

# Border Country

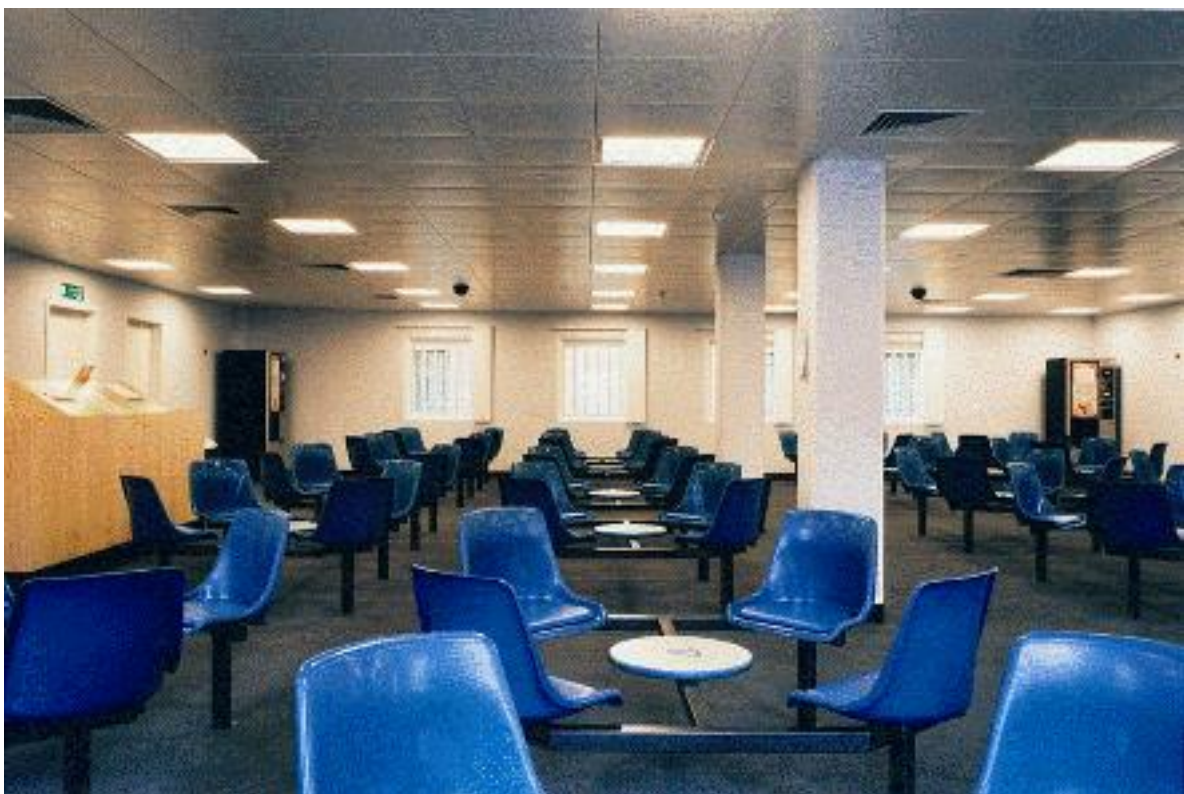
Photographs by Melanie Friend, UK tour

Chris Gilligan

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**Contemporary media representations of migrants tend towards one of two extremes. Migrants are either represented as a threatening force (they are a drain on our resources, they push up crime rates, they are terrorists) or as helpless victims (trafficked women and children, refugees fleeing genocide, traumatised asylum seekers). Melanie Friend's photographs steer away from these clichéd representations. Instead of focusing on migrants, Friend draws attention to the ways that Britain as a society treats asylum-seekers and other migrants who are deemed to be in the country illegally. Her photographs are of Immigration Removal Centres (IRC) in Dover, Harmondsworth (near Heathrow), Campsfield (near Oxford), Tinsley House (Gatwick), Colnbrook (Heathrow), Yarl's Wood (near Bedford), Haslar (near Portsmouth) and, Lindholme (near Doncaster). There are no people in the photographs.**

The photographs portray IRCs as familiar, ordinary, sterile, institutional environments. The room for domestic visits at Harmondsworth, with its rows of seats and its rows of tables and its cheerless walls, reminded me of some of the dole offices in which I spent many depressing hours during the 1980s. The one at Colnbrook reminded me of the waiting room at Stranraer ferry terminal in Scotland. During the 1980s and 1990s, on my periodic visits back to family in Ireland, I spent many hours waiting in the cold terminal building anticipating the Prevention of Terrorism Act checks which were routine for anyone wishing to travel to Northern Ireland back then. But the rooms portrayed here are also like many less forbidding places. They will be familiar to us as examples of public spaces where we spend time waiting: the waiting room at the doctor's surgery, at the hospital, at the passport office, or at the Inland Revenue.



Visits, Colnbrook IRC (Heathrow), March 2005 (courtesy of Melanie Friend)

The absence of people in these photographs indicates the key way in which the rooms portrayed here differ from the waiting spaces which are familiar to us. These are Removal Centres. They exist to remove people from public view. The people who are incarcerated behind the walls of the Removal Centres are removed from the streets. They are prevented from entering the shops, pubs, parks, playgrounds, and other public spaces in which we are free to circulate. They stop being people with whom we might have chance encounters. They stop being people who inhabit the same life world as us. Instead they become impersonal categories: asylum seekers, illegal immigrants, undesirable aliens. Things we read about in newspapers, or hear about on the telly.

The photographs of the external areas show us that these, euphemistically named Immigration Removal Centres, are prisons. The perimeter fence at Lindholme IRC, the waiting paddy wagons at Colnbrook IRC, the moat at Dover IRC – all suggest incarceration. The perimeter fence at Lindholme is an echo of the more extensive national border which separates 'us' from 'them'. The purpose of these removal centres, and the laws they exist to enforce, is to draw a line between *us*, as citizens, and *them*, as strangers. As citizens we have rights. We wait in the doctor's surgery, but we get treatment. We wait in the passport office, but we are permitted to travel. We wait at the Inland Revenue, but we pay taxes and contribute to the general welfare of society. As citizens we can expect something back for the contribution which we make. As strangers they have no responsibilities and they are granted few rights. They are not free to sell their labour power and they are not free to starve.



**The Moat, Dover IRC, August 2005 (courtesy of Melanie Friend)**

Melanie Friend attempts to bridge the gap between 'us' and 'them'. She allows the detainees to speak for themselves. She gives them a voice through recordings of interviews she made with detainees. (In the exhibition these voices speak to us from different points of the gallery space. For the exhibition catalogue they have been placed onto an audio CD which is enclosed inside the back cover). Some of the things which the detainees say are surprising. Isaac O. from Nigeria tells Melanie 'Being in Dover here, I

have to be happy... I don't mind remaining in this situation I am in right now, because I feel safe.' That someone incarcerated in a detention centre could say that he has to be happy seems surreal. Given the arbitrary and punitive nature of the asylum system the idea that he feels safe seems even more bizarre.

Richard helps provide some context for Isaac's comments when he says: 'I think if I am sent back to Sri Lanka they will torture me, they will put me in the prison, and maybe they will kill me'. Many of the other comments in the recorded interviews tell of harrowing experiences. They speak of people's fears and in other ways invoke our sympathy. These attempts to bridge the gap between 'us' and 'them' are only partially successful. In some ways they highlight the distance between us as citizens and them as strangers. They don't challenge the comfortable notion that we are civilised and they are barbarians. They do not invoke recognition of our common humanity. We are asked to care about them because their own societies are incapable of doing so.

The British asylum system fits neatly with a humanitarian foreign policy which divides the world into 'victims', 'perpetrators' and 'saviours'. The asylum system encourages asylum-seekers to present themselves as victims and casts us in the role of saviours. In this system asylum-seekers are required to degrade themselves. In order to be considered worthy of saving they are encouraged to show us their pain, reveal their fears and make pleading cries for help. If they are not victims, if they are active agents then we are much less comfortable with them. When Richard goes on and explains that he fears torture: 'Because I helped the LTTE [Tamil Peoples Liberation Movement – 'Tamil Tigers'] in several ways, and the Tamil people as well, by giving medicines and by digging bunkers'. He reveals the inadequacy of a simplistic worldview which divides people in violent conflict situations into victims and perpetrators. Richard may fear torture, but he actively supported one side in a violent conflict.

The gap between us and them is more effectively challenged in those comments where the detainees talk about British society. Andrei reverses the roles of 'us' and 'them' when he says: 'When I just come to England and I heard many times from English people "sorry about this", "sorry about that", "sorry!" "sorry!"... to me it seems that it is not natural to use sorry so many times... now I understand it's polite... but that means that you don't mean it. You saying "sorry" just because you have to say "sorry" not because you mean it'. Here, through this anthropological insight, we become the strangers in a strange land where people say meaningless things; where politeness is not a mark of respect for the other person, but adherence to an informal rule of behaviour. The gap between our expectations and the reality, a gap which 'we' share with 'them' is highlighted by Lillian when she says that: 'You don't know the truth until you get here, because you hear all sorts of things, like jobs are available... whatever the kind of job it is good pay... no man can hit a woman. You know, all those kind of things'. The disjuncture between the idea of everyone being given a fair chance and treatment as an impersonal statistic, which many of us experience, is highlighted by Lillian when she says that; 'I always thought at least you'll be given a fair chance... now it looks like it's a race about numbers. How many can we deport back? You're treated like a number, you're not a person anymore'.





**The Visits Room, Haslar IRC (near Portsmouth), February 2005 (courtesy of Melanie Friend)**

The Immigration Removal Centre is one of the devices through which 'our' estrangement from 'them' is enforced. This estrangement is conveyed through the structure of the exhibition, with the absence of people in the photographs and their presence in voices in the gallery space. It also comes across in the content of many of the pictures. In the photographs of the external scenes the fences are one obvious way in which we are divided from them. In the internal scenes the social distance between the detainees and the IRC staff is indicated through the presence of CCTV cameras, 'No Smoking' signs, and posters which outline such things as: the Detention Services Mission Statement; the Centre Rules; a Race Relations Policy Statement; Policy on Suicide and Self-Harm in three different languages. (These can be read, sometimes with some effort, in the exhibition photographs, but this level of detail is lost in the catalogue). I found it jarring to see these posters in the context of the detention and removal centres. These kinds of posters are ubiquitous in our everyday lives, so much so that they often go unnoticed. Seeing them here made me wonder at their purpose. Take the poster advertising official policy on 'Assaults on Staff' (on the wall of the visitors centre at Campsfield IRC) as an example:

#### ASSAULTS ON STAFF

We believe our staff have the right to work  
in a safe environment without fear of assaults.

We are committed to supporting anyone who is a victim of assault.

The law provides for penalties which may on conviction include imprisonment.

The poster will be familiar to many of us from the hospital waiting room and other public spaces. In the context of the detention centre it seems like a sick joke. The frustrations that anyone would feel if they were imprisoned without any formal charge and with no idea about the outcome of their detention are nowhere acknowledged. The fact that many of the detainees have come to Britain to flee violence is absent. The posters are, like the asylum system in Britain, unthinking and unfeeling. What does it mean to put a

poster advertising a Race Relations Policy in a Centre which is devoted to the categorisation of foreigners as undesirable? What is the purpose of advertising a policy on suicide and self-harm in the context of a system which encourages people to view themselves as victims?

Asking these questions leads to asking the questions more broadly, why is so much advertising devoted to appealing to us as potential victims or aggressors? And why is this victim/aggressor dichotomy one that pervades so much of our contemporary culture? It suggests to me that British society is not so much uncomfortable with foreigners, but with humanity as a whole.

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'Border Country' is touring the UK: Belfast Exposed Photography till 11 January 2008; the Winchester Gallery 5 – 29 February 2008; University of the Arts London (Well Gallery) 6 – 24 October 2008. Also the BCA Gallery Bedford and other venues.

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