

Life in a Box

By Elisabetta De Dominis (translation by Erika Marina Nadir)

Dwora Fried, American artist of Jewish-Viennese ancestry shows at Venice.



“Heil Hitler!” The uniformed man salutes from the threshold of the house. His pants are half-off... The little girl is hidden behind the door. Chairs are hanging on the wall . . . Everything is in disarray, the house

is no longer a house, no longer a refuge. LIFE HAS BEEN VIOLATED. Nothing is as it was.

A real life in a little wooden box, 8 x 12 inches, filled with tiny authentic toys because the little girl in the photo really existed, was deported by the Nazis, and fortunately was not killed in a concentration camp, but died of old age. This is the way Dwora Fried, American-born artist of Jewish-Viennese ancestry remembers her mother, Gisa, who is recently deceased after a long illness. But this very illness helped Gisa find, before she died, what she had lost: her doll. Gisa's truncated childhood was buried deep in her subconscious where we put our insufferable pain like unutterable secrets.

Alzheimer's, however, lowered the defenses of the conscious mind and opened the door to the unconscious. Denied dreams floated into her memory: for example, to have a doll. Her daughter, Dwora, searched markets all over the world for little dolls and other tiny objects of the 1930s and 1940s with which her mother could have possibly played. With these objects she furnished the life stories contained in her BOXES that I call "box vitae" because life is not a merely a resumé. Life holds and traces a symbol that defines and transforms even those who have not lived it, but inherited it. I recently read *Metagenealogia – la famiglia, un tesoro e un tranello* (Feltrinelli) (Metagenealogy - family, a treasure and a trap) by Alejandro Jodorowsky - he, too, oddly enough, of Jewish background - who created a method of genealogical analysis to understand how what we think, feel, desire and live can be traced to family ancestry. "The family is our treasure chest, but also our mortal trap."

The stories in boxes entitled "Vienna – Los Angeles – Venice" are great little works and are on display until September 15th in the Jewish Museum of Venice in the New Ghetto, then in Los Angeles where the artist lives, and can also be seen on the website www.dworafried.com. In these works, family memories reveal themselves to be a golden trap

for those who lived where everything seemed normal but nothing was really right. Maybe because everything could change from one minute to the next due to the unpredictability of life.

Little Dwora smiles happily stretched out on the inflatable bed between mommy and daddy. But they are floating between two canals in Venice and the water is as dark as oil. I asked her what it meant, even though she told me that everybody must experience the work through their own perspective.

“As a child, I never felt protected by my parents,” Dwora Fried tells me, “and I was afraid to stay home alone with our terrible Austrian nanny who dressed in a white apron and starched cap. I always felt that things were topsy-turvy. I felt uneasy, as if I were on water and feared that something terrible could happen from one minute to the next.”



I first met Dwora in the 1960s at Lignano Pineta when I was a young girl: she was already a teenager and her beautiful seaside home was a open house in that everyone was welcome and it was a secure mooring; you could show up without calling ahead. I was sure that life was invented there: her friends played the guitar, they sang, they spoke, they flirted. It was a small world filled with international young people and her sister Romy and I would look on and hope to one day be initiated into that life. Then Dwora went to study at Tel Aviv University, she fell in love and got married there, and the seaside house remained empty. In 1978, she moved with her family to Los Angeles. Some years later her father Teddy passed away and the seaside house was sold. Even so, Dwora returned every summer with her children and her partner, Gigi. She must have realized that a home is not a building, but is where you feel comfortable and where people love you. In fact, her boxes are mobile: you can move them around, and even the little hanging objects inside can be moved or be repositioned. Dwora explains: "Once in a while I take an old box that I no longer like, take everything out, and start to make a new one."

"How long does it take to make a box?"

"Two or three days but it could be two or three months. When I am working, I don't realize that hours have passed and it is suddenly the dead of night."

In ten years, Dwora has made about 150 boxes: some are uni-themed, like those dedicated to Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn. Others, like the ones in the Venice show, are autobiographical; still others recount stories of friends, relatives, and events. But they are all oneiric in the sense that the boundaries between reality and imagination are blurred because in life, as in fantasy, there are no borders.

The mother and daughter smile happily but are fenced in. There is everything in the 1960s house: the television set, the maid, and an elegant neighbor has stopped by for a visit. Isn't this a great life?

The mother walks with the daughter in a meadow but outside the house there is a giant rooster and all around is a fence. Is it a prison?

The grass is always greener . . . especially if there are strawberries. A little pig would want to eat them himself. A priest traps a child in a corner . . . all the while the Frieds dance and smile in the porthole window.

There are many shoes at the edge of the woods. The sisters pose happily smiling. They don't realize that beyond is the lager.

The sky is only a ceiling where a lamp hangs. Is there other illumination? The street goes all the way to the horizon, the blonde woman falls from the Vespa and her child flies away. Dwora explains: "The woman is there alone in a very dangerous place and no one helps her. Even when I was with my husband I felt alone . . . "

These boxes should be seen live to appreciate the accuracy of the details. You can be fooled by the photographs: these are not doll houses, but often shocking symbolic works of iconographic import, sometimes accompanied by sarcastic comments such as: "If you could have seen with my eyes, she would not have seemed as ugly as a monkey...".

Other times however, the message is only ironic, like the father that manufactures money, or the porcelain-faced ladies that don't realize that on their heads is the ballcock for a toilet flusher. "Because in the end," says Dwora, "we can't take ourselves too seriously.

This article will also appear in Oggi7- America Oggi