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Welcome to Media at Risk, a podcast from the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

Welcome to Gitmo Media.

The podcast is going to examine how we experience and understand the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base and its complex history.

We'll be considering how various media forms have shaped the perspectives of visitors, personnel, and detainees at the site and how they have used media to enhance public knowledge of this exceptional and often forgotten space.

My name is Daniel Grinberg, and I'm a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Meddiate Risk at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication.

I'm joined by my colleague, Mirra McCammon, an Annenberg PhD student and law student.

Our second episode of Gitmo Media will focus on the challenges of visually representing the complexity of Guantanamo Bay's military tribunals.

And to get insight into this issue, we will explore the journey of Janet Hamlin, author of Sketching Guantanamo, and I've been court sketch artist at Guantanamo since 2006 for various media.

In our last episode, we probed the strategic ways in which documentarian Joanna Hamilton sought to demonstrate the paradoxes and problems associated with the detention facilities themselves.

And in this episode, we look at a different task, the process of artistically representing the individuals, lawyers, detainees, and others who have been present at the Department of Defense's.

Military commissions over the past many years.

Hamlin began sketching the tribunals in Guantanamo Bay in 2006 and remains very invested in thinking about invisibility and absence as they relate to the visual storytelling associated with the site.

Today, I'll be speaking to Hamlet, not just about her book, but also the arc of her many trips to Gitmo and back.

Afterward, stick around to hear Daniel and me discuss some of our responses to her unique perspective as a court sketch artist.

How did you end up covering the courts at Gitmo?

Primarily I was in, I have been an illustrator, and the Associated Press was one of my clients and in 2002, the art director there said, you know, you'd be, I think you'd be an excellent chord artist.

I'd like to send you to the Scale trial in Norwalk, Connecticut.

And that was with the Kennedy relative was a high profile, and I spent a month doing it and I just absolutely loved the whole narrative visual storytelling aspect.

And then after that, the AP continued to use me for various court appearances.

They sent me to a military hearing and then Guantanamo came up with Omar Khadr being seen for the first time in in a few years, and they wanted to send a artist down because he was still a teenager at the time.

So that's when I went in April of 2006.

And then after that, they sent me a few times and then as of 2008, I went for the 9/11 through CNN and other media, and we made a pool arrangement with all media.

I'm wondering how you prepared to go to Gitmo for the first time, you know, it just, you know, before you knew what it was like, how you prepped.

Yeah, I grew up on military bases, and I think that really helped a lot.

My father was in the Air Force.

The thing about Air Force bases or any military base, uh, is that they're set up similarly.

There's a similar feeling to them, just like when you go to some kind of a franchise, uh, supermarket or something where you feel somewhat familiar with it, you can navigate it.

Um, so I kind of thought, well, Guantanamo is probably going to be like a tropical version of that, but I wasn't sure.

They give you a pretty lengthy list of things that they suggest, and surprisingly, like layers is one of them because everything is refrigerated like a meat locker.

So I had everything.

I had every kind of drawing material, lots of paper, uh, a cardboard drawing board because they didn't want to take anything metal in there.

And then my layers of things and then just kind of a wing and a prayer and ask a lot of questions and um that's, that's kind of how I mentally and physically prepared for it.

And so cameras, cameras and recording equipment are forbidden, and I guess I'm just wondering how that impacted.

Your process of documenting and drawing people.

I'm, I'm, I have no background in drawing and so this is uh your the the obstacles you face seem.

Somewhat unique to me as an outsider and I just wanted to probe that a little bit more.

Sure, yeah, actually, the obstacles in Guantanamo, it's, it's a daunting venue to sketch in because when you're in a courtroom here in the states.

You're actually in the physical open space.

There's no barriers really other than the fact that you have to sit either in a jury box, if it's, if there's no jury presence or in the front row, but at least you, you can hear them as they speak, you can see them, and your, your only impediments really are people who might be in front of you or files.

In um Guantanamo, it was like that initially.

They were very strict with the seating, and there were times when they had me sitting directly behind or in a position where I couldn't really see, you know, there's that trying to negotiate and navigate that, which is typical.

But when they built the um second courtroom for the 9/11 and anything sensitive, where they did, they wanted to control what we hear.

Um, they built it with the media viewing in the back.

And we have soundproof windows.

So I, you know, first of all, you're in the far back behind everybody, everybody who's in that inner room, and that includes troops, um, you know, paralegals, files, and they, they, and with the 9/11, there are 5 men.

And they're all sitting at the end of the table, but facing forward, so you're getting at best a 3 quarters view, and then you're behind this glass and you're hearing everything, like you'll hear all rise, and by the time you hear it, they've already sat down.

So you don't, you don't have your ears to guide you.

And for a while I did have these stadium glasses that had no metal in them.

They were just plastic glasses.

They were very ugly.

They had 22 sets.

I call them my fugly glasses.

Really, it's like Mr.

Magoo, right?

Um.

So they had these little dials on the side and you could extend, you know, telescope out the first layer and that way I could, you know, get a good view of what Khalid Sheikh Mohammed might be, you know, doing with his face.

You can see in the book, I, I did a little study of, of the split screen monitor that they would let me go into, but even that has started to get difficult because um I have to have a special escort.

They have to key in two locks to get in and trying to get to the uh Homeland Security officer to sign off on my sketches.

I can't go anywhere with those sketches until they're signed off.

Or at least they, they can never be moved to the media.

Yeah, and there's just, there's so much to unpack in what you just said, and I want to just ask a brief follow-up question, which is, how do you avoid fictionalizing a scene or skewing the truth when you have such little direct access to the, you know, the entirety of the courtroom.

Well, that's probably one of the most important.

Things that I try to not do.

One of the things I loved about this art director at the Associated Press is that, you know, he said, look, I know in a lot of court scenes, you know, people I've seen, you know, artists move, you know, make a person's head this big and move people in the proximity of that and Sort of, uh, you know, create sort of.

A montage, but it may not be accurate as to where those people actually are, and he instructed me that he wanted, no matter how it turned out, he wanted everybody to be where they're supposed to be.

And you've, I mean, you've, you've drawn so many different groups of people at Gitmo.

You've drawn families of 9/11 victims, detainees and their lawyers, military judges.

Journalists, uh, and I'm, I'm wondering who, who is the hardest to draw?

Is there a, is there a group that that you struggle with?

Oh, yeah, there, there's definitely, there are times, so many times I'll that I'm, I'm not happy with.

What I'm capturing in terms of likeness because of the sheer lack of time.

Um, and the fact is, once, once I'm done with the drawing there on premises and it's been signed off, in my mind, it's pretty much a frozen image and to add to it.

Uh, you know, would be altering it.

Um, I might subtract like smudges of things, but to add to it, I won't.

So I'm, I'm kind of stuck with whatever time I have there.

And is that your own rule or your your editor's rule, or it's, it's the rule, in my mind.

It's how I interpret whenever they sign off, whenever I get Homeland Security, the security officer who signs off on the drawing.

I feel like what he's seen is what he signed off on.

So in my own mind, in my own sense of integrity, and how I see it is that's what he signed off on and if I was to go grab a photo of somebody and and adjust something, um.

I would be altering it.

The, the seating can be difficult, um.

Ah, you know, the family members, if they pull the blue curtain, sometimes they do, but with time I have been able to. bounce around in there and sometimes stand where the family is and get their perspective of it.

Can you talk a little bit more about that because I don't think everyone would fully know what the blue curtain is.

Um, it's such a bizarre space again.

Well, yeah, the, the blue curtain is there to give victim family members privacy, um, because, you know, they may not feel comfortable with the media or Some of the NGOs, uh, lawyers, uh, whoever is observing, you know, and there are times have been base personnel.

If there's room, they'll, they'll come and watch.

Um, and it's a privacy curtain, and uh I think a sign of respect, but often, um, the family members don't want that pulled.

They want people to see.

Them holding up photos of their loved ones or their reactions.

I have to be very careful because part of the rule is we cannot go up and engage them in conversation, uh, but if they engage us in conversation then, and then it's OK.

Uh, so I'll sometimes talk to the escort and say, is there anybody here that's not comfortable?

And they'll rearrange their seatings so that they won't be part of my drawing or I'll just do an outline, um, out of respect, and there was a a while initially when I battled with the.

The feeling of, of I didn't want to seem predatory because a lot of times, you know, people are crying or there is something that they're saying that's sensitive or with Omar Khadr when his widow was up on the stand and she was reading a letter children wrote to Omar about the loss of her husband who was a medic who'd been killed by a grenade.

Initially I've been told that I couldn't sketch her, but then she herself through, I was standing next to her spokeswoman.

It was again one of those moments where she's right there, but I can't talk to her.

So I said to her spokeswoman, um, is there any way in which I could draw an outline or or something of her there?

Um, and she said, no, you can draw me.

But, you know, there was that feeling like, I hate to ask this, but I have to because you're part of what's going on here.

That that feeling of wanting to be, you know, disengaged and doing my job, but also sensitive to what I'm doing and respectful, uh, and fair to both sides.

And that neutrality that I think is so important, you know, when you're trying to capture or or be a journalist.

Um, you want to give the information, but you don't want to be one side or the other.

There was a time when Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, uh, did not like the, the first time I drew him.

And um, you know, there were times when I think they, they think they've covered all the rules and then something like this comes up.

And it was the first time I was drawing and I was very nervous.

He was far away.

He kept turning and sort of giving me, you know, prime view with his pulling his elastic goggles up, and I did this horrible likeness, and then I knew I still had the other 4 guys to do and so I knew it wasn't great, but I had to move on and finish the other ones.

This time around, they decided to take it in, to take it back to show the legal team in there just to see if they were OK with it, and that, as you know, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was not OK with it, and I just happened to see him through the class, you know, holding the drawing and shaking his head and frowning, and I thought, oh crap.

I don't blame him.

It's a terrible likeness, um, and for them to bring it out.

And I thought, well, you know, well, I didn't know what they were going to say, but I thought, well, you know, maybe this is an opportunity to It's embarrassing, but it's an opportunity in which I can make this a better drawing, a more accurate depiction of, of what he looks like.

So it kind of turned into a um lemon to lemonade situation, uh, but it was also an outrageous thing for other people to say, well, how does he have that right?

The the nose issue was quoted in time, it was, you know, on the cover of Newsday.

These hurdles come up out of nowhere and you just have to try to You know, as as infuriating as it can be, um, I keep thinking, well.

It's got to be everything in the military is pretty black and white.

I know that from my father, you know, and they, it's part of it is sometimes infuriating, but it really comes from this point of security, try to be reasonable.

And so I had thought in my mind, what would, what would, uh, Gandhi do or what would Martin Luther do, King, you know, they would do a sit-in.

And so that was my, my way in which to deal with it, and it was effective.

I mean, when you think back on that.

You know, do you, do you have moments where you think that perhaps the accused should be able to veto all drawings?

Or how, I guess I'm just interested in how you weigh the ethics of it outside of the the legal system that exists, or if that just doesn't factor into the process.

You know, I, I, I would think that they should have they could at least make a comment.

I think, you know, of freedom of of being able to To make comments and suggestions, but actual censorship, I don't think so.

You know, if there's something truly sensitive, I would try to be respectful of all, you know, of why and how.

Yeah, I mean, to, to that end, yes, I mean, let's let me know if there's a comment there, negative or positive.

But, but actually censoring it, I don't think that would be, no, it's just such a.

Complex ecosystem.

And I'm wondering how you explain your work to people who've never been to Gitmo.

Um, that's a random random question to lob about you, but.

Yeah, just in the way that I did with you where it's, it's in a, you know, people say, why no cameras and I'll say, well.

You know, there are personnel there who don't want to be photographed, you know, they're they're on assignment or they have families that they don't.

It's a very inflammatory venue for a lot of people.

It's painful or there's a lot of questions there and sensitivity there.

So there are people that, you know, can't be identified, the troops who stand guard, who line the courtroom, some of the interpreters, some of the paralegals who are, you know, wearing modest garb.

On the defense.

So I, and also there's always the risk of a camera capturing something you could blow up and you could read a document.

So there's a lot of this sensitivity um that explains why no cameras.

If we get to the point with a jury, you know, with the military who act as a jury in Hamdan's trial, I was able to draw outlines and and show sort of their gender and their color and their rank.

Just not their features, but with another venue with Omar Khater, oh, the judge wouldn't let me draw an outline even, not even a silhouette.

So then I was reduced to drawing just the blue pieces of paper.

So I just tell people in, you know, that the big challenges are Working within the parameters, being sensitive, and the and the physical barriers.

Does sound or audio, you know, when you're in the courtroom, how does sound impact what you draw?

The censored audio is surreal.

There was a time when somebody censored it and we found out that they were, there was somebody outside of the room who could white out the noise, and that was a huge deal.

It's like, wait a minute.

Who else is hearing this?

Sound isn't something that I can rely on, but sometimes I'm surprised by how somebody might, how high uh Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's voice is, for instance, when you hear somebody actually speak, it's kind of, wow, you know, that's not what I expected.

Um.

The audio quality doesn't bother me, it's just the delayed audio that's challenging.

I was going to go back December 7th, 1st through the 7th, but they canceled the um 9/11 pretrial hearings.

It is like a muscle to be able to draw from life.

I'm, I'm hoping to go back at some point this year and capture something relevant.

It's, you know, what, what do they guys look like now?

Are they still wearing these camo vests?

You know, are there witnesses that I could start capturing?

I know that there's been some kind of witnesses and some imagery that they project that I'd like to try to incorporate and, and, and start grabbing and keep that story being told.

Listening to that interview that you just did, it really made me think about all of the different interests that had to be balanced, so the privacy of the people in the courtroom, the legal requirements, the particular restrictions at Guantanamo Bay, but also the need to access information and to be able to understand what these military processes look like.

So with with all of those interests intention.

I'm wondering what you think the right or the ideal balance between privacy and and access are.

I think that's a great question, you know, and it's one that I tried to tease out in in my my conversation with with Janet Hamlin, uh, because I think that when it comes to.

The ethics uh of depicting people at Guantanamo, uh, there's so many different stakeholders in the tribunal. uh, there's the defense lawyers, there's the detainees, uh, as she mentioned, there's also um victims' families and, and then there's journalists themselves who are who are are there many, many times it's their first time.

And their only time uh and so I guess I too share your question.

And then what do you think the impacts of these court drawings are in the larger public imaginary of Guantanamo?

I think I guess 11 aspect of of her work that saddens me is that there are so few uh court sketch artists and I think that reflects the the political economy of of Gitmo Media and that there are so few editors who are willing to invest in in sending court sketch artists down to Gitmo.

It's it's pricey to go.

Uh, and, and although she has done some work for uh a variety of of outlets, uh, she, she's one of the very few people to be doing what she's doing.

And I think that speaks to the fact that there's a lot of people who are A lot of people in in both the press and and in the broader world who are interested in forgetting Gitmo.

And then given that we've both been studying this area of media in Guantanamo Bay, I'm curious, what about your interview with Janet surprised you or opened up your eyes to something you hadn't really considered before?

Well, you know, at one point she talks about Uh, kind of the ethical code that she follows as a court sketch artist, and I think that it's interesting to note that, you know, there are so few people doing the work that she's doing so she mentioned at one point how she doesn't change a sketch after it has been approved uh by government officials, right?

And that was so fascinating to me because I thought wow, I, you know, having gone there as uh to Gitmo as a journalist, you know, I was tweaking with the words that I was using to tell the stories that I had seen there, uh, that I thought were important to tell for for weeks and weeks and weeks and there's a certain temporality to her work that is very unique, you know, she's very quickly sketching and that's the sketch that she's.

That she's got and that she sticks with and that goes to publication for the most part so I found that to be uh somewhat medium specific perhaps surprise and really appreciated the detail that she went into in the process.

Yeah, it's really impressive to make something that quickly.

In this very fraught setting that could potentially live on for years or decades as a record of a very public trial that people still know very little about.

It's this interesting mix of the immediate and the long term.

Yeah, and you know we also talked about kind of the the process of going back to Gitmo so many times and uh you know, I'm I'm eager to see her future work and and also to think about.

Uh, the, the challenges of, of depicting, uh, Guantanamo detainees as they leave Gitmo and, and, you know, uh, go beyond the courtroom.

And that concludes our episode for today.

Gitmo Media is a podcast series that seeks to address questions of power, control, and risk as they relate to one of the world's most controversial detention facilities.

Thanks for listening.

We'd like to express our gratitude to Janet Hamlin for taking time to talk to us about her experiences at Gitmo and her insights into its many paradoxes.

Barbie Zelizer directs the Center for Media Risk.

This episode was edited by Erin Shapiro and produced by Daniel Grenberg and me, Mira McCammon.

To learn more about the series, check out our supplementary material at the Media at Risk website at ASC Mediarisk.org.