

## In Stark 'Authority,' artist asks the tough questions

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*A California prison's communal room is among Richard Ross's empty spaces. (By Richard Ross)*

There are images in "Architecture of Authority: Photographs by Richard Ross" that will make your heart race, your palms sweat and your blood pressure spike. Many of these 44 large-format color photographs -- now on display at the National Building Museum -- are of empty rooms constructed from the most institutional materials: cinder-block walls, linoleum floors, standard-issue white ceiling tiles and perhaps a few metal fittings glaring in the light of fluorescent bulbs.

They are interrogation rooms, holding cells and isolation booths, captured with a spare geometric beauty that is as compelling as it is disturbing.

Even for people who have never been arrested, questioned by police or tortured by the government, these spaces will recall familiar emotions: insecurity, fear, anger, impatience. Ross's photographs explore an idea familiar in the history of culture: that authority goes deep into all of us, that it is at work in the doctor's office as well the penitentiary, that it penetrates our bodies and souls from the cradle to the grave.

But that isn't the whole of this exhibition, even if these images -- from immigration offices, prisons and military detention sites -- are the most horrifying and evocative. Ross also includes high schools, mental hospitals, churches and mosques, as well as a meeting room where decisions about the front page of the New York Times are made. Some of these images are clearly meant as wild cards or humorous asides. But they add up to a second exhibition within the larger one -- an exhibition that challenges the viewer to make distinctions between hard and soft authority and between the sites of real cruelty (torture and execution chambers) and mere annoyance (a DMV office in Santa Barbara, Calif.).

It isn't easy avoiding the political suction of this exhibition, which opened last May at the Aperture Gallery in New York. Ross, who has taught at the University of California at Santa Barbara for more than three decades, has extensive experience as a magazine photographer and as an architectural photographer through his work documenting restoration of the historic villa of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. In an essay accompanying a book of Ross's images, we learn that the photographer began the project after Sept. 11, 2001. He was exploring, in architectural terms, the United States' response to terrorism, the increase of surveillance and the prisons at Abu Ghraib (where he gained extraordinary access) and Guantanamo Bay. And he wasn't pleased.



*Segregation cells at the Abu Ghraib prison were photographed by Richard Ross, whose images for the "Architecture of Authority" exhibit were taken after Sept. 11, 2001. (By Richard Ross)*

"The United States," he says, "is not America anymore."

The exhibition is dominated by an understated, but terrifying, horizontal image of temporary segregation cells from Abu Ghraib, taken before news of the prisoner abuse-torture scandal broke in 2004. It is a dun-colored photograph framing four simple structures that are little more than phone-booth-size cages. Brown tarps, secured on the ground with green sandbags, offer minimal protection from the sun.

They are decidedly provisional structures. Like several other images in this collection, the signs of human improvisation -- tweaking or retrofitting functional space -- give them a particular power. The cages were too hot, so someone threw a cloth over them. The cloth blew in the wind, so they weighted them with sandbags. If you have an idealized notion of architecture as planned space, this doesn't seem like architecture at all. The only forethought that went into designing these spaces was a primitive sense that prisoners are animals, to be caged, with no concern for human well-being.

Like most of the spaces Ross photographed, the cages are empty. And that, too, is part of their power. The silence is palpable, which invites us to question them all the more closely. In turn, they are even more mysterious. Rooms for communication between prisoners and visitors are photographed in such a way that you can't tell on which side is incarceration and which side freedom. An image of the Iraqi National Assembly suggests not so much a governmental space but rather a theater, and some of the seats contain photographs of unidentified people. Are these images of dead legislators? And who scratched the ghostly image of a cross on the yellow walls of an immigration and customs holding cell in Los Angeles?

Ross's basic aesthetic is understatement. He captures the segregation cells at Abu Ghraib square on, brightly lit in the sun, with no commentary added. But this bare-bones documentary style has become its own form of indictment. Of course, we know what went on at Abu Ghraib, the torture and dogs and that man standing on a box with his arms outstretched, wired up like a Christmas tree.

If the show ended here, it would be agitprop. But Ross also includes an image of an art gallery in New York, which is as spare and severe as any police interrogation room. A high school corridor is juxtaposed with a line of prison cells. Phone booths in a nice hotel are compared with a shabby religious confessional booth.

Some of these analogies are explicitly emphasized by the exhibition's layout, but they're all implicit in Ross's choice of images. How seriously are we to take them? Is a high school corridor really the equivalent of a prison? Is religious authority equivalent to the penal system?

Obviously not. If you want to make superficial connections, the exhibition won't stop you. But that would be an impoverished experience of Ross's work. To his great credit, his images actually break down ideas about authority as much as they connect them. Authority might be a part of our lives from birth to death, but it operates in distinct ways. If you resist the simplistic idea of authority that comes from a cursory reading of the works of Michel Foucault -- the obvious philosophical inspiration for this kind of show -- then you start seeing the architecture of authority in more subtle ways. Some spaces are about warehousing people. Some are about dividing them hierarchically. Some are about controlling movement. Some are about surveillance. And many of them -- think high school -- are simply about not caring enough to spend the money to make a humane environment.

That might not make you feel any better about the architecture of authority. But it is evidence that Ross's photographic journey turned out to be a lot more productive than his original outrage after the 2001 terrorist attacks might have suggested. He used the camera to make distinctions, rather than merely construct an argument. And his exhibition invites us to do the same.

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