



Abu Ghraib | Abuse of Power  
Susan Crile

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Works on Paper by Susan Crile  
Professor of Art, Hunter College

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The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at Hunter College  
New York City



Hands of Power: Murdered Prisoner | 2005 | white chalk & charcoal on paper | 27.5 x 27 in.

## Bodies Under Stress | by Mark Danner

In November 2003, barely six months into the Iraq War, Specialist Joseph Darby returned from leave and asked a fellow soldier at Abu Ghraib prison to tell him what had happened while he'd been away. In answer, Specialist Charles Graner handed him two CDs—CDs which contained, as Darby shortly discovered, hundreds of digital photographs, many of them depicting US military policemen and intelligence soldiers abusing prisoners: photographs that have since become the war's most famous images. "The Christian in me says it's wrong," Graner reportedly said, "but the corrections officer in me says, 'I love to make a grown man piss himself.'"

Sadism is unquestionably part of what soon came to be known as "the Abu Ghraib scandal"—the sadism of men like Graner who, unsupervised by superiors who cared only for "results," gave way to an individual cruelty that is as human and familiar as it is appalling. But policy is also a part of it—policy made by powerful men and women in offices in Washington who wrote memoranda and guidelines and rules which, soon after the attacks of September 11, 2001, turned the United States from a country that, officially at least, condemned and prohibited torture to one that allowed and encouraged it. Abu Ghraib is only one episode in a much larger story, a narrative that began on a bright, clear September morning in New York and Washington and eventually wound its way not only through prisons in Iraq but through Bagram air base in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and through the so-called "dark sites," secret prisons for "high value detainees" whose locations are changeable and closely held. That larger story of torture and the war on terror involves thousands of detainees and soldiers and government officials and, as I write these words more than two years after the photographs Darby saw were made public, that story has not ended.

The Abu Ghraib photographs, which are the genesis of Susan Crile's remarkable works on paper, carry a singular distinction: they made torture tangible, palpable—visible. Or, better—and all-important for Americans—Abu Ghraib made torture *televisual*. For the first and only time in the nearly five years of the war on terror, torture raised its repellent form from the grey swamp of newspaper reporting and pundit commentary to stand front and center in the American consciousness: shocking, bewildering, disgusting—undeniable.

Or so it seemed. In the event, of course, officials of the Bush Administration did deny it. The events depicted were, in the words of one investigator, nothing more than “Animal House on the night shift.” And the outlandish grotesquerie of the images themselves helped make this “few bad apples” argument—the traditional defense of nations accused of torture—plausible. The piles of naked, hooded men; the naked figures cowering before the teeth of the lunging police dogs; the lines of men grasping their genitals, forced to masturbate: how, after all, could such disgusting things have been *ordered*? Surely only a handful of sadists, acting without supervision, could have been responsible; and those sadists—those foolish enough to let themselves be photographed—would be duly punished. After a momentary outcry, and a dozen or more investigations—none of which confronted the responsibility of those who made the policies and those who gave the orders—the question of torture receded, metamorphosing from shocking revelation to ongoing story. Newspaper reporters went on investigating Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, Bagram; published a proliferating series of horrific accounts. Torture endured but it had slipped from our world of images. Torture had survived its exposure.

The photographs remain; around the world, particularly in the Middle East, they have become the instantly recognizable images of the Iraq War. Had Osama bin Laden sought to devise an image embodying the ideas underlying his jihad, that Americans were suppressing, humiliating, disempowering, *unmanning* Muslims, could he have found one more eloquent, more instantly *readable*, than that of Lynndie England, the young American soldier, standing, leash in hand, above the Muslim man naked on the floor, body contorted in pain, face clenched in humiliation, leash binding his neck?

For all their power and their ubiquity, though, these images have long since become brittle, impenetrable. Whether one sees in them a regrettable scandal from the past or a state of ongoing oppression, they have been transformed into symbolic essences. We look at them, acknowledge them, but rarely, two years after they entered the public realm, do we see into them. Susan Crile has changed that; for her works bring our eye back to the images themselves and to the humanity of what they represent—back to the encounter between human beings that is at their heart. Beyond the narrative of what

happened in a distant prison on a distant night, these images reduce torture to its essence: humiliation, degradation, pain. They make clear, in the encounter between the bulky Americans enclosed in their uniforms and gloves and great superfluities of flesh, and the slim and ghostly prisoners, rendered in calm and delicate outline, that the relation here is one of vampire to victim, the powerful sucking humanity from the powerless.

The power of these works, then, lies first in forcing us to *look* at images that we have long since trained ourselves not to see; and, in looking, to see what is depicted—inevitably, irrevocably—as encounters between human beings: encounters choreographed to assert power and dominance through systematic degradation, humiliation and shame. The torturer exerts his or her power by the forced draining of the power of the other. Hooded, stripped, exposed, the tortured becomes pure object, deprived of control over even the most basic and intimate areas of life. Bereft of sight, shelter, cover, his body belongs to someone else, who is free to manipulate it, strike it, shame it, place it under stress; even his sexuality is wrenched away from him and used as a weapon against him.

In the hands of Crile, these images are about empathy, about the urgency of seeing beyond the clouds of euphemism that the Washington advocates of “extreme interrogation” have thrown up over nearly five years. Such euphemisms—“adjustment of environment,” “forced nakedness,” “use of dogs to induce stress”—clutter the government memoranda that have emerged in a flood of leaks from the Pentagon and other bureaucracies. What after all could be more anodyne, more precise and scientific, than a “stress position”? When I first cast my eye on Crile’s *Panties as Hood* (2005), in which a naked Iraqi prisoner is shown shackled to a bed frame—one of the favored “stress positions” at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere—there came to my mind a passage from the deposition of one Ameen Sa’eed Al-Sheikh, taken down by soldiers of the US Army’s Criminal Investigation Division:

They stripped me naked. One of them told me he would rape me. He drew a picture of a woman on my back and made me stand in a shameful position holding my buttocks. Someone else asked me, “Do you believe in anything?” I

said to him, “I believe in Allah.” So he said, “But I believe in torture and I will torture you. When I go home to my country, I will ask whoever comes after me to torture you.” Then they handcuffed me and hung me to the bed. They ordered me to curse Islam and because they started to hit my broken leg, I cursed my religion. They ordered me to thank Jesus that I’m alive. And I did what they ordered me. This is against my belief. They left me hanging from the bed and after a while I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I found myself still hanging between the bed and the floor. ...[O]ne of them stood by the door and pee’d on me. ... Then he hung me to the door for more than eight hours. I was screaming from pain the whole night.<sup>1</sup>

In the Pentagon memoranda we read ongoing debates about the number of hours during which such “stress positions” may be imposed: should it be four hours? Five? The language is dry, distanced, clinical, written by men and women in air-conditioned offices, whose notions of “toughness” are drawn from an entirely different world. “I stand for eight to ten hours a day,” Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, working at his stand-up desk, scrawled beneath his initials on one such document. “Why is standing limited to four hours?”

This is the blithe voice of bureaucratic power. Susan Crile depicts the ultimate effect such voices of power can have on the bodies of those without it. In *Panties as Hood* we see this in its essence: a human being humiliated and in pain, his face draped in a woman’s undergarment, his arms wrenched back, his delicate torso bowed like a harp. There is degradation here, and pain; yet the artist’s hand retrieves from that dark world, insists on retrieving, the essential, the inextinguishable beauty of the human form. If there can be redemption here we must find it in that beautiful line, still throbbing, still vital, amid these overwhelming images of bodies twisted, bodies broken, bodies under stress.

July 2006

Mark Danner is the author of *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* and *The Secret Way to War: The Downing Street Memo and the Iraq War’s Buried History*, among other works.

<sup>1</sup>See “The Depositions: The Prisoners Speak,” in Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib and the War on Terror* (New York Review, 2004), pages 221–22. The text has been slightly edited for clarity.



Panties as Hood | 2005 | white chalk on paper | 27.5 x 39 in.

## Abuse of Power | by Susan Crile

In the photos from Abu Ghraib, the prisoners have no weight; like Raggedy Ann dolls or balloons they lack balance or gravity, even when stacked three deep in piles. 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.

The emptiness of the sheet of paper is a metaphor. There is no context; the prisoners are hooded, with no perception of where one thing begins or another ends. 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 itself. The figures brush against its limit—the edge. This is the space of torture and abuse. In prison, it is said, that sight is not dominant, but rather sound; there is the constant, brutal clanging of metal against metal—the prisoner never *sees* anything. This sense of ‘blindness’ is intensified by the hoods and the women’s underwear used as blindfolds, which is meant to humiliate them.

While the prisoners appear ethereal and are often deprived of sight, the interrogators are massive and accompanied by the accoutrements of power (the gloved hand, the leash, the painful shackles, the attack dogs) which includes the interrogators’ right to see and be seen—both their right to surveillance and the right to be photographed with their human trophies. Their physical massiveness (boots, vests, layers of clothes, gloves and excess flesh), in contrast to the prisoners’ fragile nakedness, is a sign that they are the center of power, the source of intimidation and abuse. One group of drawings, *The Hands of Power*, shows close-ups of the interrogators wearing black or surgical gloves. Is it to buffer or diminish the marks of abuse on the bodies of the victims? Is it the fear of contamination and disease? Is it the anticipation of drawing blood? Or is it simply the fear of the other?

That these images are based on photos is important; the photos are the record and not to be disguised in any way. We become aware that the scene has been orchestrated—staged. It was meant to be photographed, and the photographer and we, the viewers, are seeing the same thing. We are looking over his shoulder, complicit as either witnesses or voyeurs of this awful scene.

Photos have become such a part of the fast expendable information age we live in that they have created a glut, where the sheer mass and volume of photographic images have made the eye the most overused sense. Drawing, the use of chalk and charcoal, the texture of 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 empathically.

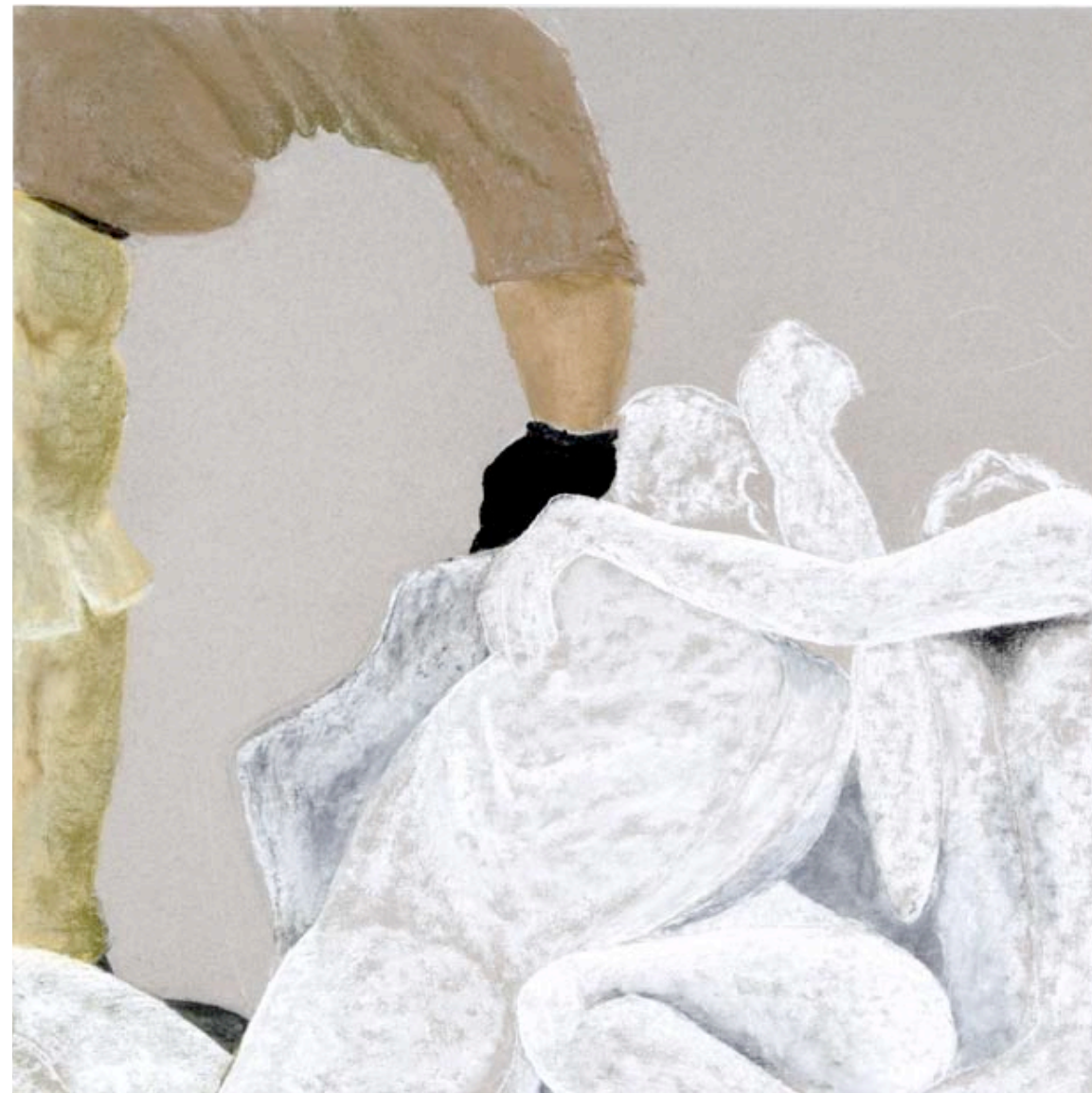
The depiction of suffering is one of the central themes of Western Art. An integral part of that theme is the artist’s attempt to find a visual form through which the viewer can identify or empathize with that suffering. The Abu Ghraib photos are particularly disturbing since they were taken with the intent *not* to have an empathic connection to the suffering of the prisoner—to ‘the horror of it all’—but are meant to show his weakness in the face of might. They are meant to immortalize the strength and the ideology of the American soldier and the army behind that soldier and the country behind that army. We are looking at something that appears to be out of control, yet has been supported and developed over decades in a sustained way by a clandestine U.S. foreign policy. (Most of the methods of torture used at Abu Ghraib prison can be found in the *Kubark Manual for Counterintelligence Interrogation*, which has been in use by the CIA since the 1950s.)

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. One hopes that accountability does not lag far behind empathy.



Hands of Power: Before the Storm | 2005 | white chalk & charcoal on paper | 27.5 x 39 in.

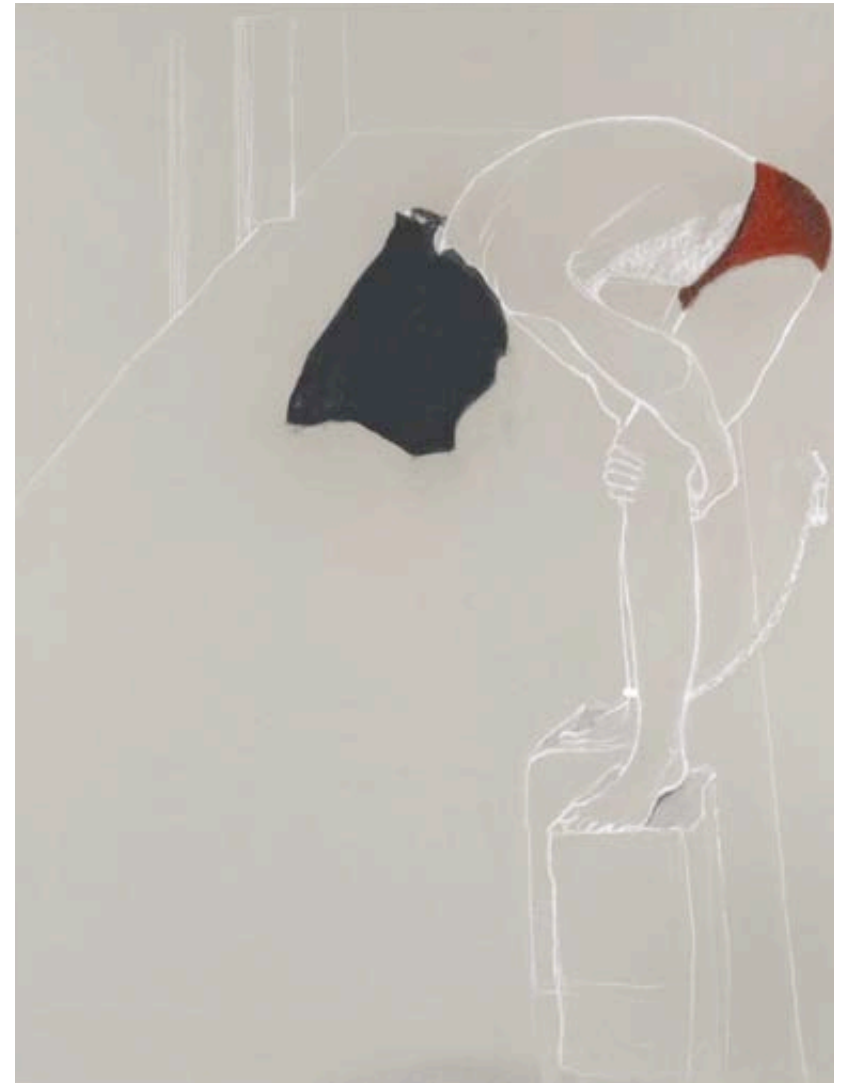
Hands of Power: Handled | 2005 | white chalk, pastel & charcoal on paper | 27.5 x 27.5 in.





"Obscene Intimacy" (BB) | 2005 | clay paint on paper | 35 x 47 in.

Shackled in Red Panties | 2005 | white chalk, pastel & charcoal on paper | 42 x 33 in.





"Torture Light" | 2006 | pastel, charcoal & chalk on paper | 42.5 x 22 in.

Anguish | 2006 | pastel, clay paint & charcoal on paper | 38 x 40 in.





Crouching in Terror | 2005 | white chalk, pastel & charcoal on paper | 34 x 33 in.



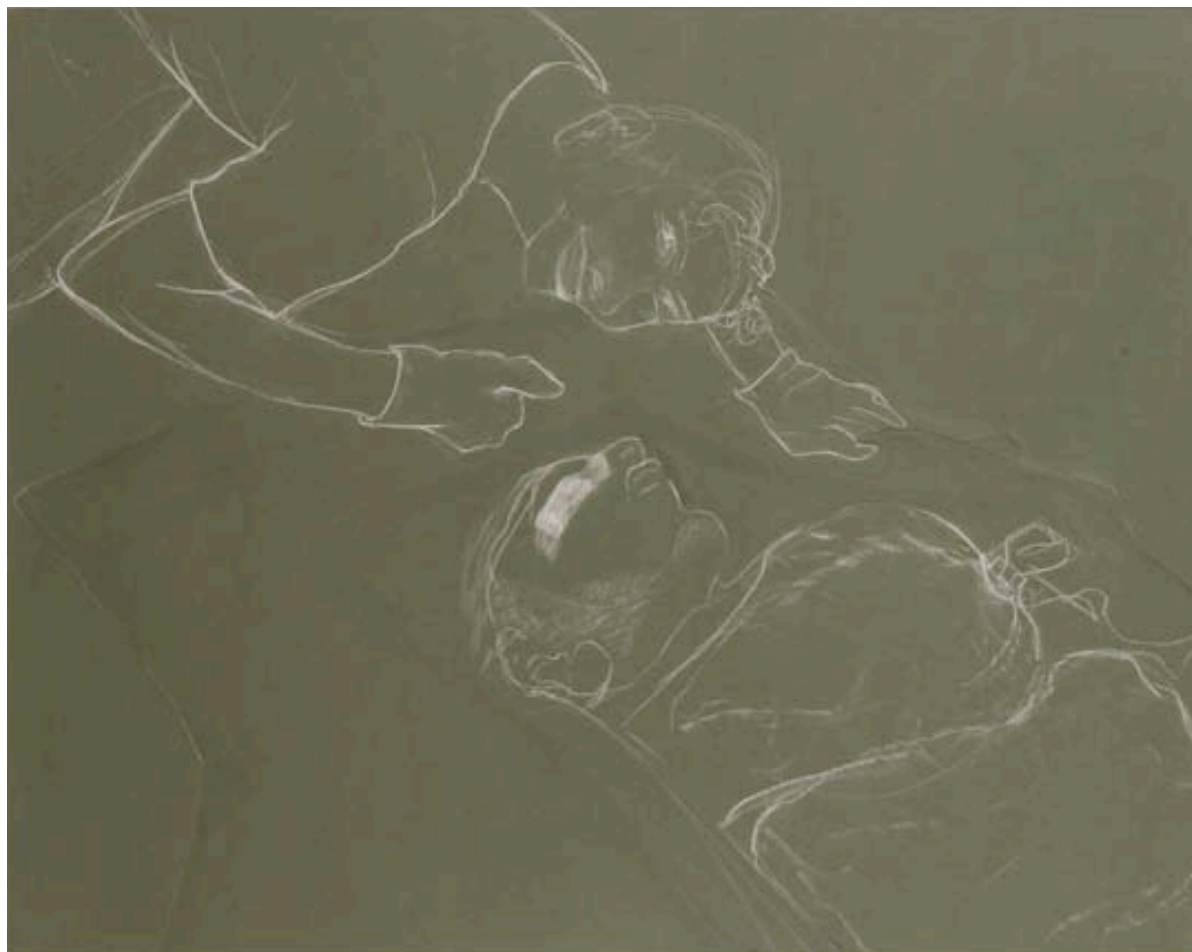
Private England Dragging a Prisoner on a Leash | 2005 | white chalk, pastel & charcoal on paper | 33.5 x 33 in.



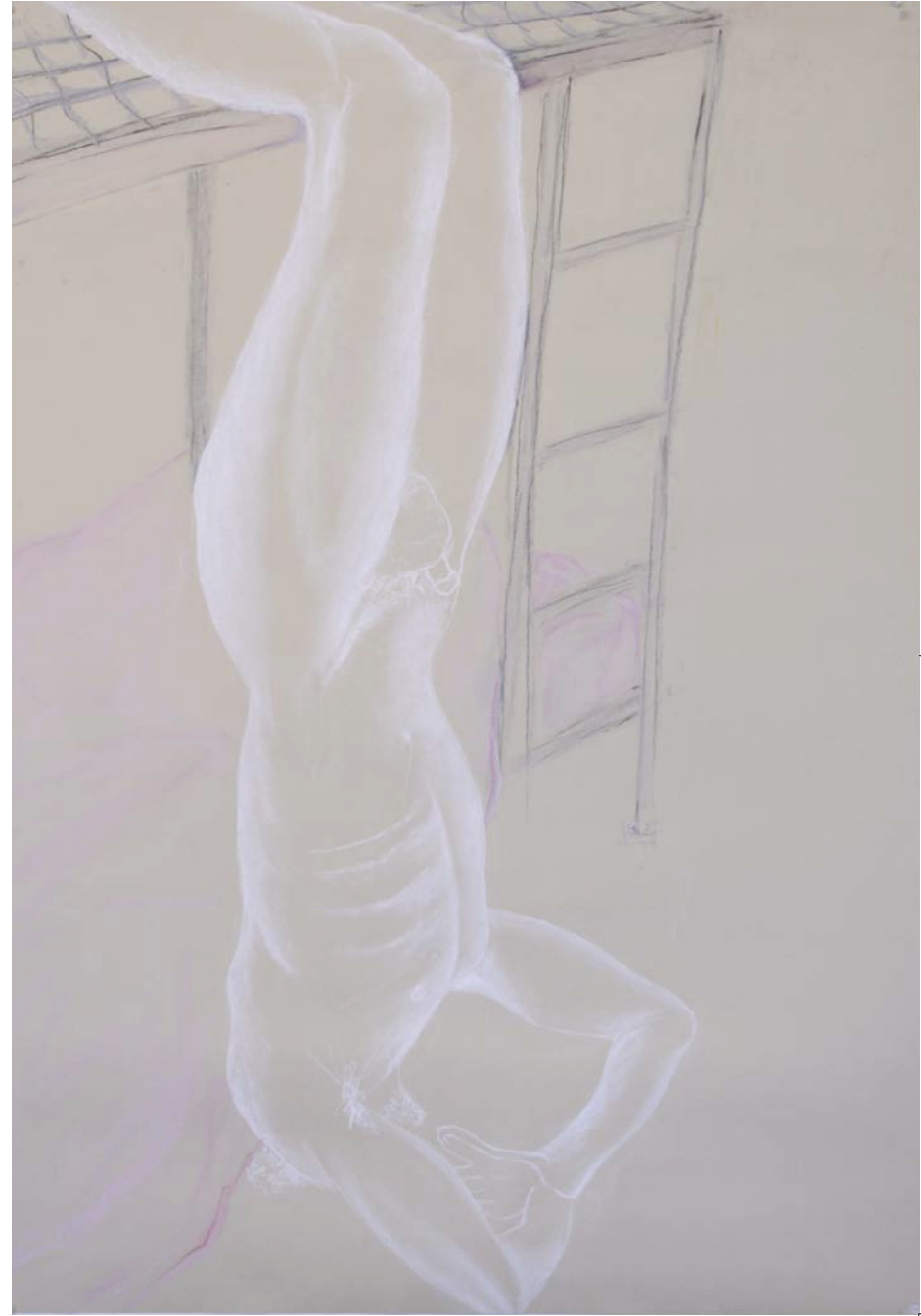
Arranged: Naked Mound of Flesh | 2005 | pastel & white chalk on paper | 34 x 42.5 in.

Point & Shoot | 2006 | chalk on paper | 35.5 x 34 in.

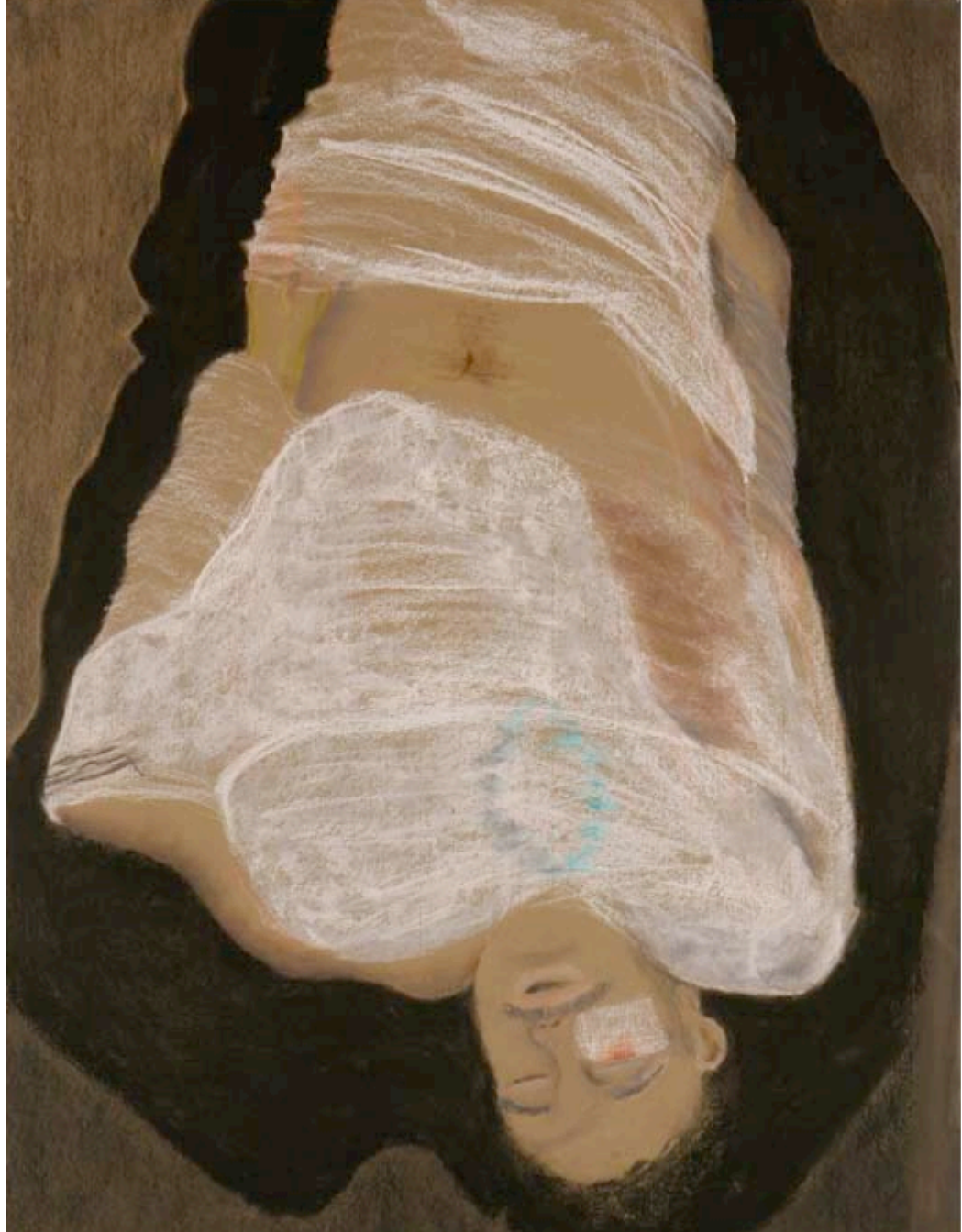




Leering at Death | 2006 | chalk on paper | 34 x 42.5 in.

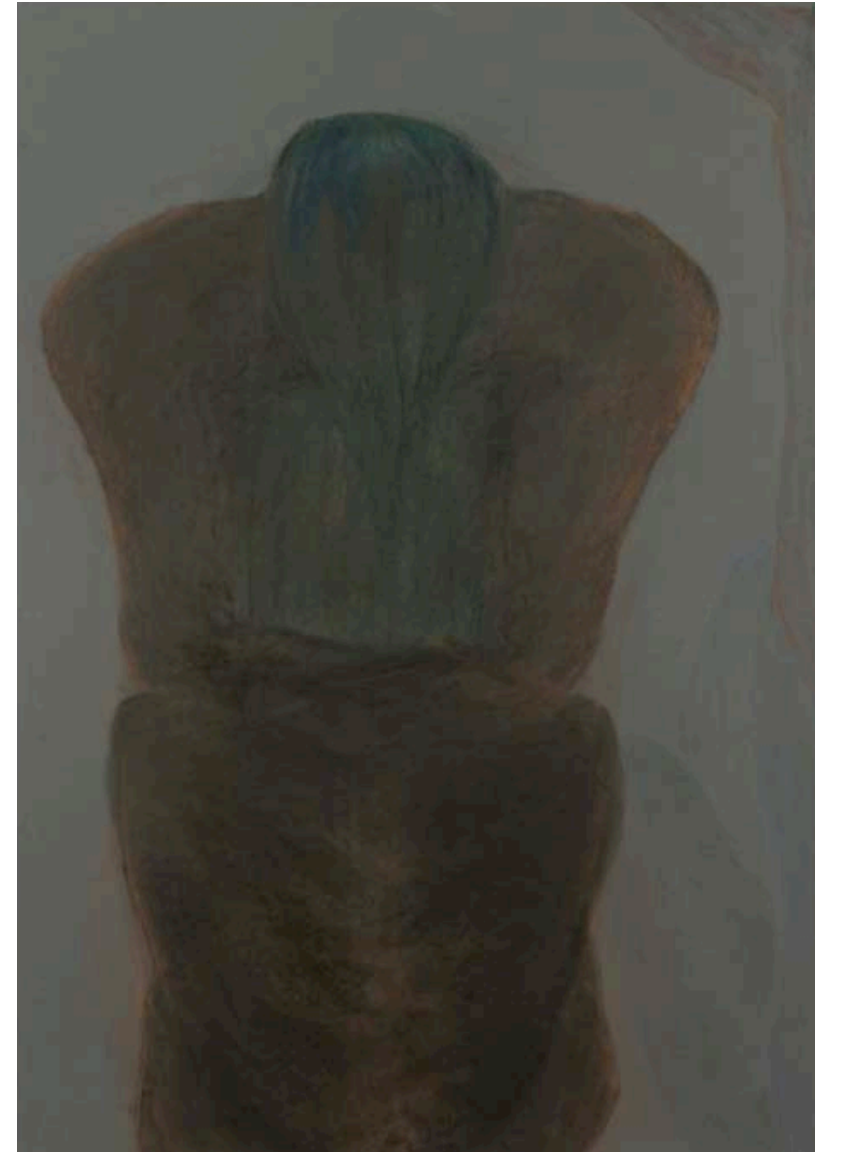


Hanging Prisoner | 2006 | white chalk and pastel on paper | 39.5 x 27.5 in.



"We Do Not Torture" (G.W.B.) | 2006 | charcoal, pastel & chalk on paper | 36 x 27.5 in.

There is no There There | 2006 | chalk & pastel on paper | 38.5 x 34 in.





Erotic Humiliation | 2005 | white chalk & pastel on paper | 39 x 27.5 in.



Bleeding Prisoner #2 | 2005 | white chalk, pastel, & clay paint on paper | 27.5 x 33 in.



Threatened | 2005 | charcoal & pastel on paper | 34 x 42.5 in.

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