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# Tortured memories

DOCUMENTARY IN PAINT



Artist Daniel Heyman said he typically had a few hours to work on each portrait, but he drew as quickly as possible so he could focus on scribbling down the person's testimony about Abu Ghraib prison.

Marcus Larson/News-Register

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News-Register Contributor

## By DAVID BATES

The scenario does not strike one as an obvious source for artistic inspiration: an attorney, assisted by a translator, deposing Iraqi torture victims in a room in Istanbul.

But that's exactly what led artist Daniel Heyman to create the remarkable collection of portraits, handsomely mounted by curator Cris Moss, that fills Linfield College's art gallery at the moment.

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A visitor is immediately struck by the mostly sad and stoic faces of dozens of Middle Eastern men wrongly imprisoned by the U.S. military after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequently tortured by their American jailers at the Baghdad Correctional Facility, better known as the infamous Abu Ghraib.

The exhibit is titled, "Bearing Witness: Daniel Heyman." It will be open through April 30.

Heyman is a Philadelphia printmaker and painter who received an unusual invitation in 2005: Would he like to accompany a human rights attorney to Jordan to observe while she interviewed Abu Ghraib victims?

As the men talked about the violence and indignities they'd suffered, Heyman sat nearby with his easel. During the early part of the discussion, he drew their pictures. Then, as their horrific stories spilled out, he scribbled excerpts of the testimony around the images.

"It was really incredible," Heyman said in an interview. "They were thrilled to talk to somebody who wanted to listen. They had never talked to any Americans other than soldiers who had held guns in their faces."

The interviews, he said, were intense, sometimes transpiring over a period of several hours.

To preserve the immediacy and spontaneity, Heyman drew quickly and did not touch up the images later. He used no transcripts to edit the text later, so once the interview was over, so was the portrait.

"I never touched them after the interview was over," he said. "I didn't want to edit them."

Some of the portraits identify the subject by profession, and they are universally routine. The cast features a school teacher, a farmer, a taxi driver and so forth.

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Many said their ordeal began with a home invasion. Often, they said, U.S. soldiers destroyed their homes.

All these men, Heyman notes, were ultimately released without facing any charges.

Those who aim to read all the text should plan on devoting a good hour. The portraits are large, so there's a lot to read.

Walking along the rows of portraits and letting your eyes drift over the words, pieces of narrative jump out:

"... the Americans destroyed my house."

"Last week, my two brothers were arrested. I don't know where they are."

"A man was screaming, so they put him in a cage."

" ... then he released the string and the release was so big, I fainted."

"The soldiers wanted to provoke us so they could shoot us. They stepped on the Koran, tore up the Koran."

As the Abu Ghraib story broke in 2004 and the photographs flooded onto the Internet and into the media, Heyman read about it like everyone else. But his trips to Jordan for the interviews put him in the front row of a global scandal.

"As an artist, you never really think of yourself as privy to a main event," he said thoughtfully. "This was really right in the moment. It kind of gave me a more intense and full view of what actually happened."

In January, Heyman had a show in Southern California that drew a rave review from the Los Angeles Times, which commented on the uniqueness of the artist's approach to his difficult material.

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"Today, we are so used to joining the word 'documentary' with 'photography' that it is easy to forget that an eyewitness account can be recorded in paint," wrote critic Christopher Knight.

"Portraiture and torture are polar opposites," Knight wrote. "Joining them, Heyman has found an elemental means for representing human horror in a manner that is neither exploitative nor sentimental."

Heyman said he feels the experience gave the men a certain dignity, allowing them to take ownership of the horrors they'd endured in a way they hadn't before. The colors he used, in fact, give them almost a levity that seem at odds with the grim material.

"People have asked me 'Why did you use such beautiful colors? This is so depressing,'" he noted. "And I said, why shouldn't I? These are beautiful people."

Heyman has used the same approach with other topics.

Closer to home, he met another group of people who've had little opportunity to tell their stories in 2008 and 2009 — seven poor, recently incarcerated African-American fathers, who were trying to turn their lives around.

He's also produced a series of lithographs focusing on recent immigrants to the U.S. and the struggles they endured in their native countries and here. Those who read enough in the "Bearing Witness" show will eventually arrive at the words of Ibrahim Helasah, the translator. Most of the former prisoners, he said, understood that the "Abu Ghraib Americans" — more than a dozen of whom were later convicted — were not representative of most Americans.

The Linfield exhibit continues through April 30. Hours are 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday through Friday and noon-5 p.m. Saturday.