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Act of Torture

***Extraordinary Rendition* holds audience captive at Bemis Underground opening**

by Michael J. Krainak

Care for a syllogism? You know, that exercise in deductive reasoning that attempts to reach a valid conclusion based upon a given major and minor premise, such as:

- * All methods of torture are illegal.
- * Waterboarding is a method of torture.
- * Therefore waterboarding is illegal.

If you doubt either premise, check the definition of torture according to the Geneva Convention as well as the UN Convention against Torture, both of which banned this inhumane treatment and which the United States ratified in 1988.

Now try another:

- * Kidnapping terrorist suspects and transferring them to other countries that tolerate torture is a violation of human rights.
- * The United States has a record of the above since at least post-9/11, including CIA-sanctioned torture.
- * Therefore, the U.S. is guilty of human rights violations.

After some legal gobbledygook and political maneuvering, President George W. Bush declared an executive order permitting this “torture by proxy” and by all appearances, President Obama did the same in 2009. How is this possible on the world stage? By claiming our national security is more important than global human rights and justice.

And by sugarcoating “torture by proxy” with yet another euphemism, extraordinary rendition, the public is distanced and the dirty deed is rationalized as just another means to justify the end. As George W. first defended it in 2005 and then revealed in his recent memoirs that he would do so again, if it “saved lives.”

In peacetime or any other idealistic state, torture and extraordinary rendition may foster little debate, but in an era of full body scans and enhanced pat downs, the above doesn’t seem as cut and dried. Two area artists, Tim Guthrie and Doug Hayko, are counting on such equivocation in their new installation aptly named *Extraordinary Rendition*, on display in the Bemis Underground through Dec. 17.

The exhibit’s official purpose is “to encourage discourse,” but opening night, Nov. 19, this truly extraordinary show accomplished much more. It was clear that mixed media artist Guthrie and performance artist Hayko, in collaboration with nine other area artists, writers and instructors, as well as the omahaliveartdivision theater troupe, wanted to see how much their audience would tolerate U.S.-sanctioned practices in the name of national security.

Extraordinary Rendition accomplished this with a makeover of the Underground the likes of which this experimental alt venue hasn’t seen since, arguably, its heyday in 2006 with the Rob Gilmer curated *Dream House on Rye* and *Nuclear Dichotomies*, a collaboration of brothers Tim and Ken Guthrie. Along with Underground manager Brigitte McQueen and staff Joel “M’gthy” Damon and Matt Lowe, among others, the artists have transformed the venue into a multi-media experience that is at once enlightening and disquieting.

Guthrie and Hayko divided the Underground into three distinct spaces: a gallery featuring Guthrie’s large, close-up portraits of prisoners in pain during torture; a hidden surveillance room where “operatives” gather data and watch a bank of monitors displaying live images of viewers throughout the installation; and a climactic Interrogation Room wherein Hayko and fellow travelers gave a convincing portrayal of 20 questions by torture. Viewers who missed the opening performance will be treated to the video but it is unlikely to do the original justice, the opening was that unsettling.

In addition, the audience was searched and ID’d entering the installation while other members of the acting group served as security throughout the venue and were as inscrutable as the proverbial palace guard. If that weren’t ominous enough, high key lighting on the portraits and white clinical walls clashed dramatically with shadowy corners and dimly lit, narrow passageways creating a “low” ceiling and oppressive mise en scene.

At least two didactic materials were available, a handy “Official U.S. Booklet on Extraordinary Rendition” and a satiric pamphlet on the benefits of the above, both provided with exceptional graphic design here and throughout the show by Justin Kemerling and research from Carol Zuegner, a Creighton journalism professor. Also of note were labels for the drawings by *Reader* contributor Sarah Baker Hansen that poked fun at curatorial lingo even as they included key revelations of Guthrie’s art.

Viewers were also entertained by three diverse videos: kinetic sculptor Jamie Burmeister offered his highly effective interactive *Patriotism* which embedded audience silhouettes into a montage of instructional video; Guthrie created a jarring digital animation of Air Force One circling closer and closer to Omaha’s First National Bank tower, complete with sound effects and visible on two sides; multi-media artist Nolan Tredway’s wonderfully perverse digital animation, *Cautious Belly*, *Casus Belli*, an animal fable of bunny revenge on a hapless wolf that parodies the cycle of revenge and violence, another theme of this exhibit.

Tredway’s video takes place in the appropriately facetious Kiddy Room for families who prefer their children get their daily dose of violence in animation and video games. Artist and Chef Jesse Anderson sweetened the deal with her bunny-headed truffle pops and Burmeister provided even more pleasant distraction with a score or more of his signature *Vermin* little people sculptures strategically placed throughout the venue as if to remind viewers how tiny we are in any institutional or corporate scheme of things.

Yet as effective as all of the above was as prelude to the show’s main attraction, nothing quite prepared the opening night audience for what waited in the installation’s torture chamber. The Interrogation Room, as well as the Surveillance Room, was the spot-on collaboration of Andi and Lance Olsen and Peter Cales, who along with Guthrie and Hayko created a believable environment complete with an uncomfortable chair, clinical white walls, a sink and long hose, and an array of torture devices including forceps with barbed wire, chain and fish hooks.

The prisoner or High Value Detainee (Erik Vollstram) sat bound and blindfolded in what can only be described as an industrial diaper throughout the 3-4 hour ordeal. During a climactic 30-minute plus “interrogation” conducted by Hayko and his assistants (Vincent Carlson-Brown and Greg Jaxies), the “bloodied” victim appeared not to answer questions spoken, tellingly, in gibberish. Yet he suffered and not in silence as Hayko and company went after him with forceps, a drill and fists, repeatedly striking him in an oozing wound in his midsection, eventually throwing him to the floor and then reviving him just shy of passing out.

To call the performance convincing would be an understatement. Audience members later said they didn't know whether to rush to the victim's aid or just rush away. There was no clapping, only an audible gasp or two as viewers seemed frozen, awestruck perhaps either by the acting or what it portrayed, perhaps both. Some walked away early, unconvinced, unable to watch further or maybe disapproving of what they were witnessing on a personal or political level.

Until the performance, the exhibit's tone was incongruous as viewers moved socially and noisily from the gallery with wine in hand into the nether regions. In the Surveillance Room, the mood was respectful and quieter as the audience witnessed monitoring, decoding and redacting in a precise, matter-of-fact manner. Once in the Interrogation Room with the prisoner, talking virtually ceased as cell phones and cameras recorded the proceedings.

Just what sort of lasting impression this exhibit will have is yet to be determined. Extraordinary rendition and torture are a fact. Syllogistic arguments seldom win over political expediency and self-interest. Neither do art exhibits, even exceptional ones like this. Hayko and Guthrie will be satisfied just to have this show entered as testimony in the court of public opinion.

Extraordinary Rendition continues through Dec. 17 at the Bemis Underground, 724 S. 12th St. For details, visit extraordinaryrenditionart.com.



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