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WAR *Light Within/ After the Darkness*

A Powerful Exhibition about Resistance and Hope



Mary McKenzie: *Departed*. Ceramic, wood and found objects. 67.75 x 121 x 171" Image Credit: Stephen Wild.

By Christian Bernard Singer

The Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery explores multiple narratives about the Holocaust from a place of resistance and survival, hope and beauty in its exhibition *War: Light Within/After the Darkness*. Poignantly powerful, yet inspiring and beautiful, the exhibition's seven major ceramic and glass artworks and installations evoke the realities faced by Jews and other innocent populations during the Second World War.

Chari Cohen's *Hanging Forest* poetically interprets the forests in which Jewish partisans and other resistance fighters hid and operated against German occupation. This major installation consists of 50 white porcelain trees that are suspended and

sectioned at regular intervals like vertebrate beings, lynched and swaying in the breeze. The trees hover over a platform of cracked earth in reference to the 'scorched earth' policies by advancing and retreating armies, reminding us that, in addition to the vulnerability of innocent populations, nature is especially expendable during times of war. In reference to the natural world's ability to reclaim and heal itself, Cohen has embedded seedlings in the earth, which have been growing into the trees as the exhibition runs its course.

Laura Donefer's installation *Todesmärche Revisited: In Honour of Those Who Perished During the Death Marches* memorializes the last traces left behind by prisoners during the horrors of the forced death marches –

ephemeral footprints in the mud. As the Allies closed in, the Nazis attempted to erase the traces of their war crimes by emptying entire concentration camps, forcing starved and ill prisoners to march barefoot, sometimes for hundreds of kilometres, to other camps or killing centres within Germany. Like a path, blackened cement footprints, heavy with the burden of terrible suffering, lead toward a circular mound of illuminated clear cast glass footprints, affirming the glowing life force within. Here, Donefer's work becomes at once narrative, memorial, monument and reverential celebration of the living.

The Miracle of the Three Sisters by Oded and Pamela Ravek, is both a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust and a tribute to Oded's



Oded and Pamela Ravek: *The Miracle of the Three Sisters*. Clear glass, Spectrum ice glass and iridescent cast glass, hot-worked, cut, fused and polished glass. Clear dichroic inclusions. 29.5x20x22". Image Credit: Stephen Wild.

mother and her two sisters who miraculously survived the horrors of Auschwitz and went on to lead fruitful lives. The cast, fused and hot-worked glass sculpture with clear dichroic inclusions has all of the elements of an architectonic monument. The roughly cast numbers that had been tattooed on the arms of Oded's mother and aunts are in sharp contrast against the intent of the rest of the sculpture which has been so meticulously finished and polished, further suggesting the barbarous and dispassionate way in which these women were branded. The three triangles that make up the Star of David evoke the Jewish Diaspora come together in Israel, their spiritual land and home. It is a story told in clear glass like a declaration of hope rising from the ashes, made bare and transparent for all to see.

Tina Poplawski's *Dreaming Tree* speaks about violent uprooting and issues of disassociation often found in people who suffer from Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The upper part of the tree is 'cut away' from the lower half, each trying to reunite into wholeness. Cradled within the roots of the tree is a pink translucent cast resin crib, suggesting that violence shatters all sense of safety and that



Tina Poplawski: *Dreaming Tree*. Fir tree, acrylic, crushed glass, Swarovski crystals, urethane casting resin, grandmother's doily. 180x72x72" Image Credit: Stephen Wild.

ensuing traumas are carried with the victims and continue to affect future generations as well. This work references the moment that her family was ripped from their home at 3 AM by Russian soldiers in the middle of winter and sent to the Gulags. Like the Nazis, the NKVD was responsible for mass extrajudicial executions, mass deportations of entire nationalities and operated its own system of forced labour camps.

Departed, by Mary McKenzie, recreates a living room in which half of the space has been destroyed by an explosion. The remaining space, seemingly intact, suggests a homely quiet scene of everyday living. Clothes are piled in laundry hampers, draped onto drying racks, or neatly folded on the furniture. There is also evidence of recent knitting and the activity of children playing with Teddy bears and rag dolls. However, the humans are missing and the circumstances surrounding their sudden departure remain a mystery. Textile objects that might have been in contact with the people who lived there have been meticulously recreated in pure white ceramic as a way of underscoring a moment frozen in time. Meanwhile, the explosion serves as an allegorical reference



to wartime calamity and to the violence inflicted onto innocent civilians.

Claire Weissman Wilks' sculptures and drawings, depicting love, kindness, compassion, caring and protection were inspired by the personal journals of the Jewish Dutch writer Etty Hillesum who chronicled her life and spiritual development under Nazi occupation. Her *Timeless Upon Time* series portrays the very essence of fragility and vulnerability that is at the heart of the human condition. Here, unfired clay figures are precariously draped over glass bottles, each holding the other up from what seems like an endless and perilous plight. Underscoring the perception of interconnectedness where arms hold onto other arms and legs and still others reach back tenderly yet uncomfortably to support another, one can only imagine the disastrous chain reaction should any one of these figures let go.

Hélène Brunet-Neumann's *Caucus: Émergence*, an installation of figurative sculptures created out of unfired clay and straw, evokes a council attempting to reach consensus

and provides, at first glance, a hopeful outcome. Standing within the circle, one immediately feels something charged and powerful. And yet, a sense of true communication seems somehow elusive. Although the bodies are ambiguous, one eventually observes that they are neither facing nor communicating with each other. In fact, they each seem lost in their own worlds. Installed in the Gallery's courtyard, the sculptures have been slowly disintegrating during their exposure to the elements. Like the many councils before it, these figures will disappear and be forgotten - reminding us that we do indeed forget.

WAR: Light Within/After the Darkness runs until March 16, 2014 at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo, Ontario.

Christian Bernard Singer is an artist, educator and the Curator of the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery.

Claire Weissman Wilks: *Untitled from the Timeless Upon Time Series*, 2010. Unfired clay on glass bottle. 81 x 64 cm



Chari Cohen: *Hanging Forest*. Ceramic, silicone, unfired clay, grass, earth, steel, wood. 9x9x9' Image Credit: Brian Burnett



Hélène Brunet Neumann: *CAUCUS, Émergence II*. Clay, straw, wood and metal. Dimensions variable. Image Credit: Brian Burnett



Laura Donefer: *Todesmärche Revisited, In Honour of Those Perished During the Death Marches, 2013*. Sandcast glass footprints, earth cast plaster footprints, black paint, and black earth. Dimensions variable. Image Credit: Stephen Wild



Laura Donefer: *Todesmärche Revisited*. Detail. Image Credit: Stephen Wild