

For the Artist Dwora Fried the word “Heimat/Homeland” is a provocation.

OUTSIDER IN A BOX

About the assemblages of the Viennese born Dwora Fried, whose revealing/claustraphobic miniatures can still be seen at the Viennese Galerie Benedict until December 17.

The Galerie Benedict in the Viennese Sonnenfelsgasse is dedicated to African contemporary art. Sometimes, gallerist Benedict Onyemenam, with his “heart of Africa Inc.,” makes an exception and presents Russian artists that live in Vienna. He always finds thematic connections to African art, as in Dwora Fried’s case, an Austrian who lives in Los Angeles. When Benedict Onyemenam, whose original first name is Emeka and who lived for five years as a “Biafra child” in a refugee camp, interprets Dwora Fried’s assemblages, it becomes clear why these works are presented by a Nigerian in Vienna- and not by established Austrian gallery owners or museum curators. Because of his background, Benedict Onyemenam has the necessary intuition to give Dwora Fried’s unique expression the space it deserves.

Dwora Fried was born in 1951, in Vienna, to Jewish Holocaust survivors. She grew up in the second district in a building that her great grandfather bought in 1932. The Polish grandparents never lived in that building. After the war, when Dwora’s mother and aunt remembered that family asset by coincidence and were able to reclaim their ownership, Dwora’s parents decided to return from Israel. Her father, a Viennese lawyer, survived the war by living in Palestine. Dwora, who never really felt at home in Vienna, went to college in Israel, married an Israeli contractor and become mother of two children. During a visit in Los Angeles, she fell in love with an Egyptian Moslem woman with whom she is life partners for over 30 years. Her connection to Vienna was limited to visiting her mother and sister.

Common IKEA merchandise

Dwora Fried’s diverse artistic expression focused primarily on her collage technique starting in the 1990’s. The boxes that she transforms, with the aid of old photographs and toys from the 40’s and 50’s, into life stories have a format of 31 x 21 centimeters and are only 8 centimeters deep – common boxes from IKEA with sliding glass fronts. The symbolic objects and colors in the boxes reflect Dwora’s life as a Jew, Austrian and Lesbian. The symbolism that is framed in those boxes – one could also say frozen - images and figures point the observer, in an uncomfortable way, to their own life story. And that often creates avoidance.

The thirty works that are currently being shown in the Sonnenfelsgasse, were created in the last four years, the last years of Dwora Fried’s mother, who dies this summer. The box “Shoes” contains a collection of dolls shoes in front of a black and white photo of Dwora’s mother and a friend, the two young women being shown shortly after their liberation from concentration camps. The background, is another family photo: a brown

colored Autumn forest, Dwora's children standing among the trees are being hidden by a red colored amulet of the Virgin Mary. Up above, are metal fasteners from binders found in Dwora's father's office.

"Venice" shows childhood impressions from a family vacation. "Uberrabiner" reflects on the Viennese Jewish community. "Fern Waerme Wien" places the logo of the local heating company next to a photo of Dwora's father in a Tel Aviv technical school. "Manner" has, among all the disturbing miniatures, another pointed dimension. The unknown Nazi soldier, pinned back by colored stick pins and with a swastika on his chest, which Dwora Fried actually found in her father's night table drawer, is directing his youthful, naïve glance towards the Jewish symbol (a mezuzah). The monk, who is standing next to him, has his eyes closed and is inviting with a bible and outstretched right arm into the catacombs of faith; a tramway with a pink Manner ad is holding all of this in balance. Here the Austrian past and present are represented in such a way that one becomes afraid that the soldier could rip himself out of the pins and break through the thin glass.

About the feeling of being suspicious

The word "Heimat/Homeland" is a provocation for Dwora Fried, who hasn't felt at home anywhere, and the boxes have no intention of reflecting home. It is her Austrian past that threads through each of her boxes as does her Jewish identity, which became even stronger because of her relationship with a Moslem woman.

During her more frequent visits to Vienna, she has been confronted with the current Austria. The feeling of not belonging and of being suspicious is just as present as it was in her childhood and youth. People know the truth about the Nazi time in Vienna, but they deny it. In a taxi, it often doesn't take more than ten minutes until one is confronted with underlying, and sometimes even open, resentments. Her flawless Viennese lulls many into feeling safe. But when she disagrees with their opinions, she is accused of misrepresentation and entrapment. Nothing, according to Dwora Fried, has changed in Vienna: the hatred of the taxi drivers, the disdainful looks towards foreigners in the subway, the pink fascism. Even when one has blue eyes and celebrates Christmas, one feels powerless. She became an artist in Israel because there she realized that art was the only way to express her feelings of revenge and powerlessness.

A novel made of thirty boxes

There is no response to Dwora's statements. Except, maybe, that her works have a universal character since they expose societal norms. With most of her boxes one must repress the knee jerk reaction of removing the glass, and setting the trapped figures free. With "Manner," however, one would prefer to add a layer of bullet proof glass.

One should urgently recommend to those that deny or re-write history, to expose themselves to Dwora Fried's art. Her art is, in the true sense, enlightening because it reflects to each spectator, their own personal prison. The thirty boxes in

Sonnenfelsgasse, are each telling a story- and as a whole tell a novel- that each visitor has to write. The fact that this series of boxes has found a place to be exhibited in Sonnenfelsgasse 13, has an additional dimension. The famous philosopher, Josef Sonnenfels had a Jewish identity and fought, as a publicist and linguist against the “common Austrian jargon,” primarily by trying to establish “Gottschede’s High German.” In 1938, the Nazi’s changed the name Sonnenfelsgasse to Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Gasse until 1945 when it returned to Sonnesfelsgasse.

Benedict Onyemenam repressed his childhood in a refugee camp. Since he started occupying himself with Dwora Fried’s boxes, his childhood memories have been flooding back. Benedict, whose real name, as mentioned before, is Emeka, found out only recently that there were Nazi concentration camps in Austria. During a visit to Mauthausen, he was bewildered by the many farms that surrounded the walls of the concentration camp. Dwora gave Benedict a stone to take with him, and Emeka placed it in memory of Dwora’s uncle who was murdered there.

Walter Famler