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Art review: 'Bearing Witness: Daniel Heyman' at Laband Art Gallery, LMU

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Several years ago, Washington civil rights attorney Susan Burke invited Philadelphia artist Daniel Heyman to accompany her on an extraordinary mission. She was traveling to the Middle East to interview Iraqi detainees who were tortured and victimized in Abu Ghraib prison in the wake of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Baghdad, in preparation for a series of civil cases against American contractors filed on their behalf. Heyman was asked to paint their portraits as the men recounted what happened.

The results of that remarkable invitation are on view at the [Laband Art Gallery](#) at Loyola Marymount University in Westchester. Portraits of 20 Iraqis, mostly painted in simple gouache on strong Japanese and Chinese paper, line the walls and fill a long display case. They will break your heart.

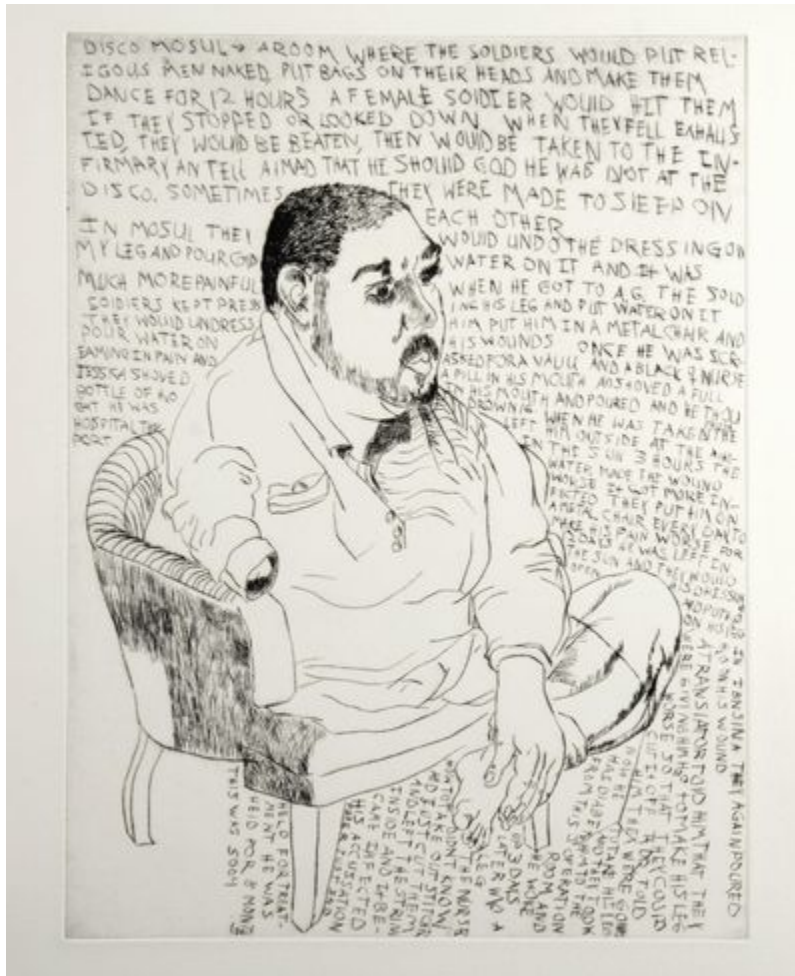
The portrait busts are straightforward and unembellished, mostly head and shoulders, sometimes in three-quarter view, without any indication of a specific setting. The upper body of the bust tends to be less detailed and more sketchy than the highly personalized faces. Occasionally a hand rests beneath a chin.

Heyman appears to have drawn and painted with considerable speed -- quick pencil lines beneath brush marks that are clear, concise, unfussy. Contours are filled in with strokes of descriptive color.

What gives Heyman's portraits their quiet power is an unexpected juxtaposition: Lips are sealed shut on every face, as if the temporal flow of speech has been silenced, replaced by a steady and immovable gaze; yet, excerpts of the sitter's testimony, sometimes jittery and disjointed and invariably horrifying, swirl around his head in ornate scrolls of looping language and blunt blocks of text.

The general and the specific, the impermanent and the eternal are held in uneasy tension.

So are the conflicting functions of portraiture and torture that Heyman puts on frank display. Portraiture has always meant to cobble together the mysterious elements of individual human identity into a momentary whole. Torture, by contrast, means to rip human identity asunder.



Portraiture and torture are polar opposites. Joining them, Heyman has found an elemental means for representing human horror in a manner that is neither exploitative nor sentimental.

A face, fleshy in the cheeks and neck, a mustache crowning a full lower lip, is next to a multicolored block of words. They describe a jailer who ties a rope around the man's wrist, slips it around a pipe overhead, hoists the man off the ground and lets him hang in space for several hours. The words on the page hang there too -- none more than a serpentine line that reads, "There is one other thing that happened ... but I cannot talk about it."

Another man describes his torture at the hands of former U.S. Army reservists Lynndie England and Charles Graner Jr., later convicted of prisoner abuse in the Abu Ghraib scandal. Their degrading photographs exploded in the media in 2004. Recognizing these soldiers' names in the narrative pulls you up short.

Ultimately, though, the realization works to underscore the distinctiveness of Heyman's paintings. Today we are so used to joining the word "documentary" with "photography" that it is easy to forget that an eyewitness account can be recorded in paint.

In a manner that is very different from documentary camera work, Heyman's documentary paintings put us squarely in the room with men who are telling their stories. Camera images easily maintain an illusion of transparency -- of nothing standing between the viewer and the viewed, even though photographs, film and video are never truly transparent. Camera images are always framed. Whatever unseen qualifier resides just outside the picture's rectangle is elided, as if it did not exist.

They are also ubiquitous -- and therefore ordinary. Portrait paintings are as singular as these men's stories.

And a painting is never transparent. A painted portrait of a farmer, a father or a taxi driver is a point of contact visually constructed by an artist. A farmer speaking of innocent imprisonment, a father telling of receiving a bloody beating, a taxi driver describing fingers smashed and broken becomes visceral, an experience lived through time. A photograph can create the instantaneous illusion of being there, which packs the wallop of a shock; but your relationship to painted images is slow, ruminative and not prurient.

In her extraordinary recent book, "[The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence](#)," New York University journalism professor Susie Linfield works hard to dismantle critical shibboleths about the deadening effects supposedly fostered by the proliferation of photographs like those taken at Abu Ghraib. A portrait painting does a similar job more simply, as attorney Burke smartly understood, because it can suffer no such mistaken interpretation: It wears its viewpoint on its sleeve, connecting an artist's humanity directly with the subject.

"Bearing Witness: Daniel Heyman" was organized by Laband Art Gallery director Carolyn Peter and Cris Moss, gallery director at Oregon's Linfield College, where the show travels next. (An earlier version was seen at Wesleyan University and Swarthmore College.) Other portions of the show feature prints, some done collaboratively with poet Nick Flynn; a single portrait of a Marine who was stationed at Guantanamo; portraits of U.S. immigrants; and African American fathers who have been in and out of prison. They add another dimension of Heyman's art, as does a wall-size plywood engraving of a house of cards bedecked with eagles and revealingly titled, "When Photographers Are Blinded, Eagles' Wings Are Clipped."

But the Iraqi portraits are what haunt the show. The nausea they induce is neither sensationalistic nor salacious. Infuriating is more like it. They will break your heart -- and they will also make you angry.

Daniel Heyman: Bearing Witness, Laband Art Gallery, Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, L.A. (310) 338-2880. Through March 13. Closed Monday and Tuesday.
cfa.lmu.edu/laband

--Christopher Knight

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Photos: Daniel Heyman, "The Broomstick Was Metal," 2008, gouache on paper; "Disco Mosul," 2006, drypoint; Credit: Laband Art Gallery