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A MAGAZINE OF CRITICAL THINKING
AND IDEAS FOR CHANGE

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SCOPE OF SURVEILLANCE

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Timothy Erik Ström

Camp America

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Reputational Economy

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Australia's Torture Camps

Tim Robertson

Debi Cornwall,

Welcome to Camp America

Melissa Miles

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What makes Debi Cornwall's photographs compelling is not so much *what* they show as *how* they show it. *Welcome to Camp America* brings together three bodies of work on the US military base at Guantánamo Bay. Known by its airfield designation code GTMO, or 'Gitmo' for short, the base became notorious in 2002 when a facility was opened on-site for detaining and interrogating suspected terrorists and enemy combatants captured after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Over the last sixteen years, 780 men have been held at the centre. Today there are forty-one. Yet the name Guantánamo Bay still conjures images of orange jumpsuited, masked, shackled men being paraded behind the razor-wire fences of Camp X-Ray, reports of 'enhanced interrogation techniques', and the detainees' imprisonment for years without charge or criminal trial. These images linger in our memories and trouble Cornwall's photographs of the far more banal aspects of life on the base.

In 2014, when Cornwall arrived for the first of her three visits to Guantánamo Bay, one of her military escorts commented that Gitmo was the best post a soldier could have: 'there's so much fun to be had here!' A sports ground, bowling alley, golf driving range, Starbucks, McDonald's and seaside deckchairs help to provide a home away from home for the thousands of US military personnel, government civilians, contractors and their families who live and work at the base. The particular brand of fun and normalcy established at the base are the focus of Cornwall's series *Gitmo at Home*, *Gitmo at Play*, which together with her series *Gitmo on Sale* and *Beyond Gitmo* raises questions about what Gitmo has become.

Cornwall works in a style of photography known as conceptual documentary, characterised by an emphasis upon careful selection, repetition, categorisation and a cool, distanced aesthetic. Rather than submerging themselves in dramatic events, conceptual documentary photographers frame their subjects according to a pre-determined idea. Conceptual documentary's emphasis upon structure and rules finds an ideal match in Gitmo. Before visiting the base, Cornwall had to formally agree to abide by twelve pages of written regulations. Certain areas and subjects were strictly off-limits, including stretches of coastline, surveillance equipment, and Camp 7, where high-security detainees are held. The faces of detainees, military personnel and civilian employees could not be pictured. Teams of military personnel acted as ever-present chaperones, and all

photographs had to be checked and approved before Cornwall left the island. Those photographs that did not pass muster were deleted. The use of a medium-format film camera on Cornwall's third visit meant that she had to spend hours developing the film in her hotel bathroom under the gaze of military escorts.

Cornwall always endeavoured to follow the military's rules. Indeed, rules are the *modus operandi* of conceptual documentary—the power in its punch. The highly structured composition that characterises Cornwall's photographs of the base leisure and detention facilities reflects the order and routine that define the experiences of staff and detainees. Tedium seems to seep out of the concrete blocks, the ceiling panels, the children's playground, and the cartons of cigarettes stacked neatly on a supermarket shelf beneath a sign announcing 'head of line privileges' for uniformed military personnel. The quiet precision with which Cornwall photographed detainees' 'comfort items', carefully staged in a pristine unoccupied cell, reflects official narratives about the 'safe and humane' conditions at the camp. When shot in a comparable clinical fashion, the 'feeding chair' waiting for its next occupant with ankle, torso and wrist restraints at the ready, and the padded leather leg irons bolted to the ground in front of a stained white recliner in the 'compliant detainee' media room highlight how fear, brutality and injustice have become utterly normalised. By framing the disused and dilapidated Camp X-Ray squarely and front on, Cornwall questions the worn logic of this place. Throughout, the idyllic blue sky and sparkling Caribbean Sea provide an evocative backdrop in this site of unsettling contrasts.

For *Gitmo on Sale*, Cornwall isolated and photographed souvenirs that she bought in the Gitmo gift shop against a plain white ground. The cheapness and humour of the toddler's 'I love Guantanamo Bay' t-shirt, the camouflage beer holder, and the Fidel Castro bobblehead throw Cornwall's third series, *Beyond Gitmo*, into stark relief. Many of the former detainees who are the focus of these portraits were not permitted to return home upon their release, and were instead transferred to foreign countries. By photographing these men outdoors but not showing their faces, Cornwall mirrors Gitmo regulations and hints at the lasting legacy of imprisonment for these men. Captions identify the men by name, the place where they were photographed, their country of origin, their period of imprisonment and the outcome of any charges. While Cornwall's other two bodies of Gitmo photographs look at the human experience of Gitmo personnel and official claims of humane treatment, prevailing here is the ongoing denial of personhood experienced by detainees. **a**

VISUAL ESSAY

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Debi Cornwall,
**Welcome to Camp
America**

Melissa Miles

Debi Cornwall is an American conceptual documentary artist who returned to creative expression in 2014 after a twelve-year career as a wrongful-conviction lawyer. Much of her work deals with American power and identity in the post-9/11 era.

Melissa Miles is Professor of Art History and Theory at Monash University. Her research explores the interdisciplinary qualities of photography and its movement across the domains of art, law, science, politics and history.



Military Privileges (Kools)



Feeding Chair, Camp 5

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Smoke Break, Camp America



Camp X-Ray



Toddler Tee (\$7.99)

Left: Comfort Items, Camp 5



Left: Compliant Detainee Media Room, Camp 5



Beer Cozy (\$10)



Playground, Windward Side



On Windmill Beach



Home v. Guest (Null Score)



Fidel Bobblehead (\$20)



Mamdouh, Egyptian Australian (Egypt) Held: 2 years, 9 months, 1 day. Released: January 27, 2005. Charges: never filed



Djamel, Berber (Algeria) Held: 11 years, 11 months, 18 days. Cleared: October 9, 2008 & May 8, 2009. Released: December 4, 2013. Charges: never filed in the United States; acquitted and exonerated at trial in Algeria

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Debi Cornwall,
Welcome to Camp
America

Melissa Miles

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Exporting
Renewable Energy?

Natalie Ralph and
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