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Art as an Escape from Torture

Ilana Mesnick

Binghamton University--SUNY

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Art as an Escape from Guantánamo

Ilana Mesnick

How might art serve as an alternative outlet in lieu of a legal forum?

Geneva Convention

- Article 17: prisoners are not to be tortured or coerced in any way during questioning or interrogation
- Article 14: “respect for the person goes far beyond physical protection and must be understood as covering all the essential attributes of the human person.”

Torture Memos

- Narrowed the definition of torture and enhanced interrogation techniques
- Didn't recognize detainees as POW

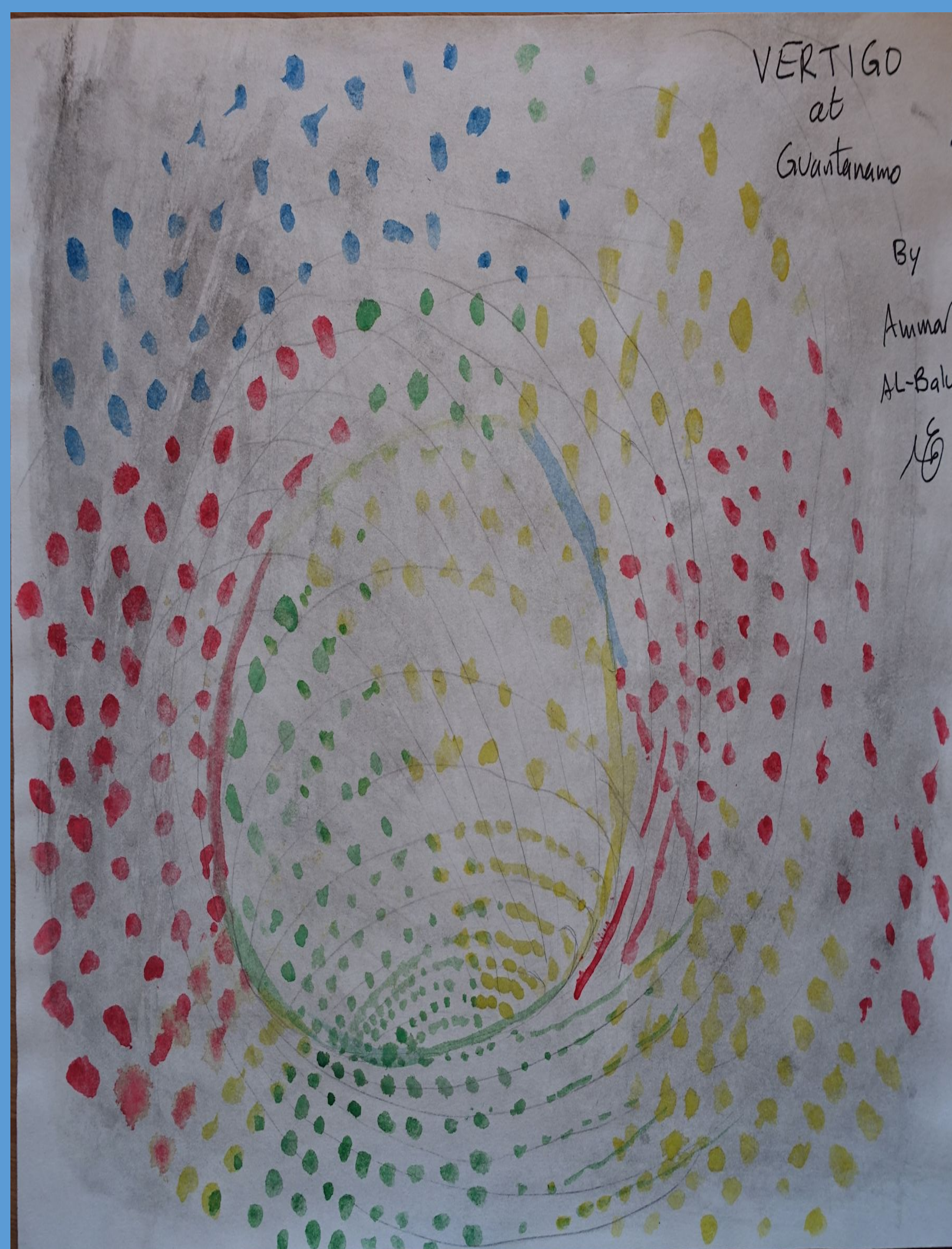
Legal Forum

- Detainees lack legal standing
- Are only entitled to Habeas Corpus Rights
- Are excluded from international, federal, and military jurisdiction

“You know what, I don't want food. Please take the food away. Please, I don't want clothing or medicine. Just bring me my colors and art supplies. I need to paint. This is my escape gate from this hell.”



Muhammad Ansi, Hands Holding Flowers through Bars, 2016.
<https://www.artfromguantanamo.com/>



Ammar Al-Baluchi, Vertigo at Guantanamo.
<https://www.artfromguantanamo.com/>

Muhammad Ansi

- From Yemen and was detained for 15 years
- Uses symbolism in his artwork (siblings are flowers)
- Painting captures the longing for freedom and escape
- Dehumanizing aspect to the painting because the person behind bars is not identifiable

Ammar Al-Baluchi

- Still at GTMO and is housed in a black site (charged with a crime)
- Suffered a traumatic brain injury from beatings – thus causing him to have vertigo
- Struggles of his life represented in the dizzying nature of the painting
- Reflects his mentality and how he is affected by torture

Guantánamo Art Program:

- Bi-weekly meetings
- 45 minutes long
- Began in 2010
- Shackled to the floor

Methodology:

Analyzing artwork made by detainees to see how they reflect their frustrations with not having a legal standing

Implications

- Because detainees don't have access to a fair legal forum, art is one of their only outlets
- Opening of art exhibits like Ode to the Sea has made art from GTMO more popular
- U.S. government started to restrict art from getting out of GTMO - lack of legality in this process and taking away detainees' voices

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