

Research Space

Book chapter

**From darkness to light: portrait pictures in the Bảo Tàng Côn Đảo
Museum**

Tennant, M.

From Darkness to Light: Portrait Pictures in the Bảo Tàng Côn Đảo Museum

The lighting in Bảo Tàng Côn Đảo Museum in Côn Sơn Town seems to get brighter as you walk through the rooms associated with the island's prison history. It is as if one moves from the darkest of pasts to a brighter future. Perhaps it is this which gives the narrative presented there a sense of reclamation. Throughout the different rooms displays featuring rows of portrait pictures are not uncommon, and these appear to become brighter too, partly through the inclusion of more colour photography, but also due to elevated present. Only a few are obviously prison 'mugshots', although many others may be. That of Tôn Đức Thắng, the first president of a reunified Vietnam, stands out particularly as such, showing the classic front and side profile with a name and number beneath. Others are clearly not and depict smiling faces in natural poses, such as the charming image of Cao Nguyên Loi, positioned below the maps that he drew to assist the Congressional visit to locate the Tiger Cages at Côn Sơn prison in 1970. Despite this variance there is a definite shift in the presentation of the various portrait pictures as one moves through the museum which complements the narrative of reclamation. Early on portraits are presented in partially illuminated glass cases on stark black walls. Almost all are men dressed in suits, traditional dress or military attire, and most expressions are stern and impassive. These do not bear the classic hollow, haunted look commonly associated with prison mugshots. Yet there is a seriousness which combines

with the black surround and the smartness of dress to create an impression of stoic determination in the face of darkness and oppression. There is pride here but it is somber and it has suffered.

Further on the background shifts to shades of pastel and the interspersing of some colour photographs softens the still often expressionless images. More smiles can be seen, though, and more softer, female faces. In one display portrait pictures appear alongside extracts of handwriting, an individual trait which, like the face, has the capacity to personalize and, on first glance does so, as much, if not more, than the portraits. A closer inspection shows the texts here are signed declarations against the separatist movement and so the personal of the handwriting is positioned collectively, uniting those faces shown within a particular political perspective.

Elsewhere, however, the writing of prisoners is recreated in more intimate displays of letters and poetry, as well as political expression. There are no portraits here but the writings, although silent, give a voice to former inmates that portraits cannot convey. As a non-Vietnamese speaker I cannot understand the words but their presence through the small, scrawls and loops, known to have been penned by inmates during their incarceration, allows the experience of imprisonment to resonate. And here it is the absence of portraits which contributes to a sense of collectivity. These are individuals, evident in their different slants and styles of writing, but they are united in a shared ordeal and in their need to communicate beliefs and experiences to others. The information boards strengthen this, detailing codes that were used to subvert attempts to prevent communication.

Perhaps the most striking example of resistance, though, comes from another series of portrait pictures. These are unequivocally prison 'mugshots', taken not to mark the arrest or entry of female prisoners, but as an attempt to position them as 'common' criminals, thus removing a treasured identity as political beings. The photographs followed a violent attack involving beatings and tear gas to compel the women to comply with the photography process. The shots are close up and the evidence of violent treatment is plain. Rather than succumbing to the gaze of the prison, however, the women seem to have engaged in an act of collective resistance by closing their eyes; one of the few acts of subversion remaining to them. Their captors' attempts to fix them with a particular identity at least temporarily suspended. There are hints in their expressions that tell of resistance too. A look of serenity, almost superiority, on the face of one woman, despite the presence of swelling and bruising around her eyes. In another there is anger and determination. The woman's mistreatment is marked by a missing tooth but her furrowed brows convey the effort she is making to keep her eyes closed. Each picture is deeply personal but their presentation together in rows belies the collective nature of their experiences.

It is in the final room of materials on prison history that the story of reclamation reaches its apex, before the museum moves on to consider Côn Đảo today. The walls here are a brighter peachy pastel, creating a sense of greater light. Portrait pictures are numerous and their presentation has a ceremonial and celebratory form. Whilst some images are still black and white, indeed some are missing - replaced instead with the red and gold national flag - many

are colour, and smiles are more abundant. Faces are evident in the form of busts as well as photographs, and many images are presented above framed certificates embossed with a red seal. Again I cannot understand the words but the meaning does not require this. These people are marked with significance, their importance officially recognized and endorsed. The suits and military attire have shifted from stoic determination in the face of darkness to a bold presentation firmly in the light. But this is not an individual reclamation. Those depicted in the early rooms have not themselves been reclaimed. They were the nadir of this narrative, living in dark times which are not to be forgotten. What has been reclaimed is in part the nation, a strong feature of all representations within the museum, particularly through the text; unsurprising at a site so central to the struggle for national independence.

What the portraits add to this narrative is the sense that the people as a whole - collectively - have been reclaimed. Their presence personalizes, but not in an individualistic way, instead acting as a reminder that the people are the nation. There are voices which are missing, of course, and the consensus on which this narrative of collective reclamation relies is undoubtedly more fractured in reality. But the portraits add an important humanizing element to a very political story in which combined effort was undoubtedly pivotal.

Maryse Tennant

