Whatever else remains uncertain following the 2016 election, Labor and Liberal parties have avowed their unwavering commitment to the policy of offshore incarceration, thereby condemning close to a thousand men held in PNG, and several hundred people including children, women and men held on Nauru, to what is, in effect, a life sentence. The fact that the gates of the Australian-funded camps are technically open does not detract from the fact that these refugees and asylum seekers remain unfree and subject to all manner of dangers. They are, in their own words, 'political prisoners' of the Australian state, for the term of their unnatural lives. Both Government and Opposition declare, with a certain relish, that their policies may be 'harsh' and 'tough,' but are undertaken in a spirit of humanity, in the name of 'saving -- some other and unspecified -- lives', somewhere else, in some unknown future. This is the much-vaunted rationale of 'deterrence'. Just what is entailed in these 'harsh' to be 'humane' policies remains largely out of sight. Politicians have become especially dextrous at fixing their gaze on the hazy horizon of deterrence to avoid focusing on the crimes being committed in its name under their very eyes.

This is the world that the courageous young artist Eaten Fish places before us. His artworks are wordless messages from a submerged world of fear and violence. They bring before our eyes, in unprecedented detail, that which is being kept secret and hidden from our sight.

Mr Fish says:

Tell them I have got serious problem.
Tell them Mr Fish locked himself away because no-one understands him.
Tell them Mr Fish doesn't want to fight.
Tell them Mr Fish is not sick, these people made him sick.
Tell them Mr Fish does not want to be assaulted.
Tell them I just want the normal life.
I want my right to be a healthy person.

Statement by Mr Eaten Fish to RAPBS

Eaten Fish’s greatly talented, highly innovative and inventive drawings from Manus Island have been published in academic journals and exhibited in galleries in Australia. His character even makes an appearance in the work of acclaimed cartoonist First Dog on the Moon. Now RAPBS has been authorized to reveal, for the first time, that Eaten Fish is the nom de plume of Ali, a 24-year-old Iranian artist who has been held on Manus Island for three years. Expert medical opinion is that Eaten Fish is the subject of trauma that caused him to seek refuge. His condition has been exacerbated by the lack of adequate care on Manus Island, and even more disturbingly, he has become the target of further violence, including sexual assault, during his detention. All previous attempts to seek help for him have failed, despite medical practitioners familiar with the case stating that he requires immediate assistance for Complex PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), severe OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), Dissociation with panic attacks and somatization.

RAPBS is today launching a campaign for urgent attention to be paid to the case of Eaten Fish and for his protection from further harm and danger. RAPBS calls for his evacuation from Manus Island and the provision of specialized care for the serious conditions from which he suffers.

A LANDSCAPE OF MENACE

Eaten Fish’s series of drawings, meticulously inked on pages torn from a notepad, document the myriad ways in which the inmates of Manus Island are rendered targets, driven to the edges of endurance in hellish surroundings. In their minute renderings of a teeming, nightmare world, charged with sexual menace, the drawings evoke the infernal paintings of Hieronymus Bosh. Under a scorching sky, graves marked with the names of Reza, Hamid and Omid, the three fatalities of our Pacific black sites, figure in almost all the works, grim reminders in an environment where even the sun seems to have turned against the inmates.

In a drawing of the health centre, medical staff are shown revelling and feasting while the injured and ill call desperately for help. A doorway leads directly to the graveyard, and a coffin lies on the floor. Inside a walled-in enclosure marked Mental Health, a hapless inmate can be glimpsed, to whom staff appear completely indifferent. Eaten Fish’s OCD leads to repeated washing and scrubbing of the body to the point where the skin is raw and bleeding. The condition has been exacerbated by his treatment on Manus. The response of health workers to these manifestations of extreme psychic distress is telling: two nurses reportedly told him he was possessed by demons and
promised that they would pray for him. Other inmates responded with bullying and taunting designed to provoke his symptoms.

Among the most chilling are the drawings in which Eaten Fish brings to light the abuse of male prisoners that has been mostly ignored in the writings about the camps. Several drawings show prisoners being subjected to sexual violence in a series of collusions among guards, managers, health professionals and fellow-prisoners. Under the all-seeing eyes of CCTV, protectors and predators are indistinguishable. In ‘Manus Island Detention Centre Sexual Harassment’, two lurking figures behind the palm trees argue over a potential victim: ‘I love him so much, I know him very well. He’s going to accept to have sex with me’ one says; ‘Sorry buddy … he is mine’, the other counters. In the foreground, a third figure schemes, ‘I didn’t have sex for three years I’m sure he’ll help me … HE MUST LET ME TOUCH HIM’, while pretending a friendly interest in the artist’s drawings. The only objection is from a crab, a creature which often supports the character of Eaten Fish in the drawings and attests to the artist’s belief that it is only the small and lowly who truly see and know the world. In contrast, the god’s eye view of the presiding CCTV incites, ‘touch him sexually’, while the sun echoes, ‘Touch him, man’. The drawing is, literally, a cry for help: a minutely drawn frame within the frame shows bound hands reaching over the fence, imploring ‘I need help, I need you’ to the indifferent scene outside.

Eaten Fish

Manus Island Detention Centre Sexual Harassment © Eaten Fish
In these works, Eaten Fish graphically draws attention to an insular world cordoned off from the rule of law and the applicability of any protective regime of rights. In the world of Manus detention prison, sexual assault, breaches of duty of care and trust, and the enslavement and commodification of inmates’ bodies are the norms that govern the camp. The cartoons materialise an amoral world in which predators pretend to be carers in order to ensnare their victims, violate them and exploit them – with the full knowledge that they can continue to do so with impunity. The recurring images of CCTV cameras that populate Eaten Fish’s drawings expose a brutal irony: the cameras are actually recording video evidence of criminal acts – to no effect. In this alegal and amoral landscape, surveillance technologies become just one more instrument of voyeurism and abuse: we see, in fact, the cameras egging on the perpetrators. This raises the troubling question: who is watching behind these cameras and to what effect?

© Eaten Fish

The power and significance of Eaten Fish’s drawings are brought into sharp focus when they are juxtaposed against the (ineffective) CCTV cameras that monitor the inside and outside of the camp. A prisoner is compelled to use the device of the ‘cartoon’, a seemingly benign and unpretentious genre, as a means to bring to public attention the daily crimes that transpire in Manus camp -- despite the fact that legally admissible evidence of these same crimes is available from the
CCTV recordings. In spite of the ubiquitous CCTV cameras, we are reliant on the courageous cartoons of Eaten Fish to bring before our eyes that which is being kept secret and hidden from our sight.

A van marked Transfield, equipped with surveillance cameras signifying Australian oversight, is at the centre of another even more nightmarish drawing which hints at hidden depths of sexual terror in the camp. A headless chicken labelled DIAC pursues a detainee, crying ‘I only want Ali little fuck me and eat me’. A weeping figure laments: ‘weeks ago I saw a dream ...a big fucking chicken escaped from kitchen... it was looking for me. It told me that it loves me. I eating chicken every day for food. I hate chicken’. A helicopter marked PNG army hovers above. Apart from the graves marked ‘Hamid’ and ‘Reza’, the figure is alone, behind a wire mesh, while the bright sunlight and postcard tropical scene outside mock his helpless desolation. The drawing evokes a cosmology of threat and terror in which Australian overseers, contractors, locals and even the surrounding landscape conspire to prey on, consume and collude against the victim.

© Eaten Fish
A third drawing, The Gift, makes an elaborate circuit of Oscar compound, taking in sentry posts, medical centre and partly obscured scenes of abuse, as a figure, identified by boat number, seeks to make a phone call on Mother’s Day. This drawing maps the currencies of sex, food, phone cards, cigarettes and other such commodities that make up the underground economy calculated to prey on the weakest and most vulnerable in the camps. Guards and supervisors appear as giant, forbidding figures. The words, ‘no chance, no change’ are repeated again and again. The drawing once more ends with an unambiguous appeal, in large letters: Help Me.

The Gift © Eaten Fish

‘The Gift’, dated 2014, strikingly parallels a recent article by Behrouz Boochani detailing the destructive underground economy of cigarettes and phone cards in the camps. In this astute analysis Boochani examines how, ‘in order to force refugees to live in PNG, the authorities make them reliant upon other prisoners’ by instituting a system of shopping points: ‘Shopping points, cigarettes and drugs, legal and illegal, all become a part of this larger plan: the deprived prisoners, those who cannot buy cigarettes and telephone cards, have sold their shoes, clothes, dictionaries, MP3s, and
other useful possessions to the rest who still have cigarettes’. Boochani adds that ‘Sexual abuse incidents and slavery cases have also been heard of’ as a consequence of this system that creates divisions among the inmates while also having the effect of increasing the profits the camp operator, Broadspectrum, who gains through the sale of cigarettes:

A few meters away, at Foxtrot compound, a young man is collecting the cigarette butts spread over the mass of soil next to the dirty toilets of the prison, in order to roll them in paper and suck in the smoke. He is also addicted to marijuana and does not have any cigarettes to smoke. There are many like this vanquished and addicted man in the quadrangle of Manus prisons.

Behrouz Boochani, ‘A Crisis of Silence’

Like Boochani’s writings, Eaten Fish’s drawings are unsparing works that attempt to bring before our eyes the forms of abjection, criminality and violence that have been fostered through the organization of the camps. They show the damage we inflict by design, licensed in the name of care for humanity.

Eaten Fish’s non de plume alerts us to the fact that detainees are being consumed on multiple levels: as prey to sexual predators; as deterrence shields by the Australian government; and as forms of disposable life outside the purview of legal rights or redress. In this last sense the name also suggests that, like several other refugees, the artist sees his existence in indefinite detention as a form of death. In this, the name Eaten Fish is reminiscent of a story told by Mark Isaacs in The Undesirables about an inmate named Parshan who was progressively broken by the regime. On the wall above his bed Parshan communicated his despair, drawing a gravestone inscribed with his name, and writing the words, ‘seven months ago dead’ on it. Some weeks later Parshan is found lying in his tent curled up in sweat-stained and blood-soaked sheets, having slashed himself across the chest and wrists. His cry for help was answered too late.

The artworks of Eaten Fish tell of a life of incarceration on Manus Island that is not a life. His message to us is simple:

Tell them Mr Fish is not sick, these people made him sick.
Tell them Mr Fish does not want to be assaulted.
Tell them I just want the normal life.
I want my right to be a healthy person.
Professor Suvendrini Perera (Curtin University) and Professor Joseph Pugliese (Macquarie University) are two of the founders of Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites. This article is published by RAPBS (http://researchersagainstpacificblacksites.org/). Please acknowledge this site when quoting from it. All artworks © Eaten Fish. Please contact RAPBS regarding permission to reproduce them.