

Painting the Holocaust: Can there be Art after Auschwitz?

Many would argue that any attempt to create art on the subject of the Holocaust by an artist who has not experienced the horrors of a death camp, or been raised by a family that has, would be destined to failure. Without authentic context, how could one possibly understand in any meaningful way the events which took place? Indeed, the only genuine artistic response to the Holocaust would seem to come from those who have experienced it in some way and whose testimony has survived.

I was born in 1965 in the United Kingdom, was raised Christian and became an artist. Between 2008 and 2009, with no personal connection, I set out to create a series of paintings which would in some way explore an aspect of the Holocaust of Nazi Germany.

As an artist I believe in the civilising power of culture and have a deep love and admiration for the heritage of German society. Yet to see that a nation so great had in the past turned its means to an act so dark is a source of profound intellectual and emotional disturbance. How is it that a society as culturally and materially advanced as that of 20th Century Germany, a society that had previously nurtured Beethoven, Goethe and Kant, be capable of instigating a mass killing programme? The idea of creating a set of paintings in response to this question had been gestating within me for around 20 years. In many senses it feels that the greater the trauma, either individual or social, the greater the period needs to be before examining how one feels about it. So it was not until almost seventy years after the Wannsee Conference and the instigation of the Holocaust, that it felt even remotely appropriate for someone like myself to attempt to tackle the theme.

The main source of inspiration for this undertaking did not come from the imagery of starving figures or contorted piles of dead bodies which have become the all too familiar yet tragic representation of the Holocaust; in fact it emerged from many hours spent visiting the *Seagram Paintings* (1958 – 1959) by Mark Rothko (1903 – 1970) at the Tate, London. As a set, the Seagram Paintings hang like a painted version of Stonehenge, acting as a metaphorical gateway to the eternal void. The German artist Caspar David Friedrich (1774 – 1840), who practiced a century earlier than Rothko, was also famous for producing images around the theme of a universal emptiness experienced within the human psyche, such as his *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), *The Monk by the Sea* (1808 -1810) and *The Abbey in the Oakwood* (1809 – 1810). With these and many other of Friedrich's paintings we are confronted by a lonely figure who stands on the threshold of something much bigger than ourselves, something unknown. In studying Friedrich's work we imagine ourselves to stand in the shoes of the subject. A hundred years later and Rothko removes any proxy figure within the picture

plane that we might imagine ourselves to be, and in doing so places us the viewer directly at the metaphorical heart of the painting, making for a more immediate visual experience.

It was this idea of meditating over a void which most intrigued me. Not images of the Holocaust itself, because as horrific as they are, as time passes, the shock of what we are looking at subsides; in fact one thing which puzzles me is just how quickly we become de-sensitized to pictures of brutality, and how over time audiences become hardened by portrayals of atrocity. Instead, what I hoped to achieve with this series is a renewed look at the subject, a reflection which aimed to consider how there may be an underlying darkness residing in us all. More specifically, what intrigued me revolved around how we act within our social setting as individuals. And that this may on occasion, if we don't pay attention to the seemingly insignificant details, pave the way towards our own culture descending into a void of inhumanity. This meditation seeks in some way to explore whether a social evil is the responsibility of only a small handful of people who manage to manipulate and distort a broader culture, or whether a whole society can be held in some way accountable for its actions.

As I began to contemplate this series, I was highly conscious of Theodor W. Adorno's line 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.' (1949)ⁱ and wondered if, indeed, there can ever be any art after Auschwitz? After all, historians, survivors and nations are still trying to grasp exactly what happened decades after its occurrence, so how could any artist hope to approach a theme of such magnitude? Is this subject in fact off limits to all artists aside from those who have witnessed it first-hand? If this is the case, then it would seem at first appearance that an art of either reportage or catharsis, an art of account or therapy, rather than of symbolism and interpretation would be the only authentic response.

In order to explore this I first want to ask the question: What actually is art? For me, art is the creation of metaphor, the statement of one thing as being something it clearly is not. By engaging in this way the artist seeks to create a fresh way of looking at a subject, opening our eyes to additional angles and ideas which help bring new perceptions to bear. How then can this be applied to a trauma as great as the Holocaust?

For a person who was there, who recorded and depicted scenes they witnessed first-hand, by camera or with pen and paper, perhaps it is impossible to make metaphor from an event of such magnitude and instead perhaps we should regard the greatest achievement in this context as being to have witnessed and documented in some way, as a testament for others, events so horrific. This, I would argue, is both reportage of the highest order and a statement of the strength of the human spirit to be recognised and heard against extraordinary odds. Works of this nature are documentation brought back from the edge of humanity. It is this material, the written, spoken and recorded matter of survivors and eye witnesses which becomes the substance of authentication. And it is this substance which artists can attempt to use as the source material from which to create metaphor.

Art then appears to enter as a second stage to understanding; it arrives as a reflection of our emotional responses to events, rather than a description of them, enabling us to gain in some small way an alternative angle on our sensitivities to experiences.

In the 1970's the Slovenian born painter Zoran Mušič (1909 – 2005) produced a series of haunting images in response to the Holocaust titled *We are not the Last* which depict twisted and emaciated human figures, often appearing as a kind of knotted undergrowth. Mušič was recognised during his lifetime as an artist of international importance, with his works hanging in many of the world's most important art museums, and in 1956 his status as a major artist was confirmed when he won the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale. Mušič had moved to Venice in October of 1943, and in the November of the following year he was arrested and deported to Dachau concentration camp by Nazi forces. Whilst at Dachau he produced over one hundred sketches of life in the camp, of which around seventy survive.

Mušič's work offers us an authentic response to the horrors of the Nazi concentration and death camps, perhaps the most genuine of all artistic voices on this subject. Yet we notice that his artistic response to the horrors of Dachau began as a direct recording of the sights he observed, only being synthesised some 25 years later into a more metaphorical format and a form we would view as art rather than record. This holding trauma apart for an extended period permits the emotional response time to breathe, enabling something more considered and meditative to emerge. It brings us to an understanding that great art may not be born of an immediate reaction to trauma, but instead grows slowly as a measured reply to the subject it explores.

In this way we might begin to observe that with Zoran Mušič, first came the recording of suffering, then much later a symbolic reply to it. And I believe what occurs within the individual is mirrored within society, and that what has been recorded in a time of pain, becomes the material with which artists much later build a metaphorical bridge between individual experience and a broader social understanding. This was the foundation of understanding for my own series of paintings *Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History* (2008 – 2009). Having no personal connection to the Holocaust, I felt it was neither appropriate nor possible for me to produce a personal response to the sorrow and death caused by the events in question. Nor did it seem appropriate for someone in my position to undertake the creation of monument to those departed. Instead, what I hoped for was an alternative meditation on the origins of this tragedy and how it arose.

For the first part of this project I drew six delicately coloured pencil drawings designed to be reminiscent of hand tinted postcards. They represent external views of the hospitals in Germany and Austria where the T4 Euthanasia programme took place between 1939 and 1941, the programme which acted as the first whisper of the death camps which were to follow. I wanted them to have the appearance of holiday photos, the locations do after all look like retreats and hotels, places where state sanctioned murder would appear to be the last thing on the agenda. This somehow innocent and

innocuous view is something I hoped might act as a visual stepping stone to the larger more direct paintings which make up the second part of the series.

The second part of the project consists of five large scale black and white oil paintings, each portraying the interior of a gas chamber. Each painting shares the same horizon line so that they work visually as a unit when hung together. Over the course of the five paintings the spaces depicted widen out, from the small and confined adapted shower room presented in Bernberg through to the large purpose built killing room at Auschwitz. As each painting visually expands we gain a sense of each room having the capacity to accommodate more people, and notice a gradual falling away of the pretence of cleansing the newly arrived to the straight forward practicalities of exterminating as many people as possible in the shortest given time.

The rooms themselves are painted devoid of figures, so that we might view them as places which hold no moral position about the events they were used for. They stand silent and empty, unconcerned by what we might think or feel. With this somewhat detached observance it is my aim that we view the Nazi gas chambers not so much as killing centers, which of course they were, but as a perverse cultural expression, constructed by a social group acting together towards a common goal, during a particular time and place. Each brick cemented in to position, every tile carefully laid down and all the pipes meticulously plumbed. In doing this it is my hope that we might begin to consider visually how no one person was individually responsible for the realization of these rooms or what took place in them. Not the architects who drew up the plans or the suppliers of materials to build them, not the factory workers who made the tins which held the Zyklon B or the truck drivers who delivered it. Instead they are the manifestation of a series of people acting in unconnected and banal roles towards a common goal.

Evil, if that is the term we use within this context, is allowed to occur because it takes root in the mundane. The gas chambers of Auschwitz, Sobibor, Majdanek and the many other locations of Nazi mass killing did not just appear overnight, someone somewhere received an order to tile the gas chamber, someone was contracted to make and fit the pipes, supply the bricks make the metal doors and their hinges. All these people and many more will have received money for their work and not thought of themselves as directly responsible for the atrocity of the Holocaust, because they did not carry out the actual killing or come up with the original policy. They were in fact just getting on with their lives. And perhaps this is where one aspect of denial can take hold, that when no one person can be held wholly accountable, then no one person can be easily held to blame. Denial can of course be used as a coping mechanism. By ignoring or disbelieving powerful events which have the potential to emotionally overwhelm us, we enable our everyday lives to continue, we gain the capacity to 'carry on as normal'.

As an artist coming to the subject of the Holocaust without any special connection and at a considerable time lag behind the events, it would be fair to ask; why should one do this? Personally, my motivations lie in a drive to explore the often difficult subjects that underpin contemporary society

and appear as universal human themes. When we look at the history of the twentieth century in particular, we see violence enacted on a grand scale. We witness rampage shootings, total war and genocides which have occurred in places as diverse as Cambodia, Columbine, Armenia, Nanking and Rwanda, acts which have come to define the twentieth century as perhaps the most brutal of all time. In fact it would appear that violence is somehow hard wired into the human psyche. But as we know, it was the industrialisation of the killing process which for many marks out the Holocaust of Nazi Germany as a chapter to be treated separately from all other atrocities.

Now, after seventy years, as the last survivors die out, memory of the Holocaust has the potential to fade, despite written, spoken and visual legacy. Perhaps after seventy years we have a duty not only to archive and shore up the testimony of survivors but to examine our past for lessons as to how we might live more fully in the future, one in which we treat each other with respect and dignity.

So what lessons might we begin to learn by studying the gas chambers of Nazi Germany? For me, it is that social atrocities, when they arrive, come with little warning, yet they are enabled by the commonplace activities of many people who cannot be held individually fully accountable for what occurs. And it is perhaps these small sins of omission which we must all be on our guard for if we are to maintain and build communities of peace and prosperity in the future, societies where each person is valued for their uniqueness within the group regardless of their opinions. By embracing our differences we are able to nurture and develop strong communities, creating civilizations which are enriched and rendered beautiful through diversity.

Robert Priseman, 2013

The series 'Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History' is in the permanent collection of the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria

ⁱ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' [1949], translated into English in *Prisms*, Cambridge, MA (MIT Press) 1983, p. 34.