
Exhibition Review: Andres Serrano: Torture

Andres Serrano: Torture. Stills Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland: November 30, 2018–March 3, 2019.

Ten photographs from Andres Serrano's *Torture* series were recently exhibited at Stills Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland. The large images on display belong to a comprehensive body of work that Serrano completed in 2015. The artist traveled to over fifteen cities in Europe, where he photographed torture museums, concentration camps, Stasi prisons, victims of torture, and medieval torture devices. In addition, he staged torture practices with tens of volunteers. Chosen for the display at Stills were six images of four volunteers placed in degrading positions simulating torture tactics, three images of historical torture devices, and one portrait of the ex-Central Intelligence Agency analyst and whistleblower John Kiriakou—the man who revealed the CIA's widespread use of waterboarding to interrogate al-Qaeda prisoners in 2007.¹ Through the documentation of multiple subjects, locations, and objects linked to torture, Serrano's works flatten time in favor of pointing to torture as a panhistorical and universal human practice. The artist's aestheticization of torture describes its brutal reality and underlines the continuing use and cover-up of inhumane crimes against persons considered a "threat" to the status quo.

Torture has been used for punishment, shaming, and interrogation throughout human history. The act is administered by a ruling power and its executioners, where both parties are motivated, and moralize torture, by an overarching ideology of their time. Today, physical and psychological torture is exercised on people deemed politically dangerous in the way medieval torture was used to punish heretic behavior. Acquitted from questioning the ethics of brutalizing human beings by contemporary ruling principles, torture executioners and their superiors wield absolute power. When they are given instruments of power paired with a righteous impetus, people can often become dangerous and sadistic. A series of psychological experiments conducted in the United States in the 1960s and '70s, including the Milgram experiment on obedience to authority figures and the Stanford prison experiment, suggested that when participants were given the instructions and the power to harm or seemingly harm other volunteers, the vast majority complied with the instructing

1. John Kiriakou, "I went to prison for disclosing the CIA's torture. Gina Haspel helped cover it up," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/i-went-to-prison-for-disclosing-the-cias-torture-gina-haspel-helped-cover-it-up/2018/03/15/9507884e-27f8-11e8-874b-d517e912fi25_story.html?utm_term=.7754633f9d84.

authority, who in these cases were the experiments' directors. If one of torture's brutal realities is that people can apply it in spite of ethical dilemmas, Serrano's photographs reveal the thin veneer of humanity and kindness that can be stripped by the appropriate combination of power and justification.

Most photographs from the *Torture* series were taken at the Foundry—a nineteenth-century armament factory in Maubourguet, France, that produced military equipment during World War I for France's National Defence. The space was recently acquired by a political, an arts organization concerned with social and political issues, who supported Serrano in developing the series. At the Foundry, Serrano assumed the role of a torturer, and under the guidance of military personnel, photographed close to forty local volunteers instructed to assume degrading positions. The participants were hooded, tied up, shackled, submerged in water, or forced to hold stress positions for extended periods of time.

In addition, the artist photographed medieval torture devices. Some were borrowed from museum collections, while others were produced on-site by residents of Maubourguet. Other photos were taken in torture museums, concentration camps, and Stasi prisons, where Serrano focused on their empty interiors, presenting them as similar gruesome stages. In addition, the artist photographed portraits of actual victims of torture. One was Fatima, a woman who was imprisoned and tortured by the Sudanese Security Forces. His other subjects included the Hooded Men—fourteen individuals suspected of involvement with the Irish Republican Army during the Troubles. As part of Operation Demetrius in Northern Ireland, the British Army subjected the Hooded Men to the “five techniques”: hooding, stress positions, white noise, sleep deprivation, and food and water deprivation. None of the fourteen men were ever convicted of a criminal offense.²

Serrano's series is not a historiography, nor is it an evolution of torture through the ages. Instead, his works discuss torture as a persistent feature of the human condition. Stills showed a selection of Serrano's photographs primarily taken at the Foundry in 2015. Their oversized dimensions (88 × 72 inches) and staging recalled the grandiose extreme realism used by Renaissance artists to convey important cultural and political narratives.

The staging chosen by Serrano further contributed to that connection. For *Untitled XIV* (2015), the artist had instructed one of the torture volunteers at the Foundry to slump his torso over the edge of a concrete basin, his head wrapped in a bloodied cloth. The image's composition, along with the prop, is reminiscent of Jacques Louis-David's painting *The Death of Marat* (1793). Serrano's use of theatrical staging and strong lighting can be traced to his earlier works. In his series *The Morgue* (1992), he photographed the corpses of anonymous victims in New York City's morgue, and in *Residents of New York* (2014) depicted New York City's homeless. *Torture* contributes to the artist's practice of giving center stage to uncomfortable, even taboo, subject matter [Image 1].

The *Torture* exhibition also included individual photographs of three torture devices, each presented in such a way as to make the items resemble grotesque variations of opulent still-life paintings. The *Pear of Anguish* (2015) photograph depicts the eponymous medieval

2. “The Hooded Men: torture, lies and a quest for justice,” *Amnesty International*, October 8, 2018, www.amnesty.org.uk/hooded-men-torture-uk-ireland.



IMAGE 1. *Pear of Anguish, The Inquisition Museum, Carcassonne* (2015) from the series *Torture* (2015) by Andres Serrano; courtesy the artist and a/political.

tool commonly used to punish, or to elicit a confession from a prisoner by gagging or evisceration. By positioning it on a red velvet cloth, Serrano makes the pear of anguish appear like an item of luxury, rather than an austere torture implement.

He also photographed *Scold's Bridle IV* (2015), capturing a mouth-restraining device typically forced on women accused of witchcraft and gossip between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³ The object was borrowed from the collection of Hever Castle in Kent, UK, and photographed placed on top of a polished wooden base.

3. "Scold's bridle," British Library, www.bl.uk/collection-items/scolds-bridle.



IMAGE 2. *Untitled X-1* out of *Untitled X-1, Untitled X-2, Untitled X-3* (2015) from the series *Torture* (2015) by Andres Serrano; courtesy the artist and a/political.

Both the *Pear of Aguish* and *Scold's Bridle IV* confront the audience with a barbaric past. When displayed among the remaining photographs, however, their meaning is transformed. The images no longer evoke revolting violent practices of an opaque and distant past; they begin to resonate with contemporary examples of torture—an identical practice, only by different methods.

An example of Serrano's reference to recent instances of torture was displayed in his triptych of images, *Untitled X-1, Untitled X-2, and Untitled X-3* (2015). The central image in the triptych depicts one of the Foundry volunteers, hooded and draped in cloth, with their



IMAGE 3. *Untitled X-2* out of *Untitled X-1*, *Untitled X-2*, *Untitled X-3* (2015) from the series *Torture* (2015) by Andres Serrano; courtesy the artist and a/political.

arms outstretched. The picture mimics the infamous photograph of Ali Shallal al-Qaisi, who was imprisoned and interrogated by the CIA at the Abu Ghraib prison in 2003. Captives at Abu Ghraib were subjected to torture, sexual abuse, and humiliation, with one instance of death at the hands of CIA torturers. The incidents received widespread criticism after photographs of torture victims circulated in mass media.⁴ Among the most recognized

4. Seymour H. Hersh, "Chain of Command: How the Department of Defense mishandled the disaster at Abu Ghraib," *New Yorker*, May 17, 2004, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/17/chain-of-command-2.



IMAGE 4. *Untitled X-3* out of *Untitled X-1*, *Untitled X-2*, *Untitled X-3* (2015) from the series *Torture* (2015) by Andres Serrano; courtesy the artist and a/political.

images was that of Shallal al-Qaisi, who was shown standing on a box, hooded, arms outstretched, with electric wires attached to his fingertips. *Torture's* volunteer, placed in the center of the triptych, is flanked by two industrial metal railings, formally imitating the wires attached to Shallal al-Qaisi's body [Images 2–4].

Kiriakou's portrait is the only photograph in the exhibit that does not express violence overtly. His revelation of the CIA's use of torture in interrogation speaks to the ongoing practices employed by government officials. Recently, Kiriakou wrote an article for the

Washington Post, expressing his objection to Donald Trump's nomination of Gina Haspel as CIA's next director, pointing out that she is known for her advocacy of using torture tactics during interrogation, and covering up the brutalities inflicted upon victims deemed "dangerous to national security."⁵

During his electoral campaign, Trump infamously stated that "torture works," backing waterboarding and "much worse."⁵ When he was faced with opposition, he responded, "even if it doesn't work, they deserve it."⁶ After completing the *Torture* series, Serrano stated that "it's easy to torture people when you have power over them."⁷ This series frames Trump's justification for backing torture as being for the "safety" of the United States, and as a moral opposition to "non-American values." The exhibit also showed Serrano's justification for staging torture to create art that points to the transhistorical use of barbaric tactics against people suspected of threatening contemporary values. ■

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5. Jenna Johnson, "Trump says 'torture works,' backs waterboarding and 'much worse,'" *Washington Post*, February 17, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-torture-works-backs-waterboarding-and-much-worse/2016/02/17/4c9277be-d59c-11e5-b195-2e29a4e13425_story.html?utm_term=.c1dcefeada3b.

6. Ben Jacobs, "Donald Trump on waterboarding: 'Even if it doesn't work they deserve it,'" *Guardian*, November 24, 2015, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/24/donald-trump-on-waterboarding-even-if-it-doesnt-work-they-deserve-it.

7. Eleanor Heartney, "In conversation with Andres Serrano," *Brooklyn Rail*, October 5, 2017, <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/10/art/ANDRES-SERRANO-with-Eleanor-Heartney>.

