

There is no such thing as a good Holocaust memorial

On Holocaust memorials, artists commemorating it, multidisciplinary approach to teaching about Shoah and the first exhibition on violence against women in Holocaust and genocide – we talk with Dr. Batya Brutin, Israeli art historian and curator

Being an art historian, what inspired you to get interested in Holocaust memorials?

*My decision to choose the Holocaust as my central topic of research was triggered by a mutual seminar of Israeli and German scholars from Bet Berl academic college – where I used to teach for many years – and from Wiesbaden and vicinity, Germany in Poland in 1993. Each one of us was required to present a lecture or a workshop on the Holocaust. As an art historian I chose a workshop on Holocaust art. This seminar was exciting, enriching and most of all shaky for me. It has had a decisive influence on my continued occupation with the Holocaust. I understood that this is the subject I want to engage in research and education and influence future educators. In order to “dive” into the many contents of the Holocaust, I invested much time, thoughts and energy to learn and expand my knowledge in the field. At the same time, in the years 1996-1998, I began a research, prior to my doctoral dissertation, on Holocaust commemoration through monuments in Israel. In 2005 this study was published as a book entitled *Living with the Memory: Monuments in Israel Commemorating the Holocaust* (in Hebrew).*

What features should have a good Holocaust memorial – being at the same time an object of art?

There is no such thing as a good Holocaust memorial, in my opinion. A monument is composed of two components: a sculptural element and an assembly square that differentiate it from an environmental statue. The sculptural element conveys the historical event in artistic means

while the assembly square enables gathering to hold a memorial ceremony. Since the monument is a formal expression it belongs to the field of visual arts, but it is different from works of art in general in that it is related and built to mark a historic event, and its shape and style derive from a didactic orientation. The monument is therefore not a purely aesthetic expression that gives an advantage to the shape over the content. Quite the opposite: here the content is essential, and the aesthetic form is enslaved to it. The monument's power is measured by its ability to make the historical memory permanent. A work of art is intended to perpetuate a memory and every time a memorial service is held beside it, the historical event is recalled and remembered, and thus ensures its eternity in the collective memory.

What are the most interesting, in terms of art, Holocaust memorials in the world?

The most interesting monument, in terms of art, is a monument that „catches” the immediate attention of the spectator, they understand the form and connect it to the Holocaust immediately. In addition, the form must convey the historical truth, for example: The Umschlagplatz Monument in Warsaw by Hanna Szmalenberg and Władysław Klamerus, Korczak and the Children of the Ghetto by Boris Saksier in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, The Shoes on the Danube Bank in Budapest by Gyula Pauer, etc.

What visual artists should not do when they decide to commemorate the Holocaust?

Mislead the spectator with false information.

What distinguishes the art of Nathan Rapoport, the subject of your academic interest, among other artists of his era?

Nathan Rapoport's art is figurative, expressive, monumental, and based on historical events. As such it is understood by any audience with no difference of nationality.

Your field of interest is, also – links between art and psychoanalysis. Is there anything that artists

commemorating Holocaust have in common?

*As an art historian all my researches emphasize the visual expression of the topics and images of the artworks of different artists. Its method combines the artistic–biographic approach that highlights the artists inner world and socio–historical reference in order to create a link between the iconographic and stylistic artistic debate and the historical time and social–cultural context in which the artworks are created. In this way, we can simultaneously see the personal point of view of each artist and learn about general trends and processes indicating the attitude of the artists to Holocaust events. In my research of Holocaust monuments that was mentioned above, in my research about art of children who were born after World War II to parents who lived in Nazi-occupied Europe and suffered from the Nazis in the ghettos and camps, in hiding, in flight or as partisans, which was published in 2015 as a book entitled *The Inheritance, The Holocaust in the Artworks of Second Generation Israeli Artists*, Jerusalem: Magnes and Yad Vashem, (Hebrew), and in my research *Holocaust Icons in Art: The Warsaw Ghetto Boy and Anne Frank*, I wish it comes out soon by Jerusalem: Magnes and Berlin: De Gruyter, (English), I found that artists who are connected to the Holocaust on a personal level – survivors or their children – are more devoted or in some cases even obsessive to the subject. I discovered that these artists delve into their inner world to find their own emotions, feelings, thoughts and images of the Holocaust. Therefore, I use other disciplines such as Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Sociology and Theology for a better and deeper understanding of the artists` background, motives, emotions and aims.*

Why only multidisciplinary approach to teaching about the Holocaust is the right one?

The Holocaust is a human phenomenon that manifested itself in all aspects of life. Human beings were forced to face harsh conditions, evil and death caused by other human beings. The Holocaust is not just an historical event that evokes causative historical questions, but it is a humanistic event concerning fundamental contemplative issues of human morale. Therefore, one can review and deal with the subject of the Holocaust in different ways – historical, philosophical, theological, psychological, sociological and more. Any discussion about the Holocaust, in every aspect, must be based primarily upon the knowledge about the period, its

conditions and problems. I believe that a multidisciplinary approach that emphasizes history and integrates it to literature, cinema, visual art, etc. is the most effective one since it is rich, interesting and appropriate for various pupils.

Why was the exhibition that you curated at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, opened in April 2018 –Violated: Women in Holocaust and Genocide – seen as controversial? And who saw it – what groups of people, either visitors or reviewers – as such?

The Violated: Women in Holocaust and Genocide exhibition was a controversial one because this is the first exhibition to deal with the subject of sexual violence towards women during the Holocaust and later genocides. While there is documentation and testimony, sexual violence during the Holocaust has for decades mostly been covered up, denied or ignored. Artistic representation is one way to raise awareness about this heinous component of the Holocaust, as well as later genocides. The artworks in this exhibition commemorate and reflect upon this violence and serve to inform viewers about this missing part of history, encouraging empathy and shedding light on this subject. The exhibition reveals the past and confronts the present in order to include women's stories into education, for the future. The audience who visited the exhibition was diverse – the general public, students, women organizations, diplomats, UN representatives, etc. The exhibition was covered by media. All articles and further information can be found in the Remember the Women Institute website: <https://www.rememberwomen.org>

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Photo: Dr. Batya Brutin with students at Bet Berl Academic College (Batya Brutin)

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