

'THIS IS CAMP X-RAY' BY JAI REDMAN

In an article especially commissioned for Don't Cross the Line, Melanie Jarman discusses the political context of the artists' work.

The way in which we view the world is limited by the place that we come from. The first European settlers in America, for example, brought the imagination, and its boundaries, from other countries to transplant in the new geography. Their way of seeing the world, and so their way of living, was often not open enough to their new setting, leaving them sometimes bewildered and sometimes hungry. These days the television allows things to come to us: we don't have to leave our armchair to see the other side of the globe. Strange objects 'on the box' aren't so strange because the television intervenes and limits how they stretch our imagination. But try a full-scale replica of the Guantanamo Bay detention centre standing live and direct in central Manchester - that's a little more unnerving.

The three installations in 'Don't Cross the Line' flaunt just that instruction and crash through preconceived notions. For a start they break free of the elitist environment of an art gallery and sit in spaces used by the general public, inviting a response from passers-by. Jai Redman's 'This is Camp X-Ray' is sandwiched between a housing development and some wasteland, while the paper sculptures of Helen Knowles' 'Growth Investment' appear in the Royal Exchange, a building which is a direct reference to past colonial trade but now houses a theatre, restaurant and craft shops. Maggie Lambert's 'Asylum Seekers' photographs are on billboards on the old Manchester city boundary line and edge of the corner known as Little Ireland, home to refugees of another age.

'This is Camp X-Ray' represents the most obviously fortified line. The 'real' detention centre houses prisoners from the Afghanistan war and alleged supporters of Al Qaeda, the organisation that crossed a line and brought the low level international war in which the US has been involved for some time onto home territory. The camp stands as a warning to anyone daring to step out of line and challenge Bush's empire, its harsh conditions having been condemned by international human rights organisations for breaking the boundaries set out in the Geneva Convention on humanitarian treatment of

prisoners. And all in the name of freedom and democracy.

'Growth Investment' brings a historical perspective to the construction of empires and recalls how plants have been carried across national borders to fill imperial coffers. This trend continues today with the plantations of old echoed in the fields of genetically modified crops that the profit-led biotech companies promise us will feed the world. The items in 'Growth Investment' are themselves made from plant material, a ghostly white paper that blurs the nature of the objects on the botanist's bench to make them into memories or dreams. And the original observer and user of plants, the botanist, crosses a line to become a subject of observation him/herself, as an ashtray and wellington boots sit cast in paper alongside the scientific paraphernalia.

Plants cross national boundary lines and are treated as extremely valuable. Human beings - now they're a different matter. Maggie Lambert's 'Asylum Seekers' photographs show people who have crossed geographical lines and been treated as alien by people whose ancestors crossed geographical lines in previous generations. These pictures have travelled to the US as part of an exhibition there. Such a journey for the picture's subjects themselves is likely to never be more than a dream.

All the lines in the exhibition lead to the place where we stand as observers. It is difficult, for example, to see Manchester's Camp X-Ray and not feel some response. But the shock that the detention centre generates is different to the response to an art piece such as Damien Hirst's shark in formaldehyde. With 'This is Camp X-Ray' Redman takes something that actually exists, transports it from another place to this, and shows us what we are not meant to see: acts which are carried out in our name, with the quiet consent of our government, and with massive consequences for our liberty. Camp X-Ray, and the events that led to the need for it in the first place, are what happens when we don't bother to draw the lines that mark out democratic space - the civil liberties such as freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial. While Camp X-Ray, like sweatshops or environmental destruction, is something that happens far away, it is easier to be merely observers and not take part in shaping the world around us. But 'Don't Cross the Line' ultimately is an invitation to take a step - to cross over from silent observation and to take part.