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Submitted Photo

The Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo hosts a precious metal clay workshop this Thursday.

By Bob Vrbanac, Chronicle Staff

The Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery's latest exhibition, WAR: Light Within/After the Darkness, has a lot of emotional resonance with Remembrance Day coming in the middle of the show's run on Nov. 11.

That's because it was the remembrance of a family story that inspired the gallery's curator Christian Bernard Singer to explore the theme of looking back on the Second World War and tackling the difficult memories of the Holocaust that took root in the latest exhibition.

"The inspiration from the show comes from my own background," said Singer. "My grandmother used to talk about letters that stopped coming during the war that were begging for help," said Singer. "They were asking for help to get out of Kossuth, which was part of Poland at the time, but later became part of the Ukraine."

His great-grandmother Yetta Fromstein, nee Kramer, lost contact with relations in her former homeland and it was only after the war that they realized the scope of the horror. The dwindling trickle of letters was an important memory in his family and their complete absence was an unexplored heartache.

"The whole idea of the Holocaust is a horrible thing, but it's also from a completely different generation than mine," said Singer. "For a lot of us it's just a horrible idea, but when you are able to actually trace your own family in it and the loss of family members who might have been relations of mine today, it's very disturbing."

There is a memorial project attached to the exhibition that has particularly resonated with gallery goers. It is a banner that memorializes 60 well-known Jewish artists, writers, musicians and composers who died in the concentration camps.

It is representative of the thousands of artists and others murdered by the Nazis, said Singer, and while incomplete it is an acknowledgement of their lives and what could have been.

While Singer said the banner packs an emotional wallop, he didn't want to dwell just on the "what if," he also wanted to look at examples of hope, courage, survival and the strength of the human spirit that persists when evil is trying to stamp it out.

"I really wanted to explore themes like resistance and survival," said Singer. "There are lots of stories about resistance and anyone who survived this that's the greatest act of resistance itself."

"I thought that was a good place to explore and I wanted the exhibition to be inspiring as well."

That's why the works on display don't shy away from the reality but are more of a testament to a people's wanting to live and survive what's being hurled at them.

"It's about people's sense of hope," said Singer. "Maybe something will change tomorrow or we can turn this situation around, or maybe this war will end."



“Those little moments of hope allow you to continue on until the next day, and where there’s hope you can love people, you can see beauty and you can continue to attract love. If you don’t have hope it’s over, and those that did survive had that hope — it was there.”

That’s also something that distinguishes our humanity — the hope that tomorrow is going to be a better day. Art has a way of expressing that too, no matter what’s lost in the stories, the names and the details.

Art can capture those ideas and translate it to audiences unconnected to those original events and express those thoughts and feelings and bring those emotions forward in a way that still impacts us today.

“Art has a way of speaking universally,” said Singer. “It has the ability to speak not to just one event but all events.

“It’s a way of mirroring back the human experience to others.”

And despite the resolve since the Second World War to never letting this type of genocide happen again, Singer said that we have modern examples in places like Rwanda, Bosnia and the killing fields of Cambodia where that evil still persists to this day.

That’s why works from artists like H  l  ne Brunet Neumann, Chari Cohen, Laura Donefer, Mary McKenzie, Tina Poplawski, Oded and Pamela Ravek and Claire Weissman Wilks that directly respond to the atrocities of the Holocaust and explore the spirit of resistance, survival, hope and beauty inspire the need for eternal vigilance and the importance of remembering.

“I wanted to avoid excessive sentimentality,” said Singer.

“I wanted to get projects that explored that theme, and the artists created specific projects for this show because they were excited by the theme.”

Exhibits include Donefer’s installation of cast glass footprints, including some taken from actual Holocaust survivors. It tells the story of the forced death marches to the concentration camps, and in some cases those footfalls would be the only visible evidence the victims of the Holocaust would have left behind.

“She’s making permanent the very last ephemeral gesture of those people,” said Singer. “If they died the last trace they would have had on the planet was a footstep in the mud, and she captures that and it leads to a circular path of cast feet that is illuminated from within and looks like it’s glowing — you can feel the energy coming out of it. It’s a beautiful piece and really quite moving.”

For more information visit www.theclayandglass.ca.