Impounded.

Manzanar to Guantánamo:
Executive Orders, Cultural Myths

Curatorial Statement

This exhibition pairs two sets of photographic records, two Executive Orders, two wartime experiences of internment separated by fifty years in the evolution of America's cultural mythology. At the heart of it is a collection of work by the renowned photographers Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams, with additional images by contemporary journalist photographers Clem Albers and Frances Stewart. Having worked extensively in the government employ, Lange (whose images from the Farm Security Agency are well known today), Stewart and Albers were recruited in February 1943 by the newly formed War Relocation Authority to document the registration, processing and internment of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry (over two thirds of whom were American citizens) in concentration camps in the West.

This exhibition brings together for the first time the varied approaches and points of view illuminating the aesthetic and ethical decisions made by four photographers during wartime. Some of Lange's photographs are collected in Linda Gordon and Gary Okihiro's new book, *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* (W.W. Norton, 2007) which has served as the inspiration of this exhibition. The curators are indebted to Drs. Gordon and Okihiro for presenting these images, most of which were censored and impounded by the military and quietly confined to the drawers of the National Archives for decades afterwards. Other photographs by Lange, Stewart and Albers were exhibited as part of a 1972 traveling exhibition that went to the Whitney Museum of American Art, the DeYoung Museum in

San Francisco and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC. Adams's collection, including portraits taken at Manzanar later in 1943 after the internees were more settled into their lives, has been shown as a separate body of work.

February 1942, Executive Order 9066

Once President Roosevelt issued the order to intern the Japanese living in the western US, the government wanted the process documented, in part for their own record keeping – it was a well-established practice under the New Deal – but also to anticipate and deflect Japanese propaganda or international civil rights protests concerning perceived abuses. The War Relocation Authority, a branch of the military, imposed strict censorship on the images that could be taken and published. The photographers could not take pictures of soldiers, guns, guard towers, barbed wire, or anything that would suggest that people were being confined or being held against their will. The WRA's goal in the photography project was to show the country and the world that the Japanese were willingly complying with their ordeal as a patriotic duty – that this compliance with the exigencies of wartime would firmly secure their place in the ranks of full American citizenship.

Dorothea Lange wrestled with her role as a documentarian and as a witness to what she considered a grave injustice. Her stake in her work was political as well as personal: she and her husband, Paul Taylor, had many Japanese friends from the Bay area who were interned. According to Lange biographer and co-editor of *Impounded*, Linda Gordon, there are no written letters or documents that would suggest Lange's motivation in working for the WRA. But we do know that she plunged into her work taking thousands of images beginning in February 1942 and for the next three years of the war. She began with the lives of the Japanese on the farms they would be forced to sell, the fishing boats they would leave behind, the stores that would be taken for well below market value by those who were judged more *American*. She was there at the processing centers where families were registered and given their instructions. Some of her most poignant and telling images record the *waiting* – the long lines, the collected baggage and bedding, the few belongings each family was permitted to take with them. And Lange began to document the life of the Japanese at the Manzanar Camp in California. It was inside the camp that she encountered ongoing, instinctive opposition from the military and camp authorities to her presence and the images she sought to record. She encountered myriad roadblocks; her credentials were constantly challenged. Many of her images were impounded by the military censors for violating the rules of censorship – for telling a bit too much of the truth. Many of these impounded images are the heart of this exhibition and the book, *Impounded*.

What is all the more remarkable about Lange's position and practice in her photography of the internment experience is that it meant turning against Roosevelt, whose programs she had so strongly supported during the New Deal. Lange's opposition to internment was also unusual within the American Left. The American Communist Party itself supported the internment in the name of the "international front against fascism." Other progressive organizations such as the NAACP either favored the internment or refused to oppose it.

Ansel Adams fell within this camp of Americans who believed the internment was justified. Revered as the country's preeminent landscape artist and photographic printer, Adams had been in the employ of the Department of the Interior while creating many of his magnificent images of the American West. At the outbreak of the war, he regretted that he was too old to enlist in the Army, but when called upon, he declared that he was only too glad to put his skills to use for the WRA. He was invited by the camp director at Manzanar later in 1943 to provide more of the "official view" of the camp experience as the internees had settled into their lives. His intent was to portray the nobility and endurance of the Japanese and as the master photographer that he was, he succeeds in his way. This is indeed a central part of the narrative of the camps. And yet, as masterful as the portraits in this exhibit might be, they fairly glow with an alarming dishonesty when viewed side-by-side with the impounded photographs by Lange. The dishonesty lies in their decontextualization from the essential transgression of the Japanese population's civil and human rights. They appear polished - as in a primetime television feel-good story. It goes without saying that none of these photographs were impounded or hidden from the public record. Censorship is not required for those who intimately share the censor's point of view.

Guantánamo: Pictures from Home. Questions of Justice

We have paired the World War II internment images of *Impounded* with Margot Herster's installation *Guantánamo: Pictures from Home. Questions of Justice* for obvious political reasons and less obvious aesthetic ones. Ms. Herster's husband is an attorney with one of the law firms that is representing detainees held in Guantánamo. The images in this installation were first collected by attorneys visiting with the detainees' families across North Africa, Pakistan, and the Middle East. The intention was to gain the prisoners' trust in an environment where no prisoner had any reason whatsoever to extend it. The snapshots, videos, and fragments are not the stuff of high art. They are something much more precious: the trembling evidence of humanity, threads of possibility working against the Bush administration's assertion that these men are outside the boundaries of our species. The "art" (of a most essential kind) exists in the volition of the artist confronting the viewer to engage in a banned act of imagination: To imagine our human connection.

The artist seeks to challenge the opacity of Guantánamo and the control of visual or other information about these 700 men. She presents us with images to demonstrate "the power of photography to build trust and sustain family relations, and to provide the public with an intimate look into the lives of the people detained at Guantánamo."

What separates these two bodies of work – Manzanar from Guantánamo - even more than the span of 50 years, is the mythology of a government that in 1941 was still holding onto and promoting a world image of a populist democracy (perhaps with a small "d") that was readily distinguishable from fascism, from monarchy, from dictatorship. The ethic of Roosevelt's New Deal still resonated even as the Japanese citizens were being processed into the camps. It was consistent that Lange, with her great reputation from her work for the FSA, would be recruited to document the process. Even as the Roosevelt administration confronted the exigencies of war, as it deferred to the military and police concerning real or imagined Japanese "enemies within," as it surrendered to the most base and racist assumptions about Japanese people and culture, the guiding myths of the New Deal – the things that Americans most needed to believe about themselves – required that the internment would be different, that it would be guided by humane and just principles, and that in the end it was all for the greater good. Myths (which are not the same as falsehoods) are beliefs that guide human action. In the face of evidence that challenges their validity, myths need to be serviced. This was the task of the WRA photographers. The difference between Lange and Adams is that Lange could not conscience the contradiction, while Adams demurred.

Censors scrawled "impounded" across many of Dorothea Lange's photographs of soldiers and barbed wire at Manzanar. The government in our era would impound our imagination. They would have the censors crawl inside our heads as they have in within the newsrooms of far too many newspapers and television stations. Margot Herster and other artists like her, like Dorothea Lange, insist on challenging us to pierce the lies and free us to criticize. These visual acts of criticism lead to reconnecting us with the world.

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