Chapter 7: This Fragile Body; Susan Crile’s Abu Ghraib: Abuse of Power

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When the Abu Ghraib torture photographs first became public in April 2004, they met with an array of mostly predictable responses. These responses ranged in tone from the vehemence of moral outrage, to the defeated confirmation that “this is to be expected within the context of an illegitimate war,” to the strategies of dismissal that acknowledged evidence of torture only to casually deflect it onto some version of human nature, thereby demonstrating a willingness to confuse behaving badly with acting immorally and even criminally.

Yet it is by no means clear what the Abu Ghraib photographs themselves are. They are certainly not documentary photography in the normal sense in which we understand documentary as neutrally and transparently providing factual evidence. Some of the photographs were purportedly taken to extort confessions from prisoners and their family members by showing detainees naked and in sexually compromising positions—a strangely misguided innovation in the public structure of humiliation for its willingness to conflate the exposure of a consensual act with one coerced for the camera. The intention to humiliate not only makes this...
particular subset of photographs inseparable from the acts of torture that they do not just “depict” but also actively participate in the use of the camera to coerce by forcing bodies into view reveals a knowledge of violation that underlies all the Abu Ghraib photographs. And though there is something correct about the comparison of the images with pornography, this arguably has as much to do with the cognitive dissonance generated by what the eye perceives as an amateurish yet stylized simulation of real events as it does with sexual content, something that gives even the non-sexualized photographs a feeling akin to performance art.²

Whatever the precise circumstances under which they were taken, the visual and conceptual confusions generated by perpetrators of torture taking pictures of themselves looking at torture inevitably comes to frame the way that torture is seen in the photographs. This gives the photographs the peculiar effect of reading their own interpretive ambiguity back onto the person who views them, who may or may not actually see torture being perpetrated in the photographs. Viewers may or may not actually see themselves participating in the act of torture in the photos or see their viewing of the photographs as problematic in any way. (“Tell me what you see in the Abu Ghraib photographs, and I will tell you who you are.”)

As such, the photographs not only beg certain questions about the relationship between representation and reality already familiar to postmodern criticism; the use of photography to torture seems to almost willfully collapse the distinction between the infliction of pain and its representation. Bodily suffering isn’t so much being “captured” in the photographs as being approached from the vantage of its being posed as though for the camera. This remains the case even in those photographs that show prisoners in legally authorized “stress positions,” in which the ongoing nature of their suffering so clearly extends beyond the instant the photo was taken.

The feeling that the torture being shown in the photographs has somehow been posed has the effect of undercutting the immediacy through which pain is made visually manifest by those undergoing it and is confirmed by the visceral, which is to say, spontaneous and bodily response of the person looking at the photographs. The entire visual orientation of the photographs thus serves to preempt the experience of sympathy evinced at the sight of suffering that Susan Sontag identifies as the distinguishing feature of war or “shock” photography and which gives it its ethical potential not through a misplaced identification with another’s pain.
but as the “spark” for understanding the viewer’s own relation to—and even responsibility for—that pain. Yet this is not because we have been made insensitive as a culture through an excessive exposure to images of violence but because the Abu Ghraib photographs are direct about their own enactment of a complicit seeing: the photographs put the intentional coercion of pain and suffering on view in order to be seen as substituting an appropriately affective response for the act of taking a picture. Such self-reflexive awareness is certainly not only an aspect of how the camera is transformed into an instrument of torture at that moment the photographs were taken; the photographs frame—the photographs themselves—the act of perception through which we become capable of actually seeing and being moved by the suffering of bodies.

This makes viewing the Abu Ghraib photographs far more complicated than it at first appears. For if what the photographs show is perpetrators of torture regarding the intentional infliction of pain in order to be seen not to be seeing it as pain, the question becomes how we can look at the photographs without reiterating the perceptual and affective disposition that the photographs themselves compel. How can we recuperate a sympathetic response to the immediate suffering of the bodies in the photographs against the photographs’ own structuring of a complicit seeing? Still further, what sense of ethical and political responsibility might such a response open up in considering the effects of the United States’ policy on torture under the George W. Bush administration?

These are the questions posed by American artist Susan Crile, whose highly unusual project Abu Ghraib: Abuse of Power seeks, by drawing the photographs, to recuperate the possibility of the viewer’s experience of sympathy for the prisoners being tortured. As Crile writes in her artist’s statement in the Italian exhibition catalog that accompanied the series:

The Abu Ghraib photographs are particularly disturbing since they were taken with the intent not to have an empathic connection to the suffering of the prisoners—to “the horror of it all”—but are meant to show his weakness in the face of might. . . . By recasting now familiar signs of power and ideology in the Abu Ghraib photos, by exposing them as markers of brutality and viciousness, and by turning those abused objects of degradation and contempt back into human beings, I have tried to elicit the viewer’s empathy.
Quite unexpectedly, then, it is art—and, in particular, Crile’s intuition about the nature of drawing in relation to the fragile outline of the body and the viewer’s own sense of touch—that restores the immediate and affective connection between the individual bodies of those suffering in the photographs and the viewer’s own body as providing the opening for the viewer to assume ethical responsibility in response to another’s pain.

Crile is unique in this regard. Where the artists Richard Serra in Stop Bush (2004) and Gerald Laing in American Gothic (2004) have capitalized on the iconic feel of individual Abu Ghraib photographs for the purpose of branding the Bush administration’s policy on torture, and Fernando Botero has allegorized the photographs in his series of paintings Botero Abu Ghraib, Crile straightforwardly bases each of her drawings on the original photographs. She thus assumes that viewers have seen the photographs in order to challenge and expose their underlying framing—and this includes the viewers’ first encounter with the photographs, what they saw and didn’t see—by making the violated bodies of the prisoners the very site for the restoration of their humanity. This radical, if not also obvious, shift in visual orientation allows the viewer of the drawings to make a critical self-reflexive turn with respect to the way seeing is being framed in the torture photographs; this turn is neither ironic nor generalized but instead takes place through the viewer’s sympathetic response to the suffering of bodies and the sense of ethical responsibility that follows from it.

This essay begins by laying out in greater detail how the Abu Ghraib photographs enact a complicit seeing by comparing them with lynching photographs taken in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. My intent in developing this comparison is to contextualize Crile’s specific artistic decisions by juxtaposing this analysis to her drawing Crouching in Terror (2005), which presents viewers with a choice concerning the position from which they see the drawing—prisoner or guard—that directly implicates their own spectatorship. Next, through the two drawings Panties as Hood (2005) and Erotic Humiliation (2005), I make a series of points about Crile’s use of white chalk to communicate the fragility of bodies and the various ways in which she seeks to evoke the viewer’s sense of touch. Finally, I offer an interpretation of Crile’s drawing of the infamous (and also interpretively overdetermined) photograph showing Private First Class Lynndie England with a prisoner on a leash, suggesting that Crile’s
sensitivity to the intimate relation between bodies offers a different way in which to understand the logic of torture.

Before turning to my analysis, however, it is important to clarify a terminological distinction that has philosophical import and that poses itself as something of a temptation within Crile’s project, for where I use the word “sympathy,” Crile uses the word “empathy.” While Crile’s drawings are clearly about recuperating the possibility of an affective response that takes place through the viewer’s own body, there is a significant difference between empathy and sympathy: empathy is predicated upon an identification with the other’s pain as my own pain. This collapses the difference between self and other, as the other’s pain becomes my pain purely through my ability to be affected by it—to literally “feel their pain”—which gives the appearance of doing all of the ethical work when, in fact, doing none of it. But the other’s pain is, of course, not my pain (even as I show myself capable of being moved by it), and it is this distinction that the word “sympathy” attempts to capture as the opening onto the ethical relation with the other’s pain and, critically, with the other’s difference.

The publication of the Abu Ghraib photographs was accompanied by the almost immediate impulse on the part of writers, journalists, and intellectuals to contextualize the visual uncanniness of the images by searching for precedents. Individual torture photographs have been compared to iconographic representations of Christ’s crucifixion in great works of art, to the Statue of Liberty, to the sportsman’s souvenir trophy shot, and, less imaginatively, to sadomasochistic and gay porn. Where these comparisons have operated primarily on the level of visual composition, the unusualness of including perpetrators of torture as also spectators of torture has led a number of commentators—Luc Sante first and Susan Sontag most famously—to compare the Abu Ghraib photographs to lynching postcards that were taken in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. While later critics have gone on to stress the very different racial, social, and power dynamics under which the pictures were taken, there is something importantly correct about this comparison in going beyond similarities in composition to the manner in which both sets of photographs enact a complicit seeing. And in both cases, the crucial clue proves to be the ways those in the photographs are shown to look for the camera.

Inevitably, the first thing the viewer sees in the photographs are the eyes and smiles that look out beyond the frame of the picture and directly
at the camera, which is where the action of the photographs is taking place in apparent disconnection with the violence being done to the bodies. The viewer of the photographs is also quite blatantly being shown how to interpret this gaze through the use of hands (the accusatory index finger, the congratulatory thumbs-up), which direct the viewer’s eye toward the bodies being tortured, not in order to make them the focus of attention, but to make visible its own way of seeing through the self-disclosive gesture of a pointing finger. By contrast, Crile, in her rendering of the Abu Ghraib photographs, tends either to crop out the sight line of the torturers or to obscure the directness of their gaze so that hands are made to refer to bodies—they nearly always suggest a menacing touch—and not to the act of seeing.

This direct eye contact made by those in the photographs collapses the distance between the viewer and the photographer, and has the peculiar visual effect of placing the viewer at the scene of the photographs in looking at it from behind the camera so that the viewer’s seeing becomes the actual foreground of the photographs. As British photographer and documentary filmmaker David Modell implies in referring to a “triangle of communication,” there is a strange kind of interpolation of gazes that takes place between those looking at the camera, the photographer, and the viewer, as the viewer does not simply meet the gaze of those in the photographs but is also anticipated by it in a manner that compels consent to and reciprocation of how seeing is being staged within the photographs, yet within the photographs as for the camera.

There are two important and internally connected points to be made here. First, the immediate reciprocation of direct eye contact compels the viewer to look past the violence being done to bodies as the viewer’s gaze is directed through the eyes and hand gestures of those in the photographs back to the viewer’s own seeing, which is made indistinguishable in the photographs from that of the camera. This is what gives so many of the Abu Ghraib photographs their distinctive three-dimensional or holographic quality. In direct violation of Sontag’s insistence that photography is a way of seeing, the collapsing of the viewer into the photographer allows the photographs to present themselves as though they are, in fact, capturing “seeing itself.” For it is in appearing to reflect back to the viewer the viewer’s own seeing through the eyes of those in the photographs that the photographs actually impose this seeing onto the
viewer as though it were the viewer’s own—they impose this seeing onto the viewer in order to, in the same instant, confirm this seeing through the very act of the viewer’s looking at the photographs. This means that the photographs not only enact a complicit seeing, but that they are directly coercive; the photographs attempt to construct the viewer’s seeing by reiterating through their very framing the perceptual and affective disposition that the photographs themselves compel.

This leads to the next point: the transformation of the viewer’s seeing into the foreground of the photographs has the disorienting visual effect of making the bodies of those being tortured withdraw to the position of incidental background within the frame of the photographs. In what is no doubt their most cognitively dissonant aspect, both the lynching and the Abu Ghraib photographs are seen to force the intentional infliction of pain into view in order to show those in the photographs looking away not in horror or moral repugnance, but to smilingly pose their seeing for the camera. This self-reflexive awareness thus not only comes to substitute for the immediacy of a sympathetic response to the other’s pain, its further effect on viewers is to actively obscure their ability to see the bodies in the photographs as suffering bodies. Quite tellingly, Luc Sante describes first looking at the Abu Ghraib photograph depicting the pile of naked Iraqi prisoners and thinking it was a montage, the relationship between Specialist Charles A. Graner Jr. and Private First Class England’s thumbs-up appears so utterly disconnected from the sculptural staticness of the naked bodies.15 (Laing’s *American Gothic* actually does turn this photograph into a montage, pasting the pile of bodies on top of his ironic rendering of Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*.) Although both the lynching and the Abu Ghraib photographs are necessarily, and even irreducibly about the violence being done to bodies, the true object of the photographs—and what the photographs themselves are—is this being seen not to be seeing, which regards the intentional infliction of pain from the position of banal spectacle. This point is made sadly vivid by lynching photographs that were reproduced by the thousands as postcards.16

Crile prompts the viewer to make a different kind of self-reflexive turn in *Crouching in Terror* (fig. 7.1), her drawing of an Abu Ghraib photograph showing a prisoner being menaced by a dog. In comparing the drawing to the original photograph, the first thing the viewer notices is Crile’s decision to place the prisoner at the center of the viewer’s visual field, which
7.1 Susan Crile (United States), *Crouching in Terror*, 2005; 34 x 33 in.
Printed with permission of the artist. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson
requires her to crop out the guard with the dog, reducing his body to a forearm, gloved hand, and the barest suggestion of a toe. This not only shortens the perspective of the camera shot (the photograph’s landscape view is made into a square); it also reorients the entire visual framing of the original photograph by eliminating the sight line of the photographer, who, in standing at the right-hand corner of the scene, is physically aligned with the guard along the wall, but visually aligned with the guard restraining the dog. This oblique orientation generates an odd and perceptually confusing double perspective as the photographer looks at the guard with the dog menacing the prisoner, who looks back at the guard in obvious terror. At the same time, however, the photographer’s physical positioning places him on the same side as the guard along the wall with whom he looks on in also assuming the position of casual spectator. The viewer of the photograph is thus compelled to regard the prisoner’s terror from the perspective of the two guards simultaneously—from the one guard who is the source of that terror, as well as from the other who, in direct contrast to the photographer, is shown within the photograph to casually disregard that source.

Crile’s elimination of the photographer’s direct sight line changes where the source of the visual action originates, even as it leaves the viewer to contend with the looking-on of the guard along the wall. The large, 34-inch by 33-inch, format places the viewer who encounters the drawing in a gallery setting roughly at eye level with the crouching prisoner. This means that the viewer is put into the position of starting from the prisoner’s gaze and outstretched hand in order to visually trace out what, from the prisoner’s perspective, he is attempting to so forcefully and so vulnerably stop.

In contrast to the original photograph, whose vanishing point creates the illusion of the prisoner receding into the corridor of the cell block, in the drawing the prisoner’s eyes and hands direct—if not push—the viewer’s gaze away from his body, back into the foreground of the visual field, and even out beyond the paper’s left edge. And it is in being pushed away from the prisoner’s body that the viewer’s gaze is directed along the prisoner’s sight line toward the gloved hand and lunging dog, whose menace and black mass are emphasized in seeming to come out of nowhere—a nowhere that viewers are now made to understand that they share with the torturers. Crile is explicit about what she hopes to achieve in this. She
writes, “Tertiary or grayed-out colored papers increase the institutional barrenness of the space—the chill of the cement prison floor. The frame of the empty page is like the cell or the cage. The figures brush against its limit—the edge. This is the space of torture and abuse.”

The sensuous impact of this effect in *Crouching in Terror* is decidedly dramatic, as the original photograph’s oblique perspective is accentuated and rendered uncanny in making the drawing appear to come at (and even over) the viewer, who is included under the glare and drab relentlessness of its decontextualized space.

This reframing of the viewer’s visual orientation is essential for understanding the contrast between the structure of complicit seeing enacted by the original photograph and what Crile is attempting in this particular drawing, as both the photograph and the drawing are about the viewer seeing seeing. Where the original photograph compels the viewer to adopt the perspective of the two guards simultaneously, collapsing them into each other in placing the viewer into the position of the photographer, Crile’s cropping out of the guard with the dog enables her to expose the photograph’s confused double perspective by putting into its place a different double perspective. In starting with the prisoner’s body and moving to the dog’s coming out of nowhere, the viewer of the drawing is viscerally made to feel the terror and vulnerability of the prisoner’s stop.

Yet in keeping with the original perspective of the photograph, the viewer remains ever so slightly aligned with the guard along the wall, who does not stop the prisoner from being terrorized but is instead shown looking on from the position of casual spectator. This is key: the side-by-side juxtaposition of these two perspectives puts the viewer of the drawing’s seeing in tension with itself by initiating the possibility of the viewer making a critical self-reflexive turn with regard to his or her own spectatorship. (Here it is important to note that Crile’s recuperation of distance preempts the collapse of self into other that takes place in empathetic identification.) While this critical self-reflexive turn necessarily originates with the prisoner’s body, it is in Crile’s staging of the viewer’s next seeing the guard’s looking-on that the viewer is called upon to reflect on the relationship between his or her own seeing and the guard’s seeing. Is the viewer’s seeing the same as the guard’s seeing? Is the viewer looking at the terrorized prisoner from the position of casual spectator? What would distinguish the viewer’s looking at the drawing from the guard’s looking-on?
In direct contrast to the self-reflexive awareness of the camera operative in complicit seeing, the critical self-reflexive turn initiated in Crile’s drawing offers the viewers a choice by presenting them with two possible ways of seeing, each alongside the other and each holding the other in suspense. It is in the tension generated by these two ways of seeing that the drawing critically exposes how the original photograph attempts to both coerce and construct the act of perception by presenting itself as capturing “seeing itself.” Even more important, however, viewers of the drawing’s seeing of the structure of complicity directly and explicitly implicate their own seeing without thereby determining what comes next—that is, without thereby determining whether and how viewers follow out the immediate claim that the prisoner’s terrified stop places on them. In ethical terms, the structure of implication initiated by this critical turn would be the beginning of responsibility, as the viewer’s experience of sympathy would, to adopt Sontag’s language, “spark” the next step of action in response to the prisoner’s suffering. In political terms, it would be the occasion for viewers to reflect on the nature of their still deeper complicity with the United States’ formal policy of legalized torture.

Beyond making the prisoners her visual focus, the effectiveness of Crile’s drawing in eliciting sympathy lies in the way she marks the presence of the body in calling forth a full range of sensuous experience. This includes not only the bodies of the prisoners but the bodies of the guards, and—very importantly—the body of the viewer. The insubstantiality and powerlessness of the prisoner in *Crouching in Terror* is made apparent not only in his ghostlike, floating presence but in his diminutive size. And his diminutive size accentuates, and is accentuated by, an impossibly large hand. Though this appears exaggerated in the drawing, in the original photograph the prisoner’s outstretched hand does, indeed, appear that large—as large as the prisoner’s head, which he is pulling down into his body in a desperate effort to protect himself by folding his body back onto itself. It is clear that in her rendering of the prisoner’s hand, Crile is calling attention not just to its large size but also to its specifically human distinctness as it gestures stop. For although the body of the guard with the dog has been mostly cropped out, his physical presence is nonetheless retained in being reduced to a black-gloved hand whose indistinctness calls forward the act of torture in being made to appear simply as an extension of the black dog. This is the inverse of the marked physical
presence of the guard along the wall, whose casual spectatorship is in part indicated by his having his hands in his pockets, which in Crile’s drawing curiously makes him appear to have no hands.

Interestingly, the only exposed flesh of the guards that is visible is the ear of the guard standing along the wall; its curve seems to vaguely echo the posture of the crouching prisoner. Crile remarks in her artist’s statement that the dominant sense in prison is not sight but sound. Yet in evoking the viewer’s hearing, this ear does not call attention to what is heard in the prison so much as it reminds the viewer of the absence of the prisoner’s voice — his no doubt also screaming in terror — as well as his inability to directly testify to his experience and be heard, confronting the viewer with the terrible responsibility of hearing the silence that engulfs the entire drawing.

The vulnerability of the prisoner in Crouching in Terror is in part achieved through Crile’s use of white chalk, which is the dominant visual element that connects the drawings in the series. As she describes in her artist’s statement, it is intended to communicate the fragility and insubstantiality of the bodies of the tortured prisoners while at the same time calling to mind a set of visual resonances that suggests the bodily, human imprint left at scenes of violent devastation:

In the photos from Abu Ghraib, the prisoners have no weight; like Raggedy Ann dolls or balloons they lack balance or gravity. When the body is subjected to torture, the protection of the skin dissolves and the self no longer has a safe container; it is afloat and defenseless. I use white chalk to designate the fragility of the victims, who are like the ash-covered figures fleeing the World Trade Center, the body shells from Pompeii or the chalk outlines that mark the place of dead bodies at crime scenes. It takes me days to get the white chalk line to show the particular sense of humiliation of a particular man, to reveal the exact sense of his terrible pain.18

While Crile’s filling in of the body of the prisoner in Crouching in Terror gives him a ghostlike, floating presence, some of her most affecting drawings depict the bodies of prisoners in pure outline form. Of these, the most disturbingly beautiful is Panties as Hood (fig. 7.2), which shows a prisoner in a legally sanctioned stress position. What is so immediately arresting about this particular drawing is the way that its beauty calls
7.2  Susan Crile (United States), *Panties as Hood*, 2005; 27.5 x 39 in.  
Reprinted with permission of the artist. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson
forward—and thus highlights—the intentional degradation of the prisoner achieved precisely in the use of panties as a hood. In order to achieve this effect, Crile edits out both the bed frame and the bars of the prison cell, which together create a jumbled and distracting network of intersecting vertical and horizontal lines. This allows her to bring forward the unnatural gracefulness of the body’s outward arc, as the prisoner’s single arm is rigidly pulled back and outside the field of the drawing. Though the viewer cannot actually see that the prisoner is bound (this is also true of the original photograph), the sense that the prisoner has been forced into this position is poignantly suggested by the flap of skin at the level of his shoulder blade, which interrupts the body’s curve. Where the original photograph appears to be shot from above, as though the photographer were standing on the lower bed rack looking down, Crile emphasizes the feeling of horizontal movement generated by the body’s arc by turning the photograph’s portrait view into an asymmetrically executed horizontal framing. The drawing measures a wide 27.5 inches by 39 inches, and the expanse of blank space on its right-hand side contributes to the effect of the prisoner’s being stretched, as the experience of his pain is shown to extend beyond the boundary of his body and continue on into an empty, and perhaps even infinite, space.

Whereas *Crouching in Terror* exposes the structure of complicit seeing by creating the possibility that the viewer will make a critical self-reflexive turn, *Panties as Hood* is by far the more challenging drawing for the way its arresting and fragile beauty positively invites the viewer’s gaze. And, indeed, this is Crile’s intent. While the original photograph is a quick snapshot, Crile’s effort to capture the “exact pain” of particular bodies calls on the viewer to visually trace out with his or her eye the white chalk outline of the prisoner’s body. This not only serves to restore something of the temporality of the prisoner’s pain in the stress position; the act of visually tracing out the movement of a line has the further—and unexpected—effect of evoking the viewer’s own sense of touch, which is the sense originally violated in the act of torture. Crile, whose artistic background includes work in textiles, is deeply aware of this connection: “Drawing, the use of chalk and charcoal, the texture of the paper speaks to our sense of touch. Touch slows down the hungry and impatient appetite of the eye and allows the body—our body—to respond empathetically.” The connection between drawing and touch is
essential for understanding the insight that underlies the entire collection as what Crile also titles “Works on Paper.” The materiality of drawing as a medium allows the viewer’s body to respond sympathetically because the elements specific to drawing are uniquely able to capture the fragility of the human body as subject violation: the tactility of the paper reveals the prisoner’s naked and exposed skin as the pure surface of impressionable flesh; the white chalk outline contains the body at the same time it calls attention to it in its fragility as permeable boundary.

Yet there is a still further point to be made here that reveals the greatest risk Crile takes as an artist. For the viewer’s act of tracing the outline of the prisoner’s body has the effect of returning to it its violated integrity—the literal sense in which it is self-contained, individual, and whole—by granting the prisoner the dignity of his pain precisely within the context of his body’s intentional degradation. This is accomplished through the viewer’s responsive touch, which gestures toward the undoing of the original perversion of touch that underlies the act of torture at the same time that it affirms the prisoner’s suffering as separate. It would be easy to regard this gesture as salvific or even invasive, which perhaps says something about how uncomfortable we are today with the vocabulary of dignity and the unique sense of self-contained and bodily beauty through which it is communicated. However, Crile’s drawings show that it is this experience of being responsively touched by the prisoner’s violated dignity that alone reveals the irreducible vulnerability of the body as the site of a common humanity. And it is exactly this common humanity that the torture shown in the photograph not only denies but also exploits in order to falsify by treating the prisoner first as an Iraqi, an Arab, an enemy, a terrorist, and so on—anything but a human being subject to pain and wounding.

Crile’s sensitivity to the outline of the body is used to quite different effect in the drawing Erotic Humiliation (fig. 7.3). Where the focus of the original photograph is clearly the coerced staging of mock fellatio in which the prisoner standing along the wall just happens to be included, Crile’s effort to capture the bodily postures of the prisoners in a single white line creates a series of visual resonances that not only incorporates that prisoner into the formal composition of the drawing but makes him its key in appearing to comment on the scene of staged humiliation that he is nonetheless unable to see.
7.3 Susan Crile (United States), *Erotic Humiliation*, 2005; 39 x 27 in.
Reprinted with permission of the artist. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson
In first looking at the drawing, the viewer starts with the hooded and downcast head of the prisoner standing at its center in order to then trace the outline of the curved back of the prisoner being forced to kneel between his legs, continuing this line through the curve of the back of the prisoner standing along the wall, who completes the visual circuit of the drawing in being shown holding his head between his hands. While the viewer of the photograph takes in the strange disconnectedness of this tableau all at once, Crile slows the viewer’s eye in tracing the continuous outline of the prisoners’ bodies, incorporating the prisoner standing along the wall by calling attention to the way that his bodily posture echoes aspects of the postures of the other two prisoners simultaneously: his verticality, together with the positioning of his feet, make him appear to be less an independent figure than an exteriorized projection of the interior experience of humiliation of the prisoner standing at the center of the drawing, who is denied the gesture of holding his head between his hands by being forced to hold the other prisoner’s head between his legs. Similarly, the curving back of the prisoner along the wall brings forward the curve of the back of the kneeling prisoner, whose posture does not so much embody the self-withdrawal of humiliation as slump well beyond it to a place of utter passivity and dejection.

While the bodily posture of the prisoner along the wall makes it appear as though he is responding to the scene taking place in front of him, the black hood makes viewers aware that, in contrast to the viewers themselves, he cannot actually see what is being staged in front of his eyes. Crile uses this fact to recast the way that hoods operate within the drawing, and it has the effect of both underscoring the disconnected interiority of each of the prisoners in relationship to one another and revealing the true perversity of this posed scene of mock fellatio. If the experience of humiliation implies the coerced exposure of self before the eyes of another, as well the capacity to positively withdraw from that exposure into a protective interior by being seen to avert one’s eyes, then an aspect of the torture in the photograph is the denial of the prisoners’ ability to show themselves as withdrawing from view, which would be to retract the conditions of their exposure. (Indeed, this is the significance of what it means for the prisoner along the wall to put his head in his hands.) Still further, the original photograph in its extreme psychic violence puts on display for a digital eternity this inability to withdraw from view by con-
stantly reenacting the exposure of the prisoners to the gaze of others through the medium of the photograph itself. Where *Crouching in Terror* stages the possibility of the viewer’s making a critical self-reflexive turn, here the viewer’s looking at the prisoner along the wall averting his eyes from a scene that he *cannot* see invites viewers to consider what they *can* see, and to do what the photograph itself does not: protect the prisoners from humiliation by looking away—in shame. Sympathy responds while again preserving distance and separateness.

Crile’s use of the neutral, empty space of the paper to communicate the decontextualization of the bodies being tortured takes on a markedly different inflection in her rendering of what is no doubt the most interpretively overdetermined of all the Abu Ghraib photographs, which shows Private First Class Lynndie England with a prisoner on a leash (fig. 7.4). The photograph, which England claims her superiors told her to pose for, has become emblematic of the United States’ abuse of power. And it was able to become emblematic because the posing of the photograph reveals not just an awareness of the relative hierarchical positions that define power (guard-prisoner, male-female), it also dramatizes that awareness in a manner that is at once assertive and parodic. Within the staging of this photograph, the conspicuously theatrical inversion of the power relationship between male and female through the use of the leash is being borrowed on to positively assert the power of guard over prisoner. What is transgressive, and even liberatory, in subverting the dominant hierarchical relationship between male and female through the use of the leash is being borrowed on to positively assert the power of guard over prisoner. What is transgressive, and even liberatory, in subverting the

The visual—and also visually interpretive—effect of this framing in the original photograph is twofold. First, the tortured prisoner’s compelled submission is being both highlighted and masked as a dimension of his torture is his being forcibly posed for the camera as *playing at* submission. Though this does not show up well in the photograph, the prisoner is, in fact, leashed to himself. The violent realization of what is being passed off as a fantasy of transgression creates—and must create, if its purpose is to humiliate—the illusion of agency.30 (This is also an aspect of the scene depicted in *Erotic Humiliation.*) The man’s seemingly willing surrender to domination by a woman thus serves to cover over the
7.4 Susan Crile (United States), *Private England, with Prisoner on a Leash*, 2005; 33 x 33 in. 
Printed with permission of the artist. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson
actual domination of a prisoner by a guard, which is rendered ambiguous in appearing to be just part of an act that reveals itself to be well aware of the dynamics of both power and transgression. Second, the posing of the photograph makes it inevitably about England’s gender, which is not simply being “lent” to this scene in order to compound the tortured prisoner’s humiliation but is instead being performed as violently dominating. According to certain feminist interpretations, the body that shows up as being originally violated is hers, which should be incapable of torture on either biologically essentialist grounds or as the result of a heightened social awareness generated by her own reductive exploitation as a body.21

Crile’s simple attention to the spatial relationship between bodies radically recontextualizes how power relations can be seen to operate in the original photograph. As she did in Crouching in Terror, Crile crops out most of England’s body in order to bring forward the body of the tortured prisoner. (Interestingly, the original photograph was already cropped by Specialist Graner, who was also the photographer, to edit out the presence of another female guard who was shown watching the scene.)22 This removes both the distraction of England’s gender — what is most noticeable about “her” is the living fleshiness of a naked arm — and the domination of her downward gaze, which takes its orientation not from the body of the prisoner attached to the end of her leash but from the camera. Though the viewer of the drawing is clearly aware that what is being shown here is a scene of violation, Crile’s emphasis on space creates a feeling of both quiet and passivity. This has the effect of exposing not only the gratuitousness of the act of staged domination but also its uncomfortable intimacy. And it is this intimacy that makes this overly familiar image surprising.

The elimination of England’s sight line, together with the absence of lines indicating the physical setting of a room, once again have the effect of giving the drawing a peculiar dimensionality. Where the black diagonal line created by the leash seems to confirm its initial appearance as flatly two-dimensional, Crile’s inclusion of the outline of England’s boot toe moves her back within the unmarked spatial field of the drawing. This both gives England a verticality that towers upward in its solid mass and makes the body of the prisoner seem to float forward and toward the viewer as it threatens to float outside the right-hand frame of the drawing. (One thinks of Crile’s comparison of the weightless bodies of the
prisoners to “balloons.”) The sense that the prisoner is floating toward the viewer interrupts his or her natural way of “reading” the drawing (right to left, up and down) by making the viewer engage with what appears to be visually closest—namely, the prisoner’s outstretched arm—in order to move backward: the viewer’s gaze starts with the prisoner’s arm, travels upward through the black diagonal created by the leash to England’s arm, and then travels back down to extend through the white tether that attaches the prisoner’s wrist to his own body.

It is in tracing the diagonal movement of the leash backward and then forward that Crile calls attention to the symmetries between arms and the tethers that connect bodies to bodies, offering the viewer a different way of understanding power relations in the original photograph. In following the strong diagonal that cuts through the entire drawing, the viewer becomes aware that what England is, in fact, being shown to hold in holding her leash is the power to bind the body of the prisoner to himself through the coerced experience of pain and humiliation. Here, Crile uses the visual logic of the drawing to bring forward a deeper insight into the logic of torture. For torture dominates by making the prisoner subject to his own body through the intentional infliction of pain, which undoes him as a human being in order to turn him into something that he never is on his own—just a body. Yet this emphasis on the photograph’s underlying symmetries has the effect of exposing its organizing asymmetry, which is the contrast between open and closed circuits within a space of willed disconnection. This is evident not only in the difference between the leash (which demarcates open spaces within the field of the drawing) and the tether (which reveals the body as a closed circuit of pain) but in the small space of skin that separates the black leash from the black watchband that encloses England’s wrist. Thus, where England holds the connection that binds the prisoner’s body to itself, he does not hold a connection to her; the tethers that connect bodies to bodies in the drawing would seem to move in one direction only.

It is at this juncture that Crile does something unexpected, and that goes beyond what she would have been able to actually see in the original photograph. While she is careful to show the break of skin between England’s hand holding the black leash and her black watchband, she continues the visual line of the leash through her faint, dark tracing of the veins in England’s own arm. In so doing, Crile brings forward the
presence of England’s physical body in relation to the act of torture, suggesting that England’s arm is an extension—if not the actual source—of the leash. Yet in showing what is just beneath the surface of England’s skin, Crile succeeds in simultaneously communicating the vulnerability of England’s body, bringing forward the intimacy of her bodily connection to the prisoner even within the space of her willed disconnection from him. It is finally this shared vulnerability that connects him to her even in the face of her power to deny it.

The affective power of Crile’s drawings lies in her attention to the prisoners’ bodies, making the viewer aware of the extent to which the singularity of their suffering has been left out of the discussion of the Abu Ghraib photographs in particular and the United States’ policy on torture in general. This begs what is perhaps the only pertinent question here: Could we torture if we really saw the fragility of the body as a shared human condition, when really seeing implies undergoing the immediate claim to sympathy itself evoked by the insight into the vulnerability of all bodies as subject to pain? Could the dual insight into singularity and a shared vulnerability stop torture?

Understood from this perspective, Crile’s effort to “recast” and “expose” the dynamics of power underlying the original torture photographs is certainly a political act. She concludes her artist’s statement by expressing her hope that “accountability does not lag far behind empathy.” Her sensitivity to the singular suffering of particular bodies enables her to avoid the didacticism of art intended to morally or politically instruct—a didacticism she nonetheless risks with each artistic choice she makes in her rendering of the original photographs. This shows us something about Crile’s deeper sensitivity to the fragility of bodies and the sense of restraint that a vigilantly responsive attention to particularity imposes. For the restoration of the viewer’s sense of touch that is the beginning of sympathy starts with Crile’s eye and the relationship between that eye and the hand that holds the white chalk as she labors “to show the particular sense of humiliation of a particular man, to reveal the exact sense of his terrible pain” (my emphasis). Though this certainly does not undo the experience of torture for the prisoners who suffered it, Crile’s attention to the singularity of their suffering restores for the viewer the perverted sense of connection—eye, hand, implement, touch—that becomes disconnected, instrumentalized, rationalized, and made into...
something finally inhuman through the act of torture. Art cannot save us from ourselves. One hopes, however, that in tracing Crile’s fragile outlines, we remain vulnerable to letting it restore.

NOTES

1 Though problematic in combining interviews with dramatic reenactments and overdone scene setting, Errol Morris’s 2008 documentary Standard Operating Procedure is nonetheless helpful in clarifying basic facts surrounding both the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the specific circumstances under which particular photographs were taken. Of the three guards taking photographs in express violation of signs forbidding photography within the prison, Sabrina Harman alone understood herself to be documenting evidence of torture. (During the interview with Morris, she repeatedly says that she wanted to “just show what was going on, what was allowed to be done.”) With the exception of pictures showing the dead prisoner wrapped and iced in a body bag, Harman’s photographs of prisoners in stress positions were found by investigators to show “standard operating procedures” rather than torture. At the same time, however, that Harman was documenting these legal acts of torture, she was also consenting to pose with prisoners who had been arranged in sexually humiliating positions. For more about how Harman understood her role as photographer, see Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, “Exposure: The Woman Behind the Camera at Abu Ghraib,” New Yorker, March 24, 2008.

2 Though a sustained discussion exceeds the scope of this chapter, the connection made between the Abu Ghraib photographs and pornography was immediate and revealed important tensions as feminist writers struggled to make sense of the role that women played in the acts of torture at Abu Ghraib. For two different perspectives on the relationship between the Abu Ghraib photographs and pornography, see Susan J. Brison, “The Torture Connection: When Photographs from Abu Ghraib Can’t Be Distinguished from ‘Good Old American Pornography,’ It’s Not Just the Torture We Should Be Questioning,” San Francisco Chronicle, July 25, 2004; and Rochelle Gurstein, “The Triumph of the Pornographic Imagination,” Arts and Opinion 7, no. 1 (2008). Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero challenges aspects of these readings by calling attention to the photographs’ feeling of simulation; see Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 106–15.
Sontag lays out the ways in which war or “shock” photography affects the viewer in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). She is clear, however, that, on its own, the feeling of sympathy is not a sufficient response to the pain and suffering of others. As she writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: “Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only a spark” (102–3).

For a critical engagement of Sontag’s approach, see Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2009), 63–100. While I am persuaded by aspects of Butler’s critique (this is particularly true of her analysis of embedded reporting), I am skeptical about understanding all photography as “visually interpretive” (e.g., already situated within a frame, and itself framing in a manner that is reality constituting). This follows from Butler’s understanding of photography as representation (does it have to be?) and informs her resistance to Sontag’s claim that photographs need narratives to “make us understand” (69). On this score, I’m inclined to agree with Sontag.

Certainly, one of the more remarkable moments in Morris’s *Standard Operating Procedure* is a video showing Sabrina Harman looking down at the ‘viewfinder’ of her camera, photographing a pile of naked detainees as she is being videotaped.

In her analyses of the Abu Ghraib photographs, Judith Butler calls particular attention to the way in which the photographs “frame” the act of perception, challenging, among other things, Sontag’s understanding of photography as documentary rather than already interpretive. While my own understanding of framing is indebted to Martin Heidegger’s elaboration of the “as”-structure in *Being and Time* and “Origin of the Work of Art,” Butler’s recent work on the precariousness of life has been important for clarifying my approach to Crile’s drawings, even if I do not engage Butler directly in this piece. For Butler’s interpretation of the Abu Ghraib photographs, see her “Photography, War, Outrage,” *PMLA: Theories and Methodologies* (2005): 822–27; the chapter “Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag,” in *Frames of War*, is an expanded version of this essay.

When this essay was written, Crile’s “Abu Ghraib: Abuse of Power” series included thirty-two works on paper, with possible plans to continue with...
more drawings as other photographs were released. All of the drawings are executed in chalk, charcoal, pastel, and conte. Crile’s most recent work includes drawings of prisoners held in black sites, and is based on written testimony found in the International Committee of the Red Cross depositions. Susan Crile, e-mail to author, April 6, 2009.

8 David Ebony’s introduction to the exhibition catalog Botero Abu Ghraib is useful for documenting a variety of artistic responses to the Abu Ghraib photographs. While the Botero paintings are compelling (the series does include some drawings), they tend to be composites rather than based on the actual Abu Ghraib photographs. As Ebony writes, “Botero based his Abu Ghraib compositions on written testimony as much as on the photographic material” (Botero Abu Ghraib [Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2006], 15). There is something important about the singularity of the bodies of those being tortured in the photographs that is lost in this approach and that Crile understands her drawings as recovering. Here, I would also risk making the further point that the materiality of drawing — the tactile presence of the paper and the body in outline form — is uniquely well suited to communicating the fragility of the body in pain. Painting, by contrast, fills up the surface of the canvas and fills in the outline of the body, turning it into a figure. The significance of the materiality of drawing is addressed later in this essay.

9 In his book The Abu Ghraib Effect (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), Stephen F. Eisenman lays out the connection between the viewer’s experience of the photographs’ visual uncanniness and Freud’s theory of the uncanny, writing: “On seeing the photographs from Abu Ghraib prison, many critics, art historians and others experienced the disorientation of the uncanny because they saw in the hierarchic disposition of bodies, the mock-erotic scenarios, and the expressions of triumphant glee on the faces of the captors, something that was disturbing and intensely familiar, but could not be named or fully recalled to consciousness. What they recognized but quickly forgot . . . is in fact a key element of the classical tradition in art. . . . That feature of the Western classical tradition is specifically the motif of tortured people . . . who appear to sanction their own abuse” (16).

10 See Luc Sante, “Tourists and Torturers,” New York Times, May 11, 2004, Opinion section. Sontag makes this connection in “Regarding the Torture of Others,” pointing out that “snapshots in which executioners placed themselves among their victims are exceedingly rare” (At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007], 132). Sontag had already briefly addressed the lynching photographs in Regarding the
Pain of Others, 91–93. For a full discussion and complete collection of the lynching postcards, see James Allen, Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Twin Palms Publishers, 2003); the collection is further supplemented by the Web site www.withoutsanctuary.org.

Dora Apel lays out the important differences between the lynching and Abu Ghraib photographs in “Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib,” Art Journal 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 88–100.

It is worth noting that only the lynching photograph, with its inclusion of a white border denoting day and place, makes this relationship between frame and the viewer’s seeing visible and thus interpretively available. The digital medium of the Abu Ghraib photograph is, by contrast, effectively limitless, filling in so as to absorb any outer edge, and punctually unlocatable as even capturing a real event unfolding in real time.

As Modell eloquently writes in his post “Viewpoint: The Power of Abuse Pictures,” for the BBC News: “The pictures from Abu Ghraib are fundamentally different [from documentary]. They are not snatched, clandestine images taken to uncover the truth and disseminate it. In the almost perfect compositions it is obvious that they were taken in a perversely relaxed atmosphere—emphasized by the demeanor of the troops. And this reveals an appalling reality—that the photographs are a deliberate part of the torture. The taking of the pictures was supposed to compound the humiliation and sense of powerlessness of the victims. The photographer was the abuser. When we view the pictures, we are forced to play our part in this triangle of communication. The photographs were taken to abuse, by exposing the victim at their most vulnerable. By looking at the images we become complicit in the abuse itself. It is what makes them intolerable for the viewer and why they are so destructive to a war effort built on the spin of ‘liberation’” (BBC News, May 13, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3710617.stm).

In many of her writings on photography, Sontag stresses that photography is a way of seeing. She makes this the first principle of her short piece “Photography: A Little Summa,” writing: “1. Photography is, first of all, a way of seeing. It is not seeing itself” (At the Same Time, 124).

Sante, who was one of the first critics to comment on the Abu Ghraib photographs in “Tourists and Torturers,” writes: “The first shot I saw, of specialist Charles A. Graner and Pfc. Lynndie R. England flashing a thumbs up behind a pile of their naked victims, was so jarring that for a few seconds I took it for a montage” (New York Times, May 11, 2004, Opinion section).

For details on the circumstances under which one such photograph was taken, see Allen, Without Sanctuary, 175–76. He writes: “Lawrence Beitler,
a studio photographer, took this photo. For ten days and nights he printed thousands of copies, which sold for fifty cents apiece.”

17 Crile, *Abu Ghraib*, 27.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 28.
20 Eisenman addresses this structure in *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, 60–72.
22 This fact comes out in Errol Morris’s *Standard Operating Procedure*.