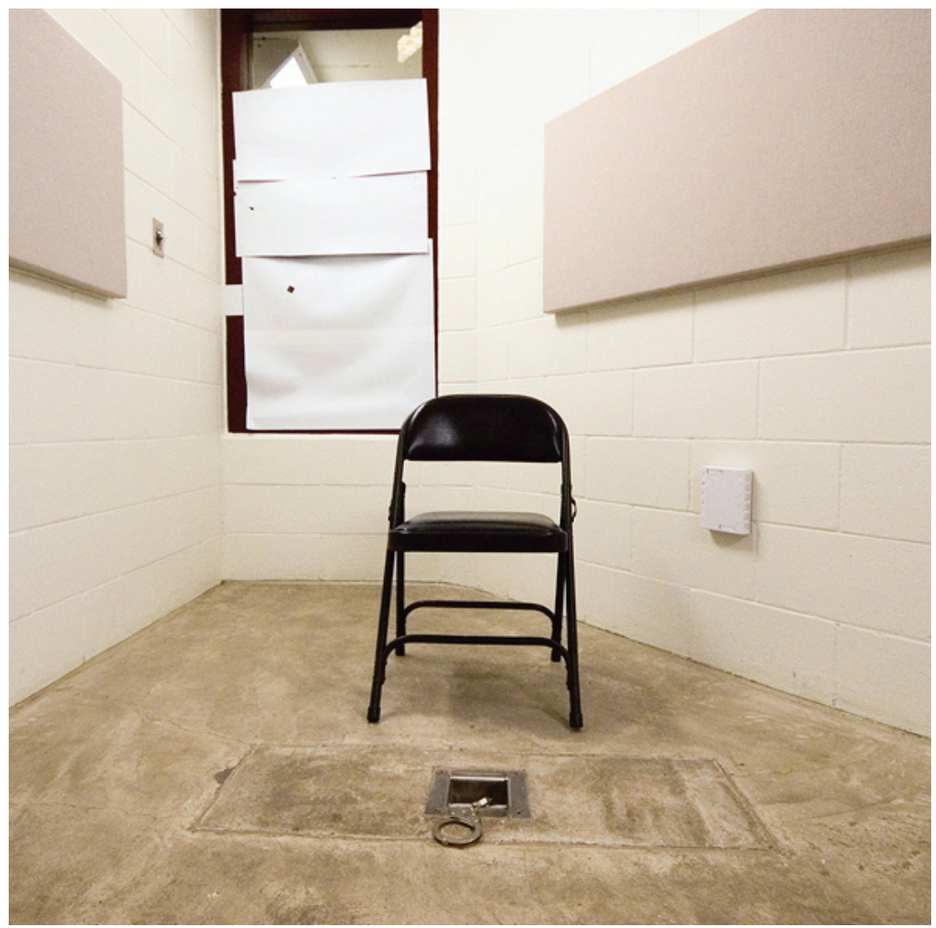
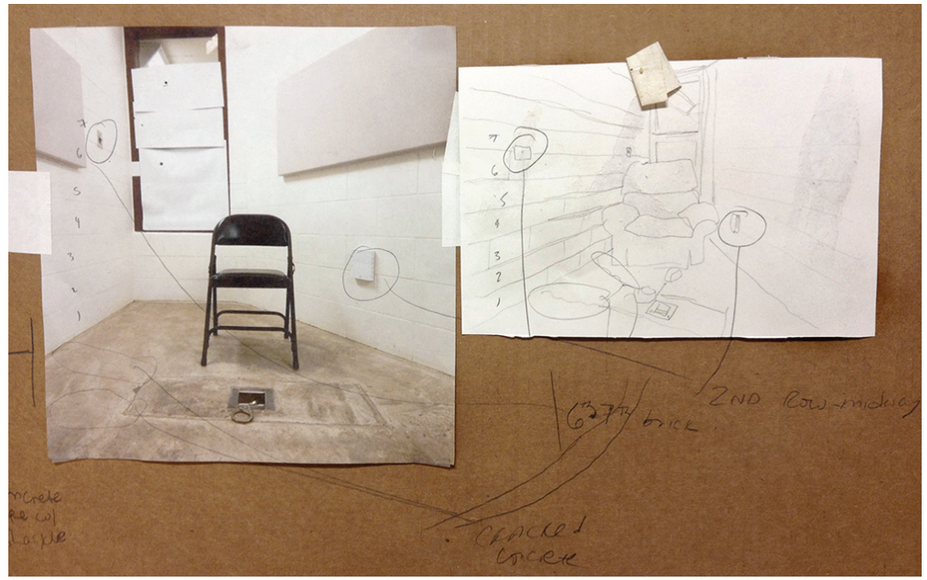
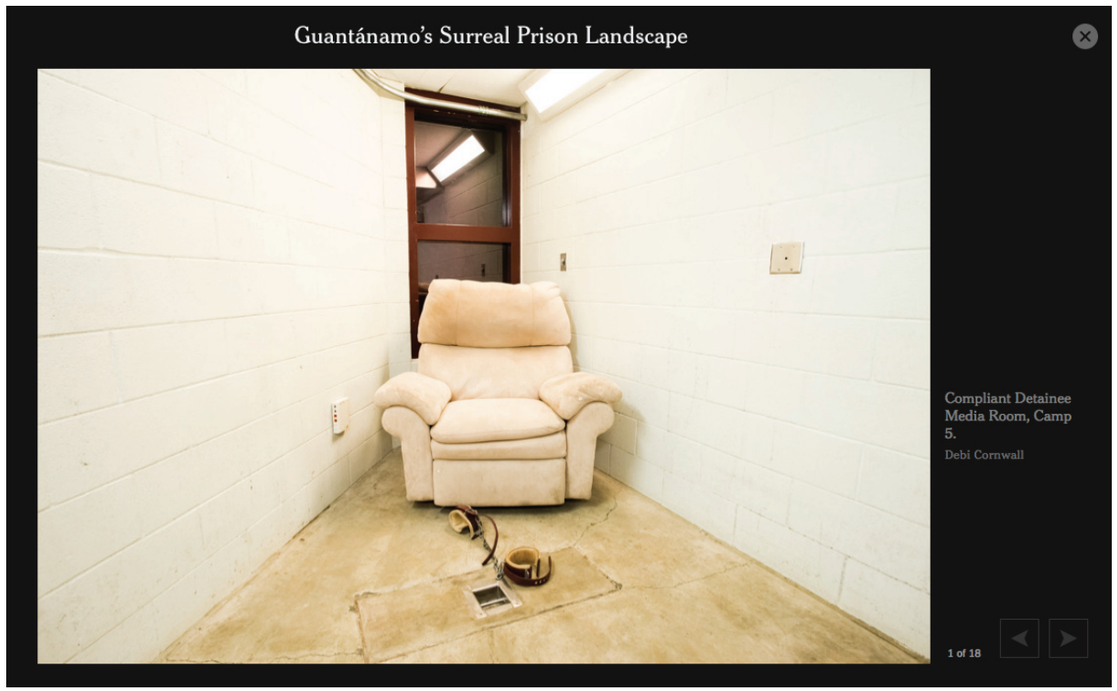


When you were approached to participate in the exhibition what were your initial reactions?

I was touched and impressed that you invited me to make an exhibition about a side project, or about something that inspires me, and that you suggested two of the images on my wall as a starting point, because it signified to me that after leaving my studio, you spent time thinking about our discussions and the extra materials around my studio. I admit that you approached me to do this show during a period when I've been questioning the extent to which the thoughts behind my work are important to the work itself, and if they are important, what are some strategies I can use to try and foreground the ideas. I'm not a mind reader, and I'm speaking generally, so please apply all disclaimers and exceptions, but increasingly I have the sense that people are cramming studio visits into their already impossible schedules, and it's hard for me to gauge how much is really shared during a visit. Studio visits are not unique in this way, the increasing degree to which the art world is acquiescing to being a community that embraces the massive circulation of reductive information is unsettling. Paradoxically, it seems that because people are so eager to learn about what many artists are making—which I will describe as an affirming phenomenon—the experience of sharing my work with someone can turn into a frustrating setup, wherein I feel pressure to explain my work in the quickest and most succinct way. I'm afraid the risk here is that the ideas behind the work are either outright ignored, or are passed over because of time constraints. Amidst these thoughts, being asked to make an exhibition that focuses on a side project or inspirational materials is welcome. Also: I've never been asked to do a solo project quite like this, organized around something besides my sculptures themselves.





What is the relationship of the exhibition to your larger body of work?

This exhibition begins with two photographs of an interrogation room in Guantanamo. These photographs are a somewhat random jumping off point for this exhibition, because I don't work directly from sources, and it is not these images specifically that inspired the work in this exhibition. Rather, I'm showing sculptures and objects that I've been working on in my studio anyway, but selecting the pieces using these two photographs as an organizing aura for the exhibition.

Sometime in the early spring of 2014, I was online and came across a photograph of an interrogation room in Guantanamo. I won't attempt to describe in retrospect what caught my attention, but what still draws me to look at it is how stark, desolate, and provisional the room is. As a stage for so much brutality, and as a locus of so much cultural shame and confusion and mismanagement, the actual place is surprisingly straightforward. This transparency of the interrogation room exists in contradiction to the obfuscation and secrecy of the operations of the base and its residents, visitors, and detainees.

The power dynamics built into the architecture are furthered through a minimally appointed interior: a folding metal chair, an inset metallic leg restraint, sound-dampening panels, a makeshift window cover, and a fluorescent light. The message of the room is clear in its simplicity: you are with us now; in this room, everything we are looking for is inside of you.

And yet, the way you get into that room has everything to do with what is outside of your control: where you were born, into what culture, into what skin. The way you get out of Guantanamo, even if you are never charged with a crime, remains unclear, now 13 years and counting after its opening. Guantanamo is not a unique site of US brutality, but by virtue of its longevity and relatively greater visibility, it remains one of the most accessible symbols of the ever-mutating, expanding, and ultra-contemporary War on Terror.

After seeing this photograph of the interrogation room, I looked further into Richard Ross' work, and especially his 2007 book, *Architecture of Authority*[1]. Outside of the dark psychological imaginings evoked by the photograph, the visual tropes employed in the spaces he photographs more broadly, have encouraged me to further consider the visceral strength of minimal artworks, structures, architectural interiors, and exterior spaces. The single image of this interrogation room remained the one that I kept on my wall, and my point of reference for these enduring thoughts.

1 Ross, Richard. *Architecture of Authority* (Hong Kong: Aperture Press, 2007), Page 103.

Later in the year, I saw a photo of what looked to be the same room, on the very top of the *New York Times*' homepage. The photograph is by Debi Cornwall[2], and was published as part of the *Times*' "Lens" blog. In my mind's eye, this new photo looked to be the same interrogation room, but there were enough differences that I wasn't sure how many rooms in Guantanamo might share this specific and menacing layout. The new photograph represented the room as being in a more dramatic, alternative color space, way more intense in terms of contrast and color saturation. By far the most obvious difference between this photo, and the older photo, was that in the new one there was a plush, off-white La-Z-Boy, grossly discolored with sweat, as well as plush leg cuffs made of leather and padding—the same kind advertised for use in soft-core BDSM play. There was no longer a folding metal chair, or a metal leg restraint. I immediately wondered what kind of sick joke it was to throw a big cushy chair and soft restraints into this room. Was this done just for the photo? And if so, why hadn't they used a cleaner-looking chair? Almost any other upholstery choice would have hidden the stains.

I printed out this newly published photograph and looked at it next to the image I had hung on the wall for the past few months. Upon close inspection, there were many details that didn't match: the cracks in the floor were not in the same places, the light switch, the Internet port, the fluorescent light, etc. I wondered if this was indeed the same space, or if I was being tripped up by a wide-angle lens. Another interesting difference between the photographs is that Ross' photo, shot before 2007, is called *Interrogation room, Delta Camp V, Guantanamo, Cuba*, while Cornwall's 2014 photo is called *Compliant Detainee Media Room, Camp 5*. In the process of trying to learn more about which photo was oriented as the space is in real life, I looked online for more images of that room, using versions of both photo titles as search criteria. I found a number of other images, and after enough study it appeared to me that Cornwall's photo was flipped in Photoshop; also the photos were shot in the same room but taken years apart. To confirm my observations, I emailed both photographers to ask if they thought it was the same room, or if they had seen other rooms like it, or if one of them had intentionally photoshopped the picture. I heard back only from Ross, who confirmed that his photo was taken "straight" as a documentary image. I did not hear back from Cornwall. I ask myself, "So what?" And I don't have a good answer. Does it really matter if the *New York Times* amps up the contrast and color, and flips around the photo? Perhaps the more interesting question, if they did, is what they might be trying to accomplish? But these questions regarding the extent to which we can trust the corporate media are ever-present, and anyway are not specifically what is powerful in looking at these photos next to one another.

2 Cornwall, Debi. *Compliant Detainee Media Room, Camp 5*. 2014. *The New York Times*. Published October 10, 2014.

(~~TS//~~ [redacted] ~~//NF~~) A cable described Abu Zubaydah's cell as white with no natural lighting or windows, but with four halogen lights pointed into the cell.[110] An air conditioner was also in the room. A white curtain separated the interrogation room from the cell. The interrogation cell had three padlocks. Abu Zubaydah was also provided with one of two chairs that were rotated based on his level of cooperation (one described as more comfortable than the other). Security officers wore all black uniforms, including boots, gloves, balaclavas, and goggles to keep Abu Zubaydah from identifying the officers, as well as to prevent Abu Zubaydah "from seeing the security guards as individuals who he may attempt to establish a relationship or dialogue with."[111] The security officers communicated by hand signals when they were with

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102 [redacted] 10026 (131233Z APR 02)
103 [redacted] 10029 (131505Z APR 02)
104 [redacted] 10029 (131505Z APR 02)
105 Federal Bureau of Investigation documents pertaining "to the interrogation of detainee Zayn Al Abideen Abu Zabaidah" and provided to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence by cover letter dated July 20, 2010 (DTS #2010-2939).
106 *See* Intelligence Science Board "Intelligence Interviewing: Teaching Papers and Case Studies" for additional details on the FBI's interrogation of Mohamed Rashed Daoud al-Owhali.
107 Federal Bureau of Investigation documents pertaining "to the interrogation of detainee Zayn Al Abideen Abu Zabaidah" and provided to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence by cover letter dated July 20, 2010 (DTS #2010-2939).
108 [redacted] 10043 (151614Z APR 02)
109 [redacted] 10047 (161406Z APR 02)
110 [redacted] 10116 (250731Z APR 02)
111 [redacted] 10053 (162029Z APR 02)

~~TOP SECRET//~~ [redacted] ~~//NOFORN~~

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Abu Zubaydah and used hand-cuffs and leg shackles to maintain control. In addition, either loud rock music was played or noise generators were used to enhance Abu Zubaydah's "sense of hopelessness."[112] Abu Zubaydah was typically kept naked and sleep deprived.[113]

In the published (redacted) version of the Senate's CIA torture report, released in the last days of 2014, the committee wrote that "[a detainee would be] provided with one of two chairs that were rotated based on his level of cooperation (one described as more comfortable than the other)."[3]

I have no way to confirm whether there are any connections between the two chairs described in this section of the report, and the chairs seen in these two photographs of this interrogation room. Regardless, we learn that there was an intentionality behind what kind of chair was provided for each detainee—that the La-Z-Boy was not put in the room just for the photo. Maybe it is obvious that there was thought put into the chair, especially considering that there is next to nothing in the room, but still, reading the report made the whole room seem even more sinister with regard to how its details are considered: as though the sweat-stained La-Z-Boy provides such an upgrade in the detainee's experience that he would be willing to cooperate with the Americans.

I am reminded of seeing photos from a portion of the now-defunct Camp X-Ray in which all the furniture—even the buildings themselves—were built out of plywood and two-by-fours. It looked like installation art to me. I mean that it looked like a really handmade, timeless, low-budget dark place that was built as cheaply as possible with industrial plywood to be harsh, austere, and unsparing.

3 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture: Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program,(Approved December 13, 2012, Updated for Release April 3, 2014, Declassified Revisions December 3, 2014), Page 28 of 499.

©John Moore/Getty Images

©AP Photo/Richard Ross

screenshot from *Gibney, Alex, Eva Orner, and Susannah Shipman. Taxi to the Dark Side. Montreal: Séville Pictures, 2008.*

photo published: http://www.heritage.org/research/projects/enemy-detention/detention-policy with caption: "Camp 5 standard interrogation room. Detainee sits on Lazy Boy chair on left. Room includes TV microwave and refrigerator."

Did you find the idea of having the freedom to show something that was "inspirational" or unrelated to your primary studio practice challenging?

I don't find the exercise of organizing the exhibition as challenging as I find the mental hurdle of moving past my anxieties about people reading my work through an overly narrow, politicized lens. Generally speaking, I'm a big reader, and news junkie, and by revealing the source images I'm using to organize the exhibition, I'm afraid that people might read my works as illustrative of the literal and affective worlds pictured in the photographs. I don't understand there to be a 1:1 relationship between an idea and an artwork, and I see my work as more of an intuitive distillation of many feelings and thoughts and experiences.

I tend heavily towards caginess, towards obfuscating inspiration and meaning, so that any attempt at a close reading becomes multivalent, pushed into a more scattered array of touchstones. Part of the challenge, in putting together this show about something inspirational, has been for me to rethink the implications of leaving my work so open to interpretation. I spend a lot of time wondering if there are already hints of source materials in my work, either visually or through titles. If there are hints, are there enough or are they too obtuse? Sometimes I wonder if it is arrogant to lift language and images—both mental and actual—from culture, and to collage and decontextualize it all. And I think about whether or not I'm hiding behind what people see as abstraction, by not more publicly communicating the kinds of things that are on my mind.

There is a lot of grumbling in the art world lately about process-based abstraction, and I identify strongly with the critiques that this work is largely vapid. I find the extensive dumbing down and speeding up of the art world to be very troubling, and I've also wondered how the original meanings of conceptual art have been co-opted to describe a process through which an artist achieves his signature visual product. But mostly, I've felt that people who buy and show this work are simply getting what they deserve, and I didn't see any reason to get involved in the discussion—until I considered whether people might see my work as part of this race to the bottom. I've never thought about my work as abstract, nor do I think of the process by which I make things to be the affective makeup or content of my work, but I wonder if other people might. And if people see it that way, should I leave it there? Is that a failure of my work itself, or a failure of me the person, for not articulating alternate, less abstract inroads into my work?

I recently shared with some friends a blog I have been putting together, called *HIT ME IN THE STREET*. The blog is primarily comprised of screenshots I began collecting years ago, as a way to sidestep the pace at which stories and images change and disappear from news websites. The practice has grown to include anything on the screen, as well as photos I take, but my interest remains in keeping an archive for myself of language/events/stories/images I don't want to forget about. It's also an experiment for me to work towards something like a book, wherein I can situate my work amid materials collaged from culture at large.

This blog and exhibition are challenging opportunities for me to reconsider how much—of my personality, and of some of the thoughts behind what I make—I hold back from putting out in public. I grew up just before it was normal to have a personal computer or smartphone or access to the Internet, though I was very much still growing as the culture at large, myself included, experienced the mass adoption of these devices. Generationally then, I am very aware—as opposed to the perspective of a true "millennial"—that being ever-available, in-touch, on-line, public about one's life (aka "sharing" [and, for free!]), that this is all an adaptation, not a given way of life. I'm someone who has trouble being myself or acting natural in front of other people, and maybe that is why I feel self-conscious, or aware of how much this need for privacy is not in vogue. Many people seem willing to make the trade, and in order to feel like they know what's going on, they accept the profound loss in depth that results from being spread so thin. More than ominous—or ethically wrong—as someone who spends most of my time working alone in a room, I experience this pervasive attitude as profoundly alienating.

HOLDING THE BAG
exhibition and illustrated text by Davina Semo
January 22 - February 1 2015

front image: photo ©Richard Ross, “Interrogation room, Delta Camp V | Guantanamo, Cuba”

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