

## INHERITED MEMORIES: THREE ARTISTS AND THE SHADOW OF THE SHOAH

By Peter Frank

The past is never dead. It's not even past. – William Faulkner

The cruelties of the last century, vast in their geopolitical as well as individual reach, were no mere scourges: they were near-apocalyptic exercises in human degradation. They have left whole nations and civilizations scarred – and the scars persist into the generations that never took the wounds. For all the insults and genocides of the modern age, the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust, having exposed so many people across so many borders to so much deliberate, even premeditated, abjection, has become the touchstone trauma of contemporary consciousness. Its reach was multi-continental. Its viciousness bit deeply. And its primary target was a displaced minority who for centuries had faced victimization wherever they had tried to set down roots – and yet had become integral to so many lands and cultures. Humanity suffers whenever a people suffer for their very peoplehood, whether in Ottoman Armenia or present-day Yemen, the Rwanda of the Tutsis or the Myanmar of the Rohingya. But no people faced a more elaborately designed program of annihilation than did the Jews in the Shoah, and no war left a more changed and damaged world in its wake.

How, then, does one awake from a lived nightmare? And how does that nightmare affect those closest to one? Is the trauma passed down? Is the nightmare itself? Many fields of inquiry, from sociology to biology, have been examining these and related questions, a tacit admission that the questions persist and even amplify – that time never leaves trauma behind. But where can survivors, and the survivors of survivors, find reflection on their experience? In art, among other places – indeed, prime among other places. The three artists in this exhibition have “inherited memories” from parents who lived through the Holocaust. More to the point, the mothers of these three women went through the ordeal, profoundly impacting their daughters and the art they make. The work of Shula Singer Arbel, Dwora Fried, and Malka Nedivi, however, manifests more than a simple acknowledgment of the tribulations their mothers underwent before giving birth to them: it embodies sensations experienced one way by the elder women themselves and another by their offspring. It is in this experiential slippage that the art finds its eloquence; and it is in the three artists’ diverse stylistic and discursive approaches that the exhibition finds its resonance.

The work of each artist tacitly denotes a different temporal relationship to the devastating event. Fried’s assemblages reflect on the life led by her mother’s family in prewar Krakow and the life her own family led in postwar Vienna – what was lost. Arbel’s relatively small paintings are based on photographs from the Bavarian displaced-persons camp where her parents met after the war – what was

gained back. And Nedivi's sculpted figures and objects muse upon the dysphoria her mother experienced in a painful present – what could be survived but not tolerated. These women lived at a point of remarkable cultural and psychological self-awareness in human history; the fact that their experiences of the Shoah, and the reverberations of those experiences, were so markedly different -- so much more different, indeed, than the same -- should not come as a surprise. It comes as something of a relief, however, to know that a process of such dehumanizing destruction could not erase consciousness, could not erase differences between individuals. The perspective, and thus the personhood, of each of the three mothers defied Moloch and defines memory.

The artwork of their daughters honors and perpetuates that memory, and this exhibition celebrates the particularity of that memory -- not least in the particular vision of those who have inherited that memory, or should I say, those memories. Artists survive on the distinctiveness of their styles and subjects, and in the cases here, that distinctiveness serves not only the artists themselves but their parallel, and now shared, efforts to perpetuate the distinctiveness of their mothers' experience(s). Even the vantage points from which each daughter echoes each mother shift: Fried's is the child's, recalling her own domesticity and imagining her mother's through the evocation of space and object. Nedivi's is the nurse's, tending to her mother's ongoing, reflexive re-enactment of trauma and distortion of sensation. Arbel's is the chronicler's, sifting through family albums to aver endurance, even triumph, evoking -- reanimating -- time and place by carefully editing, muting, and amplifying myriad specifics.

Fried's reliance on figurines, on dolls, puppets, and other miniaturizations, so often arrayed in house-like boxes, underscores both the narrative thrust of her work and the child's vantage it embodies. The narratives themselves, however, are freighted with dread and longing; an anxious and often heavy spirit pervades these assemblages, speaking of a childhood whose insouciance has been swallowed by gloom and an adult desire to return to childhood to uncover the missing innocence. The looming, even massive figures Nedivi paints and sculpts in a way embody the curdled adult spirit responsible for such youthful loss. Indeed, they are the face of shock and grief, but a shock and grief ultimately turned inward. These spiritually battered adults do not seek to harm the child -- whom Nedivi herself embodies in this case -- but, enmeshed in the stress of ever-present recollection, are heedless of even the nearest things in the outside world, rendering the child the source of hope. True hope radiates only from Arbel's selectively manipulated album leaves; the wake of the Holocaust, recalled and reconstructed through a haze of nostalgia and gratitude, yields the promise of a new world. The transition to this new world is positively bucolic, almost Edenic, in its gentle and forward-looking tone. The partial suppression of color, however, is more than simply a carry-over from the

black-and-white photographic originals: it manifests the caution and reduced expectations with which the afflicted generation faced its future.

A great, and shared, trauma keeps the past alive in a way at once ruinous and redemptive – but never healing. Wounds close over, but scars remain. The art of Shula Singer Arbel, Dwora Fried, and Malka Nedivi bespeaks these scars not by showing them but by witnessing them -- not only where they have marked the souls of the three artists' mothers, but where the scars have jumped across space, time, and DNA to mark the artists' own. There is no human bond more intimate, or intricate, than between a woman and her mother, and the former's pain recurs readily in the latter's being. "Inherited Memories" pays witness as much to gynocentric lineage as it does to recent human history: indeed, it demonstrates how they intersect, and how that intersection differentiates and at the same time bonds diverse individuals -- individuals who are women, individuals who make art.

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