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Presence & absence

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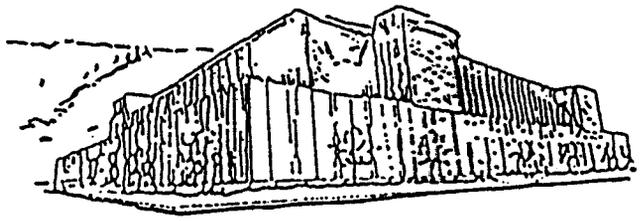
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PRESENCE & ABSENCE

by

Eva Mastandrea

M.A. Montana State University, 1989

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

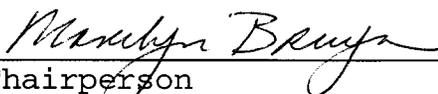
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1996

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INTRODUCTION

Communicating the impact of the Holocaust to the world continues to preoccupy many artists in America. For some survivors, creating artistic works based on their memories is a continuation of the need to bear witness. It is a need frequently described as a mission or an obligation, and it dominates the content of their work. In the Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps, Terence Des Pres describes the human response to the Holocaust as:

... an endless scream that, given time, has transmuted itself into the voice of many witnesses. This seems, in fact, to be one primary aspect of the survival experience: the will to bear witness issues as a typical and in some sense necessary response to extremity. Confronting radical evil, men and women instinctively feel the desire to call, to warn, to communicate their shock. Terror dissolves the self into silence, but its aftermath, the spectacle of human mutilation, gives birth to a different reaction. Horror arises and in its presence men and women are seized by an involuntary outburst of feeling which is very much like a scream---sometimes, . . . literally a scream. In this crude cry the will to bear witness is born (74).

The need to bear witness characterizes not only Holocaust survivors such as my parents but also the succeeding generations.

I grew up surrounded by my parents' pain and suffering, an environment profoundly influenced by the fallout of the Holocaust. My thesis work concerns the effect of the Holocaust on me, a Jewish /American woman and child of Holocaust survivors. My work however is not a pictorial representation of the Holocaust. My work is

the metaphorical response to the profound sense of loss, displacement, and doubt concerning my own right to exist, engendered by the disaster. I am but one person trying to understand recent human tragedy in the context of my personal experience. I hope that my work speaks as a reminder and as a warning against human to human tragedies. The Holocaust was a Jewish disaster, a result of ravaging antisemitism. I also view the Holocaust as an example of the misuse of power and the cost of indifference that should be recognized by all people despite their religious, national or racial differences.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The two main historical influences that have shaped my artistic development both thematically and formally are the Holocaust, and Postmodern art. The aspects of Postmodernism, with which I identify myself, are those that reflect a culture marked by change, flux, and fragmentation. Postmodernism celebrates complexity and diversity, irony and incongruity, juxtaposition and ad hoc spontaneity. It celebrates everything high and low, new and old. In today's world of uncertainty, postmodern art expresses trust in subjective experience. It affirms that our experiences are valid however personal, conditional, or open to differing

perceptions. Furthermore, Postmodernism suggests that experience may be valid precisely because of subjective conditions. Lastly, Postmodernism gives permission to express one's diversity and ethnicity. This is where I fit, and feel comfortable, somewhere between different cultures, between different languages and perceptions about society. The postmodern view is part of where I have been all along.

My influences derive not from external sources but from an internal condition, that is, an insecurity within my social fabric which causes a sense of isolation and favors an introspective attitude to my work. I prefer to see painting as an intellectual activity and as a personal experience. Therefore, my influences do not come from a particular artist or movement, but are shaped by Postmodernism which allows me to borrow from many artistic traditions. In my work I freely blend narrative and abstraction, representational painting, literary content and nonrepresentational images. My work uses contemporary art forms to shape my introspective, private experiences of the historical condition of the Holocaust. My work integrates Polish / Jewish / German life and culture, and is an extrapolation of their tragic interface. Yet it has not been an entirely separate and self-contained process. Like Kazimir Malevich's geometrical shapes, my bowls are a transformation of shape into a concentrated symbol having multiple layers of

meaning-- a complex sets of ideas reduced to a fundamental image. In “The Red Studio” Matisse decreases the number of tints to a minimum. I similarly make color an independent structural element in order to emphasize the radical balance struck between the “two-D” and “three-D” aspects of painting. I also have been influenced by the minimalists use of economy of form, contemplative stillness, and combined expression of serenity and anxiety.

Beside visual foundations , philosophy, art theory and language give me a continuous source of connections, meanings and imagery. The literary works of Maurice Blanchot, on modern day disaster and its unforgivable effects on the individual psyche and human philosophical thought bring a sense of kinship and understanding. Elie Wiesel’s personal account of his childhood during the Holocaust, and the survival of the human spirit under extreme conditions in the concentration camps is inspirational. I admire Anselm Kiefer for confronting moral issues posed by Nazism evaded by other postwar artists in Germany. Jacques Derrida’s philosophical works on the meaning of language and art are especially significant to my self concept, my understanding of the society I live in, and the art that I produce.

MEDIA

Throughout my M.F.A. program I have been exploring the properties of paint, ways of application, media and surfaces. Painting has not come easily, after many years of black and white drawings and detailed narrative imagery. I started painting slowly by translating the drawings into mixed media, and eventually into paint. Formally, the old techniques of painting and paint preparations fascinate me, and I am especially interested in the glazing techniques of the early 15th century Flemish masters such as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden which I have utilized in my paintings. The work for the thesis exhibition is primarily in black and red acrylic which I apply in a succession of superimposed thin glazes and washes. This process creates a visual effect that is dependent on optical mixing between the different layers of paint. In these glazing methods the colors are getting progressively richer and purer. All the areas of the painting are developed at the same time, so that all the parts of a painting advance steadily and equally as the painting progresses.

The pieces range in scale from five inches by ten inches to five feet in width by ten feet in length. Using a breadth of formal dimensions expands the technical exploration of paint application, composition and conceptual concerns. The surface

for the large works are industrial weight canvas, or 500 lb. 100% cotton HP paper, stretched onto the wall. Small works are done on mounted canvas or birch door skins supported on pine 1"x 2"s. Of the surfaces I have worked upon, I prefer smooth paper because paint slides across it with ease. As a result this creates a more desirable effect of transparency and illusional depth. This layering of paint is an analogy for the depth of my feelings and complexity of the issues I am trying to convey.

For me, the layers, like the events in my life, are a way to express displacement, conflict and paradox, and the simultaneity of meaning.

THESIS: ABSENCE AND PRESENCE

My thesis work consists of a series of paintings, which are presented as singular pieces, diptychs, and triptychs, all interconnected by the recurring image of the bowl. These paintings serve as a bridge between my past as a child of Holocaust survivors, and my present as an artist, mother and woman. The paintings in this exhibition are reactions to my family profound sense of loss, exile and displacement. The bowl is a basic object of daily existence, and I use it as a symbol of life and as an adopted metaphor for self. I am looking inward through the

use of an object from everyday life. Self and bowl, two different subject matters being represented by the same image: one is abstract the other concrete. The former self seeks understanding, while the latter bowl is physically grounded and defined. The bowl, situated at the center of my paintings, is a metaphoric representation of myself as repository, maintainer of the ritual of life, confined, protected, encompassing, holding its content secret. The bowl also becomes a personal reminder of a place in the past, of comfort, safety and family life. The close-ups portrayals of bowls have the characteristics of a still-life; however, the connotative meanings I attach to these images go deeper. Each bowl is fragmented and an isolated detail from the surroundings of home life that no longer exist. Each is an object left over from the past, wholly reflecting the interiors into which it once belonged. Dramatic tone contrast, from dark to light and presenting a bowl trapped in light is a recurring theme in my work. I am attempting to make a statement about the human condition and my own survival, as sensations of color and light rather than a representational image. The simplicity of the bowl is juxtaposed against the complexity of the reality.

The process of painting touches me deeply, because it allows me into memories and perceptions of my childhood. Poland and Israel are places of personal and historical identities. Memories of Holocaust, Slavic myths, Jewish

rituals combined with Montana landscape, form the content and context. These places where myths have developed and have superimposed cultures upon one another and on me also create a sense of displacement and reminds me of the reality of impermanence. The backgrounds of my paintings as memories of persecution and death, exile, a lost way of life, are further translated into the work by red and black paint. The significance of these colors are life and death, emptiness and blood. There is an interplay between the backgrounds and the emerging bowl. Both bowls and backgrounds are made from the same black and red paint. Red paint is the life force of my present work: the fluidity of its wetness, and blood quality of its color. Red paint offers me an enormous power of expression: a shuttle between the realm of feelings and the concrete world of things and events, between consciousness and subconscious, past and present. It is the repetition and dual meaning of these two colors that are essential to the internal transition and transformation in my paintings: the movement from absence to presence. Because of my background as the child of survivors, in the spacial absence and presence in my work I continuously and repeatedly rehearse the question of being and not being. I repeatedly formulate the question of my right to exist, repeatedly with minute differences throughout my paintings. Still, there is no resolution. Both absence and presence continue to exist simultaneously, and in tension with one

another, as the answer to the question I cannot stop asking.

“BOWL NO.10” slide # 1

The image of a bowl is placed open end up in the bottom half of the pictorial plane, filling the space. The value of the bowl extends beyond the image perimeter into adjacent areas of painting, helping to integrate the shape into the background.

Closely related values of red and black, and low intensity light, suggest atmospheric mystery and gloom. The depth of the painting is selectively built with acrylic washes. Cast light upon the surface simultaneously sinks into these translucent layers of suspended pigment refracting off the white primer and also emerges from underneath. As a result, the bowl appears to be receding into, or extending from, the background suggesting the dual condition of exposure or absorption.

“BOWL NO.9” slide # 2

A large singular image of a bowl, tilted forward, is placed in the bottom left of a rectangular canvas. The curving nature of this bowl shape suggests recessive movement into the illusionary depth of the canvas. The particular angle of the bowl offers a gradual transition from shallow space to deep space, and back again. The

elliptic shape of the bowl rim emerges under a strong white spotlight, accentuating the bowl's emergence from its dark surroundings.

“BOWL NO.7” slide # 3

This large rectangular work was done on paper. The image of the bowl and accompanying trees is rather underdeveloped, fractionally represented, and insignificant in relation to the background. In this painting, I used red and black in various degrees of transparency and opacity to establish a value pattern. The red and black colors have individually receding and advancing qualities and used together create an active, vibrant surface of continual forward and backward visual movement. In addition, the varied texture of the brush strokes throughout the composition add to this sensation. The accumulative effect is a sensation that visually moves instantaneously yet slowly.

“BOWL NO.6” slide # 4

This is a small work on canvas, done in red and black paint, with images of a bowl setting on a table. This painting deals with canceled and survived images. Dark color approaches from the right corner of the painting and gradually covers the table. The bowl is brilliant red and is centered and exposed, with the table below

and diffused. Red takes a position in front and advances, while receding properties of black exaggerate this condition. The space derived from this type of application and method of painting implies visual depth. The painting talks about canceled and survived lives.

“BOWL NO.15” slide # 5

Three black canvases decrease in size. Each canvas has a single red bowl placed in its center. The shapes of the bowls suggest physical form, create the illusion of space, value, and mass on the surface of the pictorial plane. Changes in the shape of the bowls from larger to smaller also create different visual weight, and causes changes in the relationship between red and black, as well as in the relationship between positive and negative space. Bowls become an altar of focus, a place set apart and set in front. Positioned amid black emptiness the image is isolated, thus insuring the full attention of the viewer. I want the viewer to think about the condition of the symbol “bowl” within its isolated environment. Strong contrasting, almost brutal color combination gives this work its directness and vitality. A mood of risk, mystery and danger accompany this work.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The thesis work intends to have conceptual and contextual depth, complexity and subtlety. The work offers simultaneous spontaneity and reflection. During the process of painting I operate simultaneously on the levels of emotional identification, theoretical reflection and symbolic use. Through this art making process, everyday life, media, theory and action become unified as one, and the content crystallizes as the formal qualities take shape. These bowls are a series about self identity self perception and survival. My ability to shut out feelings and survive difficulties - once a great gift and a necessity eventually led to a diminished self and perception of a life in the world to which I did not belong. Painting is a way of reentry. It is the path that allows me not only to retrieve the past but to reshape the present: to go to the places of pain and depravation and alter them. Painting is a way of acknowledgment, re-experiencing, replenishing and healing. It is through my paintings that I bleed, lament, grieve, and question.

Painting is a way of giving form to my terrors. Even more, though, painting allows me to give form to my desire to recover that spontaneous, joyful and a creative core within myself, that core which is full of rebellion, sexuality, humor, and energy.

THESIS EXHIBIT WORK

1	BOWL NO.5	Acrylic on canvas	5ft. x 8ft.
2	BOWL NO.3	Acrylic on canvas	6ft. x 9ft.
3	BOWL NO.1	Acrylic on wood	10' x 5'
4	BOWL NO.2	Acrylic on wood	10' x 5'
6	BOWL NO.20	Acrylic on canvas	30' x 30'
7	BOWL NO.25	Acrylic on canvas	25' x 18'
8	BOWL NO.0	Acrylic on wood	12' x 8'
9	BOWL NO.15	Acrylic on canvas	60' x 30'
10	BOWL NO.6	Acrylic on canvas	25' x 18'
11	BOWL NO.9	Acrylic on canvas	5ft. x 4ft.
12	BOWL NO.10	Acrylic on canvas	4ft. x 3ft.
13	BOWL NO.7	Acrylic on paper	10ft. x 5ft.

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