

art

Art, Jews, and the Holocaust

The DeCordova and the Starr sing Kaddish and other tunes

BY CHRISTOPHER MILLIS My first reaction on walking into the DeCordova Museum show "Witness & Legacy: Contemporary Art About the Holocaust" was reassuring. A solemn group of five-foot high, bodiless, open tunics by Gabrielle Rossmer stand at the foot of the museum's immense set of stairs. They resemble ghosts considering ascent. Where you'd expect faces, there are none; where you'd expect

knees and feet and torsos, there's nothing but air. The glass wall behind these assembled, disappeared forms looks out over the DeCordova's manicured sculpture garden, which is unfortunate — the effect of the installation could have been enhanced if the glass wall had been shrouded and the eye were made to dwell on the implied, absent bodies instead of being invited to the distractions beyond the window. But it's a small objection. What museum would go to the effort and expense of covering a huge glass expanse, even for a show that takes as its subject the Holocaust?

Given as I am to misgivings about any exhibit's ability to deliver an

second, in the most fleeting, fragmentary way, we grasp some iota of the meaning of six million.

For all its adolescent technical awkwardness, the humility of Kramer's video, its upfront admission that we can't know one (murdered) life, let alone a fathomless multiple, riveted me as a viewer in the artist's search.

Unfortunately, little of the rest of "Witness & Legacy" involved me at all. It offers images that disturb only in their banality: the darkened, prettified walk-through facsimile of a camp entrance with its de rigueur quote from Primo Levi on the wall; the faded images from passport photos on an expanse of white plaster squares; the installation, complete with chemistry-lab vials of brightly colored matter and surrounding tiles of swastika-like symbols, that seeks to reclaim the Third Reich's signature logo "by deconstructing its meaning and disempowering it." All this turns the Holocaust into something resembling a small-town circus sideshow

— phony re-enactments, faux dread, sentimental stereotypes. In one piece, we're invited to scrawl politically correct graffiti in chalk along a corridor of black walls where the word "Jew," meant as an historic reference as a slur, serves as template.

The disappointment I feel with "Witness & Legacy" is not the letdown of lofty aspirations that fail so much as the letdown of piddling aspirations that succeed (the show originated at the Minnesota Museum of American Art). Gerda Meyer-Bernstein's make-believe cattle car lined with immaculate, fresh-smelling hay and accented with a decorous spray of barbed wire does nothing to conjure the experience of unimaginably brutal deportation. On the contrary, with its small, well-lit altar of votive candles (beneath a color photo of three candles burning at the opening of an extermination oven), the piece reads more like a cozy, if demented, hearth. Jeffrey Wolin's black-and-white photographs of Holocaust survivors at home in their living rooms look like nothing more than amateur family snapshots, with the difference that the living-room walls have interminable, tightly packed, largely illegible handwritten survival narratives superimposed upon them. The stories we might well want to become immersed in can't be followed, since the narratives are cropped to accommodate the images of people and furniture. The frames come across as exercises in a double incompleteness, portrait

photography that isn't about people and stories that can't be read.

The difference between art and therapy is the difference between a conversation and a dream. The former involves two parties in a way that means the outcome is never foreknown; the latter concerns the solitary rejuvenation of an individual. When the two become confused — as they do painfully and repeatedly in "Witness & Legacy," with therapy presented as art and the conversation of art presented as a monologue — the primal importance of each is compromised and a deep injustice takes place. This exhibit ought to be wrenchingly engrossing, but if you aren't already connected historically to the experience, I suspect you'll emerge from



IN SEARCH OF THE LOST OBJECT: Gabrielle Rossmer's ghostly figures speak eloquently of absence and loss.

"WITNESS & LEGACY: CONTEMPORARY ART ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST"

At the DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, through March 12.

"DISTINGUISHING/DISTINGUISHED JEWISH"

At the Starr Gallery in the Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center, Newton, through February 20.

aesthetic experience that honors the weight of the Holocaust, my second impression was more reassuring still. Off in a little white room with rows of wood chairs sits a video monitor running Seth Kramer's 15-minute untitled video, the unexpected highlight of the entire exhibit. At the beginning of this work, the young filmmaker asks how can he understand the murder of six million people? More specifically, how can he understand the number six million at all? He decides to count six million grains of rice — by the film's end, nearly a year later, he's made it only to one million — and we watch him immersed at his kitchen table, unchanged in his posture and absorption, while the camera records him in metamorphoses of clothes, coiffure, and background tunes.

Then, in protracted silence, the camera focuses on page after page after page of his recordkeeping, the seemingly infinite columns of ones and zeroes. As the film comes to a close, Kramer, amicably disheveled, talks about the project, what he's learned, how little progress he's made, what a jar or a milk bottle filled with rice signifies. At one point he holds up two vessels that look like applesauce containers. "This is how many died in Vietnam," he says, gesturing to the tabletop of bottles filled with rice. And for a



UNTITLED (TALLIT): Josh Meyer's paintings absorb you in the creases and shadows and folds of the Jewish prayer shawl.

it with the conviction intact that it has no relevance to your life.

WHATEVER ONE MIGHT SEE as its shortcomings, the exhibit at the Starr Gallery in the Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center in Newton, awkwardly titled "Distinguishing/Distinguished Jewish," engaged me at every turn. Six artists, most of them young, all of them "emerging," explore what it means to be Jewish across an exhibit whose emotional and material range proves gratifying and whose aesthetic accomplishments are many. It's an ambitious, renegade, heartfelt show whose wit and openness immediately drew me in.

There are two significant highlights here, and they couldn't be less alike: Joshua Meyer's richly textured, meditative paintings of prayer shawls and Melissa Shiff's disturbing installation on the rite of circumcision called *Gender Cuts*. What's surprising and delightful about Meyer's work (which I've known about for some time, since the artist designs a magazine I edit), beyond its evident technical accomplishment, is its ability to absorb you in its creases and shadows and folds irrespective of your connection to the tallit prayer shawl in Jewish ritual. His are ultimately sensual works, concerned more with conveying the experience of the material world than with considering the religious use to which this particular material is put. The paintings read like gentle, inward-looking celebrations of matters tactile and, ironically, kinetic. In each frame, Meyer positions his shawls against an abstract, dark space, so they appear to be falling, and not upon shoulders, either. They're falling through air or across imagi-

nary hooks. Or, in the largest work, they're fitted tightly to an unseen table or ledge. By removing the shawls from the ceremonies to which they belong and by concentrating on their rich and enveloping properties, Meyer's paintings reinvigorate the tradition of still lifes.

Melissa Shiff reinvigorates our take on another tradition but with an entirely different aim: to bring it to an end. Shiff has constructed a diabolically delicate little room within the gallery's already confined space, a satin-covered box the size of a space module that you enter through white satin curtains. Upon entering, you see immediately in front of you, at waist level, a white satin pillow on which a videotape is being projected of a baby boy having his foreskin scissored away. The power of the piece lies in, of all things, its clever subtlety: though it's evident what's happening in the film, the shape and shadows of the pillow keep the projection suggestive rather than grisly. For all its shocking immediacy, you still get to make up your own horror.

The other four artists have not been as well served by the exhibit's curator. Six large drawings and paintings by Stephanie Borns have been jammed onto walls that should hold only two. Deborah Kalin's construction, a hexagonal body suit made of wood and beeswax, is actually part of a performance piece, but for all the proliferation of wall text, that pivotal information remains obscure. Jeff Warmouth's hilarious posters, send-ups of kosher recipes, are undercut by a relentless, slapstick video. And Zach Feurer's installation, involving a treadmill meant to be walked on while you listen to an audiotape from a headset, didn't operate.