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Perspectives

'Witness' gives varied visions of Holocaust

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

LINCOLN - Another show about the Holocaust? There have been dozens over the last decade, some created out of a sense of urgency as the older survivors of the Nazi atrocities of more than a half-century ago pass on.

There is always more to say about such a catastrophic event, hence the DeCordova Museum's current "Witness and Legacy: Contemporary Art About the Holocaust," on view through March 12. A traveling show organized by the Minnesota Museum of American Art in 1995, the exhibition has been on the road for five years now and, at this point, some of the work looks tired, both physically and spiritually.

Of the 22 artists represented, five - Susan Erony, Samuel Bak, Gabrielle Rosser, Arnold Trachtman, and Netty Vanderpol - are local, and these five are familiar to anyone acquainted with the Boston scene. All the artists in "Witness and Legacy" fall into three categories: survivors, second generation, and empathizers. The distinctions among them in terms of theme or technique aren't generally pronounced, though, nor need they be.

Qualitatively, the show is all over the map. The sculpture, in general, is better than the installations or the paintings, some of which tend toward the deadeningly literal. An exception is Kitty Klaidman's works on paper or canvas, which seem almost abstract until you realize that those angular lines are timbers that define the attic crawl space where Klaidman and her family hid from the Nazis. A celestial light - like the one often used in Christian paintings to represent God or his angels - showers into each of these cramped roomlets, a symbol of her family's survival and the brave people who aided them.

The catalog quotes Elie Wiesel on "Why this determination to show 'everything' in pictures? A word, a glance, silence itself communicates more and better." Some works in the show defy this idea; they're so horrific they numb your senses instead of awakening them. An example is Marlene Miller's mixed-media sculpture "Schlafwagen: Who Will Say Kaddish for Them?" On a pedestal dripping with "blood" and glued with photos of bodies stands a black carriage heaped with gouged, tortured, bleeding, ripped-open, puppet

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corpses that leave nothing to the imagination.

A more powerful figurative sculpture, and one of more universal application, is Shirley Samberg's "No. 15 From Wrappings," a group of hunched and huddled burlap figures, rendered helpless by lack of feet and hands. Defeated and deflated, sprawled on a platform, these silent sufferers are reminiscent of those of Magdalena Abakanowicz.

Rosser's multipart installation, "In Search of the Lost Object," includes photos and documents about the artist's relatives, many deported to their deaths from their Bamberg, Germany, homes. In Bamberg, the family had owned a small shirt factory, which, decades later, led Rosser to start making a hauntingly beautiful series of freestanding, hollowed-out, stiffened cloth garments that suggest everything from Rodin's "Burghers of Calais" to the shroud of Turin. They seem to send forth the spirits of their erstwhile wearers.

Some of the smallest and ostensibly quietest works are the most successful. Erony's little mixed-media pieces are a case in point. She grew up in a household where Jewish history wasn't discussed. She learned about the Holocaust while working in the civil rights movement, then made it the focus of her work for several years. Her dark pieces combine acrylic paint with photographs of concentration camps, Jewish cemeteries, barbed wire, railroad tracks, and narrow chambers lined with boards where the prisoners were supposed to sleep. While the rectangles themselves are small, Erony creates the illusion of deep spaces, tunnel-like and inescapable. The works are outlined in lead, that most final and impenetrable of materials. These are among the most moving works in the show, and while minute, they have a force akin to the epic works of German artist Anselm Kiefer.

A classmate of Anne Frank's, Vanderpol spent a year in Terezin before becoming part of World War II's only exchange of Jews for German POWs, finally finding herself freed in Switzerland. Her medium, an unusual one for conveying suffering, is needlepoint. In her Holocaust pieces, the backgrounds are conventionally beautiful and tightly worked. They're landscapes of loveliness. But the luxuriant softness and calming colors of the yarns are subverted by bits of barbed wire, yellow Stars of David, broken mirrors, and little metal train tracks leading nowhere. Vanderpol deftly blends the comforting and the unspeakable.

Among the more unorthodox works, and among the few likely to cause controversy, are Art Spiegelman's comic strips, which retell his parents' suffering at Auschwitz, distancing it, somewhat, by replacing their faces with mice heads and casting the Nazis as cats. Blasphemy? Simplistic? No. Spiegelman merely stresses the animalistic, inhuman aspects of what happened. The format of his work bears a resemblance to the anti-apartheid cartoons of South African artist William Kentridge.

The finest of the Boston area Holocaust shows to date was the Massachusetts College of Art's magisterial 1991 "Seeing Through Paradise: Artists and the Terezin Concentration Camp," which paired the official, sanitized views of camp life that the artists were forced to draw by day with the horrific truth, which they drew on smuggled materials by night.

The worst of such shows was Judy Chicago's execrable, self-serving "Holocaust Project" at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University in 1995, which starred Chicago rather than the 6 million dead. Also in the 1990s, former Boston artist Ellen Rothenberg showed her insidiously ethereal "Anne Frank Project," based on the unexpurgated text of the diary that was published only in the 1980s. The "Anne Frank Project" appeared at both the Institute



of Contemporary Art and Radcliffe's Bunting Institute. Equally exquisite was Charlie Gibson's 1988 "Skydrops," a series of small mirrored pyramids floating on a pond in Bradley Palmer State Park in Topsfield, a memorial to Kristallnacht, when rampaging Nazis smashed the windows of Jewish shops in Berlin. "Skydrops" had a healing peace about it, as if the glass had all been reassembled and put out of harm's way in the water.

The ICA's "Burnt Whole: Contemporary Artists Reflect on the Holocaust" in 1995 was more concep-



Above: The humorous "Matzoh Men" by Jeff Warmouth is part of the exhibit at the Starr Gallery in Newton. At left: Local artist Arnold Trachtman juxtaposes Nazi leaders with concentration camp ovens in "Our Most Important Product" at the DeCordova.

terms of cuts in human flesh. Both also consider Judaism's differentiation between men and women. Shiff's installation includes a cubicle walled in white satin with a video of the Hebrew text from Genesis, in which God commands Abraham to circumsize himself, superimposed on grainy footage of a baby boy enduring the procedure, both projected on a lace-trimmed pillow.

Borns's paintings and drawings depict the biblical sacrifice of Isaac, spared at the last minute, and of Jephthah's daughter, who wasn't - and who isn't even given her own name in the Bible; she's merely identified as her father's offspring. Borns's paintings raise all manner of difficult issues - and they're beautiful to boot, painted in a neo-Baroque style. Drapery swirls around the drastically foreshortened figures who occupy the lower part of the picture, with clouds of heavenly light above.

The other painter in the show, Josh Meyer, makes finely rendered images of his own prayer shawl, suspended against a dark ground, looking ready to enfold its wearer. Deborah Kalin's mechtiza is a personal, hexagonal, wearable version of the screen that separates men and women in orthodox synagogues. It's covered with beeswax and thick with images related to what Kalin sees as

the beehive-like structure of the Jewish community. It also serves as a costume that Kalin dons in her performance art. As sculpture, though, it doesn't work: Its shape is ungainly and its imagery is obscure to the uninitiated, as well as overplentiful.

Jeff Warmouth is the joker of the show, the gross-out guy. Among his Catskill-worthy "Strictly Kosher Style: Recipes Spiced With Jewish Humor" are lurid color close-ups of him grabbing a round portion of his ample belly, right around the navel, turning it into a bagel onto which he slathers cream cheese and lox. As well as poking fun at Jewish dietary laws, Warmouth questions rules that don't always seem to make sense, even to some Jews.

Judging from his tummy, Warmouth could do with a workout on the treadmill that is the focus of Zach Feuer's "A Walk in the Desert." A real piece of exercise equipment borrowed from the JCC gym, it is surrounded by sand and bottled water, a metaphor for the Wandering Jew forever slogging through the desert and a case of "art" being defined by context and concept.

Kaplan writes in his catalog essay that Stephanie Borns and Melissa Shiff think of Jewish identity in