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Arun Misra interviews:
Edmund Clark, Photographer and Artist

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Showing the Unseen - Edmund Clark, Photographer and Artist Arun Misra interviews

Edmund Clark links history, politics and representation in his internationally acclaimed works which examine themes of state censorship, incarceration, control and conflict. He combines a range of references and forms including bookmaking, installations and photography to engage his audiences with processes of change and transformation. He uses documents, text and other material that are conceptually relevant to investigating his subjects and communicating with audiences.

Edmund is the recipient of international awards and his works are held in several prestigious collections. He teaches postgraduate students at the London College of Communication and for four years was the artist-in-residence in Europe's only wholly therapeutic prison, HMP Grendon. His recent publications are *My Shadow's Reflection* (2018), *In Place of Hate* (2017) and *Guantanamo: If the Light Goes Out* (2010).

I interviewed Edmund in September 2020 about his interests, how he approaches his subjects and the challenges faced along the way.



Arun Misra *How did you first become interested in photography? Who were your early influences?*

Edmund Clark My very first engagement, as a very young child, was that I thought that when I blinked I captured an image.

Actually engaging with photography as a medium came quite late and I didn't own a camera until I was in my mid-20's. My girlfriend had a camera and I started using it to take photographs and found that I enjoyed the process. I became seriously involved when I was living in Brussels.

In Brussels there were a lot of photography shows and public commissions and one saw the results of photography as a medium for looking at society. There were Belgian photographers who I was particularly interested in such as Hughes de Wurtemberg. So, in short, my early influences were in photojournalism.

AM *A recurring theme in your work is that of state censorship and control and the representation of unseen experiences and spaces such as in prisons. How did you become interested in exploring these dark and unseen areas?*

EC I guess when I started making images I was interested in subjects that had a socio-political dimension to them. When I went back to college to study Photojournalism at the London College of Communication my major project was about youth crime in east London. The work I made about prisons has always been an interest, and justice and socio-political issues have always engaged me. My first book was about a prison. That came about through talking, researching and finding out about a particular prison which was piloting a

space for ageing long-term life prisoners. When it comes to spaces and experiences that are not normally seen, finding a visual strategy that can work in a way that gets around the stereotypical representation of people in situations such as a prison posed particular challenges. Getting access into prisons is difficult. It involves getting permissions and inevitably you are not allowed to photograph certain things and frankly all this makes sense. To be transparent and say that '... you can see my work and you can see what I am

from: My Shadow's Reflection © Edmund Clark



doing here...’ can aid your access but also if your visual strategy is working then it doesn’t matter because it’s not about trying to capture things which you are not allowed to see; it’s about trying to engage people at a different level to that.

AM *You are describing a desire to have a visual strategy with which to present these areas and spaces. Isn’t it a seriously uphill task because in a sense the public already have images of these places formed through novels, television and media? So what you are presenting is up against a preformed idea in the minds of the audience.*

EC Even more pressing than those pre-existing images are the images they have through the news media, and through political discourse which in relation to prisons is a very regressive one based on a binary of good and evil, them and us, right and wrong. Typically they will have the image of the mug shots of offenders in their minds. So yes, those are clearly things that I have to be aware of and which do exist in the minds of people who would be looking at my work: the audiences of my exhibitions or the readers of my books or people who look at my work in magazines or online. I am totally aware that that’s the case but in a sense that’s part of the challenge and finding a visual strategy which uses imagery in a way that is unexpected and in some way is original and engaging.

AM *Let’s talk about your work at HMP Grendon and the *In Place of Hate* exhibition. How did this work come about and how did you develop the concept?*

EC Grendon is a very particular prison. It is Europe’s only wholly therapeutic prison where the whole prison is comprised of communities which are all engaging in group therapy. The post was advertised on the Arts Council’s website.... I was approached about this post because of the work I had done in prisons before. In terms of getting in, I applied and went through a process of being interviewed and recruited, and was offered the

place. So I didn’t have to negotiate access with the institution but obviously I had to negotiate access about how I wanted to go about making the work.

The *In Place of Hate* exhibition is not based on one central concept but a range of concepts within the work. There are different iterations of looking at common themes which at one level is about the notion of what you can and cannot see in prisons. So what can I show? I wasn’t allowed to show images which identified individuals there and I wasn’t allowed to show certain aspects of the environment for security reasons and there are good reasons why that is the case. But another level speaks to how we see prisons and the stereotypical ways in which crime and incarceration is portrayed – the simplistic way in which it is seen, and the lack of nuances and understanding. So my interest was around these notions of seeing and understanding, playing with the idea of seeing and visibility and questioning what is visible. The exhibition itself comprises of a number of different installations.

The second concept in that exhibition was about trying to use, in a sense, the permissiveness of the white space of the gallery as a way of bringing an exhibition audience closer, as close as possible, to aspects of the materiality and experience of incarceration. So I bring in architectural forms like an installation which reproduces the size of a prison cell, I bring in the chair which people sit on in group therapy sessions and I bring in the bed sheets the prisoners sleep under, all of which have conceptual reasons.

But I think another concept which exists in the exhibition is the creation of a sense of proximity of the audience with aspects of criminal behaviour and experience. So physically I did that by bringing material aspects of the prison into the gallery space with two particular installations. In one I am trying to make an audience consider the connection between narratives of extreme violence in high culture such as Greek tragedy and the narratives of the violence of the individuals who end up in places like Grendon and ask why one is acceptable and the other is not acceptable, and what can be learnt from that. With *My Shadow’s Reflection*

installation I am seeking to bring the audience as close as possible to understanding or considering that they have, within themselves, the potential for the kind of behaviour which has led to people being in Grendon. And that the idea of good and evil - that they do that, I don't do that; that they are bad, I am not bad - is delusional. Were it not for the privileges of family support, education, financial advantages and being fortunate in not having a chaotic lifestyle, not suffering from extensive mental addictions or mental health issues; were it not for those things it is quite possible that any individual is capable of committing the acts which have led people to be incarcerated at Grendon. And that is what the last installation explores – that is that your shadow will literally fall on the image of the prisoners at Grendon.

The pinhole images in *My Shadow's Reflection* installation are clearly referencing mug shots. They are blurred, are ghostly and I found those images very troubling when I first made them; but it was the men's responses to them that gave them a sense of purpose and validity. Some of the men interpreted those images in relation to the violence they had carried out, but this was also in reaction to a process of transition and transformation and in a visual manifestation of an internal process which is traumatic. The idea of trauma is definitely one in which a form of turmoil, if not physical violence, a form of inner discord and discomfort is manifested in the work.

AM *Your light box installation 1.98M2 was a part of the In Place of Hate exhibition. This shows pressed flowers. Can you talk about the concept behind its creation?*

EC There were two aspects to it. There is the physical installation which is a square light box which you can walk into the middle of. So there is an entrance and a hollow interior, and the dimensions of the interior are 1.98m2. That is the size of most of the cells in MHP Grendon, just less than 2m². So the first place the audience are invited into is a light box full of plant life which has been picked within the confines of Grendon. So it is from within the perimeter of the fence that all the plant matter has been picked – anything which is

grown within the prison boundary. It came about through a conversation with a colleague of mine Max Haughton at the LCC who suggested thinking about the process that happens in the prison which is one of therapy and change. I suppose the idea of growth in some way totally caught my imagination and that I had never done anything like that before. What she said triggered something in me and I did start picking anything which grew in the prison. Very quickly you start to realise that there is a very simple and very obvious distinction to what it is you're picking. You are either picking stuff which is deliberately planted, cultivated and is grown in an organised way or you are picking stuff which is haphazard, has seeded itself, is chaotic and is not supposed to be there. You are dealing with very simplistic notions of flowers and weeds: what is accepted and what is rejected.

There is something in the process of actually pressing the plant material that I found very interesting but I did it very badly. The process is one of transformation of that material. Some of it worked, some didn't, some rotted and some dried, some had the imprint of the prison such as the paper towels that I was using. That kind of material process of transformation I found interesting and also the idea of exposing them, the pressed flowers and plant life, to light. Throughout the exhibition light is important. I am playing with the idea of light and visibility; and light and dark. But putting this pressed plant life on a light box was interesting. As your eye adjusts to the brightness of the light you start seeing more and more detail. You see every crease in a petal, you see every tear and you see where it has rotted or dried. You see where it is falling apart. You see more and more and more. It is a process of revelation that pans out before you. I am not saying that we should look at these flowers and think: ah these poor prisoners, they are like these flowers. That's not what it's about. It's about how we see: it is about what we understand as being beautiful and not beautiful, good and bad. But it's also about a process of revelation and actually it's about getting people to stop and be still, and look. And when you look and spend time with something you see more and more and more detail. You see its veins. You see its flaws and at one level that is what Grendon is about. It



from: *Guantanamo: If the Light Goes Out* © Edmund Clark

is about people going in and over a long period of time, seeing their own flaws and seeing their own damage; and seeing the damage that they have done to others, seeing the flaws in others that have made them make that damage. So it's about seeing and understanding and revelation.

AM *That's very powerful Edmund. You have two things going on here – materiality and revelation both encapsulated in your work. That's wonderful.*

EC It runs through all the installations in the exhibition. Materiality and revelation and visibility are common throughout.

AM *So did you discover anything about yourself in doing this work?*

EC Don't know about that. There are some strange aspects to the conflict work I guess. Particularly the work I made about the CIA secret

prison program with Crofton Black. Going to all sorts of different places and obviously not telling people what I was doing. What's the word I am looking for ...it's not dissonance; it's disorienting.

AM *Did you find it disorienting in some way?*

EC – Yes. Very strange working with someone who is considered enough of a threat to society that they are being held under a form of detention and which in effect overturns over 1000 years of the principle of Habeas Corpus. Yet where does that take place? It's a process that's not based on any proper judicial procedure. It takes place in an absolutely typical British semi-detached house in a provincial suburb and no one is supposed to know that they are there, and I am not allowed to tell anyone where it is. And everything I make has to be seen by the Government, and I go home and I live a normal life after that experience in my own country.



from: *My Shadow's Reflection* © Edmund Clark

These are people who have been represented as the worst of the worst, who allegedly helped plan the attacks on the twin towers in America and finding out that they are family people, living in a foreign county who were traded for \$5,000 bounty money, and who will forever live with that experience. They talk to me about four years later when they are back trying to lead a normal life and trying to get jobs. They go for an interview and in the interview someone said '...there is a bit of a gap in your CV. What were you doing in these two years?' And they say '... I was in Guantanamo Bay.' They are going for a job as a plumber and they are talking about what happened to them in Guantanamo Bay. That's a bizarre situation for people to live with. They have never been prosecuted or convicted of anything.

AM *I would like to ask you about the Black Lives Matter movement. Is there anything you would like to say in relation to your practice?*

EC One aspect which I think is related to ideas of racism and representation is the fact that there are no people: there are no representations of individuals in my work about Guantanamo Bay or about the CIA Secret Prison Program. Now that grew partly out of the experience I had with the first book I made in a prison where the representation of the criminal is problematic enough. But when you get to representation in relation to work made about 10 years ago of, for example, South Asian or Arab bearded males and, particularly at that time, the photographic representation of individuals who look like that was deeply problematic. It's where photography has this sort of strange notion that you photograph someone ... and the whole indexical millstone legacy of photography is in some way supposed to humanise them as individuals because you can see a realistic impression of them. You cannot and it is misleading. It's not the fact that it might be more accurate than a painting, it does not make them more human and actually it just serves to reinforce the immediate understanding of what the bearded or Arab male represented at that time, which were the repeated images on our screens of Osama bin Laden and people who looked like him and who were suspected of involvement with international

terrorism.

You are just re-establishing and reconfirming those tropes which we see on our screens all the time. So the absence of the South Asian, Arab bearded male in my work is about the racial problems of representation and the clearly racist connotation of how individuals were being treated by the allied forces operating in Afghanistan. And you know, there were problems within our communities and our society. It brought out racist anti-Muslim views and it was anti-religion as well. So the absence of that form of representation in my work is about the racial problems about how those people were being talked about and how they were being treated. Most of my work is actually conflict work and in particular it is about what was done to individuals without proper legal process. What was done extrajudicially to individuals by the West which claims to be the saviour and the originators of standards of decency, honesty and fair play? If you are an Asian, Arab, Muslim, you don't count. So you are absent – what's done to you isn't seen. And I suppose in a sense looking back on it now the absence of that form in my work is a reflection of that.

AM *Going back to the flowers at Gendon Prison – was it the communicative potential of using flowers that were growing in that environment of incarceration and realising that these could have a powerful effect of viewers?*

EC Yes. I immediately saw the full panoply of representational richness within that. I picked and pressed the stuff for about three years; as I started to put the work together I realised what it was doing, what the process of transformation was doing to it.

AM *What do you enjoy doing besides photography?*

EC Very ordinary things: walking, reading. I cycle and I like the sun.

AM *Edmund, it's been a great pleasure talking to you about your work and the passion and processes that make it happen. Thank you.*