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By appointment

Sandow Birk

**KCET**

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## **Geographies of Detention, Inside and from Afar**

UCR ARTSblock





In Partnership with UCR ARTSblock

UCR ARTSblock's mission is to provide a cultural presence, educational resource, com-munity center and intellectual meeting ground for the university and the community.

By Nicolette Rohr

Tiffany López arrived at the California Museum of Photography Saturday evening wearing a bright blue blouse, dangling earrings, and wedge heels. As López, Professor of Theatre and Tomás Rivera Endowed Chair in the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at UC Riverside, explained to the audience at the June 1 panel discussion at the Culver Center in Riverside, she chose this outfit because it represented what she could not wear the next day when she went to visit her brother who is currently incarcerated in a California state prison.

These details -- intimate but often unheard -- weaved throughout the discussion López moderated for the opening of "Geographies of Detention: From Guantánamo to the Golden Gulag" at the CMP. The panel brought together four artists and activists whose work is featured in the exhibition -- Sandow Birk, Alyse Emdur, Kevin Michael Key, and Setsu Shigematsu -- to discuss prison spaces, imprisoned people, and the prison industrial complex.

Birk shared how he came to paint the prison landscapes displayed in the CMP's first floor galleries, remarking that he had been drawn to the idealized visions of California depicted in 19th Century paintings when he heard on the radio that California had the largest prison population in the world. He then decided to paint prisons. He'd never really seen one, but the figure seemed to complicate those early, idyllic images of California as Eden:



'California State Prison (CEN) - Imperial, CA,' 2001, Sandow Birk. | Collection of Stephanie and Samuel F. Parker. Image courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

I realized as I sat in the standing-room-only discussion that although I have lived in California for all of my life, I've never really seen a prison either. As Birk's Hudson River School-styled landscapes from his 2001 series "Prisonation" (eleven of which are displayed in the exhibition) suggest, California's prisons are ubiquitous but hidden from view, on the margins visually, as if to dampen their impact politically, socially, and psychologically.

Emdur's installation of "Prison Landscapes," also displayed in the first floor galleries, presents the widespread but little-known practice of photographs of prisoners, sometimes with visiting friends and family, in front of painted mural backdrops in prison visiting rooms. As she explained during the evening discussion, Emdur's project began with her discovery of a Polaroid of her 5-year-old self with her sister and incarcerated brother in front of a mural in a prison visiting room. These murals, as Emdur noted, often depict scenes of freedom -- the beach, a mountain stream, a tropical island -- yet freedom is the exact opposite of what they represent. Because the painted backdrops are the only places in the prison where inmates can be photographed, the practice allows prisons, as Emdur explained, to tightly control the images exported from the prison space. Emdur's compelling photographs capture these murals in the context of the institutional architecture, security cameras, and barred windows of prison visiting rooms. The juxtaposition of Emdur's photographs and the artifacts of prison life -- a mural backdrop painted by [inmate](#) Darrell van Mastrigt in his cell at Graterford State Prison in Pennsylvania and photos and letters from prisoners displayed in a vitrine that drew intent observers all night -- complicate ideas of "inside" versus "outside." Emdur's images compel viewers to see prisoners, as she said, "not through the usual lens of criminality but through the eyes of their loved ones."



'Backdrop painted by Darrell Van Mastrigt, State Correctional Institution, Graterford, Pennsylvania,' 2012. | Photo: Alyse Emdur.





'Victoria Williams, Valley State Prison for Women, Chowchilla, CA,' 2010. | Photo: Alyse Edmur.

The panel emphasized the humanity of incarcerated people and their families, too often rendered faceless by prison statistics. López shared her experiences of driving to visit her brother, often early in the morning and often a great

distance to the remote locations of many California prisons. "It is beautiful," she said, but then the prison "looms and intrudes" on the landscape, as Birk commented. "Spaces impact our feelings," López said, reflecting the exhibit's investigation of the spaces and experiences of incarceration that are at once intimate and inhumane, omnipresent and hidden from view.

Key and Shigematsu discussed their efforts to bring the prison experience into view through their activism against the prison industrial complex and with the prison abolition movement. "Visions of Abolition: From Critical Resistance to a New Way of Life" (2011), screened on the second floor of CMP, was directed, written, and produced by Shigematsu, a professor of Media and Cultural Studies at UCR, and edited and co-produced by UCR student Cameron Granadino. The film incorporates the voices of women caught in the criminal justice system and features the work of A New Way of Life Reentry Project, an organization that provides housing and support services to formerly incarcerated women in South Los Angeles. Key, a member of Critical Resistance, Los Angeles and Los Angeles Poverty Department, represented the theater company of people living and working in the 55-square blocks of Los Angeles known as Skid Row. As part of their "History of Incarceration" project, Los Angeles Poverty Department's "184 Californians Read the 184-page U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals Plata-Coleman Decision on Overcrowding in California State Prisons" (2010-11) depicts 184 people each reading one page of the decision that California's overcrowded prisons amount to cruel and unusual punishment. The film plays continuously on the Culver Center screen facing the Main Street pedestrian mall.

"Geographies of Detention," curated by Catherine Gudis, Molly McGarry, and students in UCR's Public History Program, combines artistic representation and history with a larger intention of civic engagement and social justice, critically approaching these architectures and experiences of imprisonment and forging connections between "geographies of detention" from Guantánamo Bay, Cuba to California's "golden gulag" of prisons from the Mexican border to the Oregon state line.

The Guantánamo Public Memory Project exhibit, displayed on the CMP's second floor, explores the U.S. naval base's long history to shed light on its fraught present. Collaboratively curated by students in UCR's Public History Program and ten other universities, the exhibit opened in New York in December of last year and has traveled to universities around the country. This public history project investigates Guantánamo's history while fostering dialogue, with questions heading every panel, about the site's meanings and future.



Hoisting the US flag at GTMO, June 1898. | Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The Guantánamo exhibit presents the larger themes of Empire in incarceration while the works of Birk, Emdur, and Richard Ross, both of and from California's "golden gulag," connect these issues closer to home. Ross's striking photographs in "Architecture of Authority" explore the ways in which prison structures exercise authority and exert power over the people imprisoned within, drawing connections between these spaces from Guantánamo to Abu Ghraib to downtown Los Angeles. With the work of Emdur, Ross, and Birk on the first floor, a slide show displays photographs of each of California's prisons, a map tracing the development of prisons in California, and a series of facts and statistics, each one compelling, each one infuriating. From the right angle, I could eye an aerial photograph of a California prison in the same view as Birk's representation of it, further emphasizing Birk's juxtaposition of California as Eden with the physical reality of the prison on the landscape and philosophical challenge it poses to ideas of the Golden State.

Each day and every news story, the exhibition becomes more important and the issues it explores more urgent. As the hunger strike at Guantánamo Bay enters its fifth month as the twentieth anniversary of Guantánamo's last "closing" on June 8 -- as the result of hunger strikes by Haitian detainees -- approaches, Guantánamo remains open. In July 2013, inmates at California's Pelican Bay State Prison plan to resume the hunger strikes first initiated in 2011 by prisoners indefinitely detained in solitary confinement, some for over three decades. The suicide rate in California's overcrowded prisons is nearly twice the national average, and one inmate dies every eight days from inadequate medical care. While the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that conditions in California state prisons amount to "cruel and unusual punishment," the State has not fulfilled federal mandates to reduce the prison population. In the last decade, spending on higher education in California for schools like the University of California, Riverside, whose faculty and students curated this exhibit, has declined as expenditures for corrections have increased 25 percent. The 2.3 million Americans currently incarcerated, 70 percent of whom are people of color, constitute the largest prison population in the world and account for 25 percent of the global prison population, while the United States only accounts for 5 percent of the world's population.

In a recent press conference reiterating his stance that Guantánamo must be closed, President Obama said, "I think all of us should reflect on why exactly are we doing this." The "Geographies of Detention" exhibition inspires such reflection and begs the President's question -- "Why are we doing this?" -- at Guantánamo, in California, and throughout the United States. The exhibition's compelling offering of art and history, past and present, ask why and ask how -- how do these spaces act, on the landscape and inside the prison walls? Finally, what do these places and spaces mean -- for the nation, for democracy, for the landscape and environment, for the people -- inside and out?

*Works by Sandow Birk, Alyse Emdur, and Richard Ross are on view in the first floor gallery until September 7. The Guantánamo Public Memory Project is on the second floor through August 10.*

*Top Image: "Folsom State Prison (FSP) - Represa, CA," 2000, Sandow Birk. Collection of Brian Newkirk and Loren Ostrow. Courtesy of the artist and Koplin Del Rio Gallery, Los Angeles.*



### ***About the Author***

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