yemen in order to forget that he was imprisoned. Sabri Al Qurashi spent 14 years at Guantánamo and created peaceful landscapes and depictions of detainee life, along with political allusions like the Statue of Liberty wearing detainee constraints. Ahmed Rabbani has been detained for over 17 years, and his paintings of empty glasses and tables set for tea but with empty chairs and plates can be read as memories of his absent family and as references to his hunger strikes, undertaken to protest detainee conditions. Overall the works are less about artistic movements or influential artists and more about their experiences, memories, and hopes.

**BD:** What role do you feel the act of art-making plays in the lives of these detainees? Is it a result of the human need to express or is there also present a layer of political activism?

**CS:** Collectively the art reflects the needs to remember, forget, love, express emotion, dream, hope, and seek justice.

**BD:** What else should visitors to the exhibition know about these men, their art, and their lives?

**CS:** People can learn more by reading Mansoor Adayfi’s new memoir
Don’t Forget Us Here: Lost and Found at Guantánamo along with Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s Guantánamo Diary, and view the film The Mauritanian about Slahi. Our innovative “MagicBox” is an interactive display case with a touchscreen allowing guests to explore multimedia content, and we use the device to show handwritten documents by Yemeni detainees in Arabic and English. Additionally people anywhere in the world can visit the exhibition to learn about the artists and their art via our telepresence robot, nicknamed “Gordon,” which can navigate the gallery, change height, and zoom in on art. Self-guided visits can be reserved weekly through ODUArtsTix.com. We will also announce public programming featuring former detainees on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and we encourage following @oduarts to receive updates.

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Art from Guantánamo Bay

January 21 through May 7

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odu.edu/gordongalleries, (757) 683-6271

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