

exhibition

For anyone who has ever been or ever known an asylum seeker, walking into the 'Border Country' exhibition is like opening the door of a freezer. On each wall, oversized and clinically exact images lead you into the icy mansions of the 'detention estate': the UK's network of locked and guarded Immigration Removal Centres which confine several thousand human beings for weeks, months or (in some cases) years at a time.

Each room shows a different system of surveillance. As I look at the blue and red seats in Harmondsworth near Heathrow – blue for visitors, red for the detainee, no crossing, no giving food, no writing anything down – I remember the spacelock any visitor has to enter, the triple fingerprinting, the endless waits and occasional no-shows,

Repelling borders

▶ **MELANIE FRIEND** spent four years listening to the quiet voices of detainees in the UK's immigration detention centres, so that her 'Border Country' exhibition could give them a voice. **AMANDA SEBESTYEN** reports



The domestic visits' room, Harmondsworth immigration removal centre



Detainees' recreation area, Lindholme immigration removal centre

the ranks of righteously aggressive immigration officers.

The jargon of control is plentiful here. Other images show the 'sterile area' – an American prison term used to designate an outside yard between induction and confinement blocks – at Harmondsworth's massive new neighbour, Colnbrook. These proliferating purpose-built centres have architecture as sanitised as their bureaucratic language. We could be looking at offices, housing precincts, benefits waiting rooms, surgeries – give or take a trimming of razor wire.

In fact, I start to wonder if a viewer without the horrible experience of our well-hidden detention system might find these bland interiors nothing much to worry about. In the all-grey visiting lounge of Tinsley House, near Gatwick, will they see the black line on the floor that the detainee can't cross? I needn't have worried, because each picture is really a waiting room ushering you inside, step by painful step. On either side of each scene is a small speaker and a suitably institutional chair.

They will take you into dormitories where all the men cry silently at night. They mention the suicides, and the longing to join them by jumping into the sea, what it's like to share a room with an Iraqi with war-psychosis, when not one person speaks the same language. They talk about the effect of months or years of waiting, an indefinite sentence for no crime.

Quiet voices

Sit, and listen to the quiet voices of detainees whom the artist Melanie Friend has spent four years hearing.

'I've tried to kill myself lots of times,' says Francis, who is Liberian. 'I tried to escape but it's too hard. In Dover I've seen many people

break their leg, break their hand, trying to get over the wall.' Francis went on hunger strike twice; she was released after four years but only to destitution in Croydon and forbidden to work.

'Zimba' – tortured as a youth leader in the Movement for Democratic Change, detained for two years in the UK when he escaped Zimbabwe via Malawi, and still not granted asylum – talks about waking to the sound of pigeons followed by the keys of the officers turning in locks, and trying to pray, thinking of his two boys who 'were with me most of the time, playing football always ... I was so close to them ... I miss them.' The long pauses as people breathe, the fall of their voices, tell so much.

They show us their countries. Afsham from Pakistan, accused of adultery when she fled her violent husband alone: 'In my country woman cannot live alone. If a married girl run away, they dig a hole in earth and put on little stones until dead. If a girl not married run away, 60 times with leather [lash].' The escort squad succeeded in removing her last June, and she is in hiding if she still lives.

Mohammed, Bangladesh: 'If your party is out of power you cannot live there, they kill you.' Anglophile teacher Hamlaoui, Algeria: 'The army throw people into fields from helicopters. Bodies are buried secretly by gendarmes so the family don't know. The government kill people from the east and throw to the west; they kill them from the west and throw to the east.'

Above all, the detainees show us ourselves. Finger-snapping Andrei from Belarus enacts a running joke on the English use of 'Sorry, sorry, sorry' to mean 'Shut up and die'. Lilian, escaping battering and genital mutilation in Kenya to care work for the elderly in Britain, had heard that 'at least the white man is fair, but I've found it to be the opposite'. She emailed Melanie recently from Kenya, trying to keep

safe at the epicentre of the violence to which she has been returned.

Isaac (who fled to escape being sold as body parts for ritual sacrifice) talks about his armed English escorts chatting and snapping him on a mobile phone as he screamed with pain from the disabling tightness of his handcuffs; simultaneously revenging themselves on him for resisting removal to Nigeria, and adding to a stock of pornographic images of domination and recreational sadism. This is what lies behind the back wall of those detention visiting rooms.

Long evolution

Because Melanie Friend has tried to stay in contact with everyone she interviewed – some eventually granted leave to remain, others like Isaac pushed back where they came from, and yet others in immigration limbo over here – this exhibition has a very different feel from classic documentary reportage, which zooms in and out of one war or one town. 'Border Country' moves between many layers of time and space, and had a long evolution.

First, the artist got permission to interview and photograph detainees in Dover Citadel – once a Napoleonic fortress, then a young offenders' institute for the local underclass, now imperfectly camouflaged as an immigration centre. Some of her most evocative pictures show the view above cliffs to the silver sea, within patriotic ramparts still repelling the invader and carrying block numbers from a more recent prison past.

Friend took portraits of all the people she interviewed, always one of her strengths. I remember the radiant figures in her earlier documentary work with the women's photo agency Format, showing Balkan Roma full of dignity and beauty as they sorted through rubbish. After a decade as a photojournalist and freelance reporter for BBC radio and the *Guardian*, she made the shift to combining sound with images for galleries in the mid-1990s.

'Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible' (1996) placed the lovingly tended orchards and shrine-like interiors of Kosovan

homes against their recorded experiences of brutal raids and torture. 'No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo' (2001) portrayed and interviewed refugees in a Macedonian camp. She later met them back in their ruined homes, and retraced the steep path to the massacre site at Recak. Again, sound and images worked together inseparably. 'The voice of the massacre survivor, Shefqet Avdia – the texture, pace and rhythm of his voice – lived in my head for weeks, and often kept me awake at night,' recalls the artist.

'Photojournalists have been turning to gallery work to make political images for a few years now,' comments Friend. 'It's partly the newsprint and magazine outlets evaporating, and partly I suspect a desire to create an experience over which the photographer/artist has more control ... And using sound is hugely important for Border Country, literally giving voice to the detainees so that their experiences and opinions break through the cool facade of the state presented in the images.'

So in the end she took away the portraits of her interviewees from the exhibition, giving each person copies for themselves. Restricting her images to the detention centre interiors, she made sure that viewers could not just walk round quickly but would have to listen deeply to the stories. 'Once I've interviewed somebody, and spent several weeks transcribing and editing the interview material, their voice lives on in my head and in some sense develops another kind of intimacy even months after that person has been "removed" back to his/her home country. The voice penetrates our psyche perhaps more powerfully than an image can.'

■ The 'Border Country' book and CD (£12 + £2 p&p) are available from the Winchester Gallery, Park Avenue, Winchester SO23 8DL. Email: wing@soton.ac.uk. You can also play some of the voices on: www.belfastexposed.org/exhibitions/index.php?show=past&year=2007. The 'Border Country' UK tour will open at the University of the Arts, London (Well Gallery, Elephant and Castle Centre, SE1) from 6-24 October 2008



The visitors' room, Tinsley House immigration removal centre