

ART OF RECALL

From Memory to Transformation: Jewish Women's Voices

CURATED BY MIMI GELLMAN

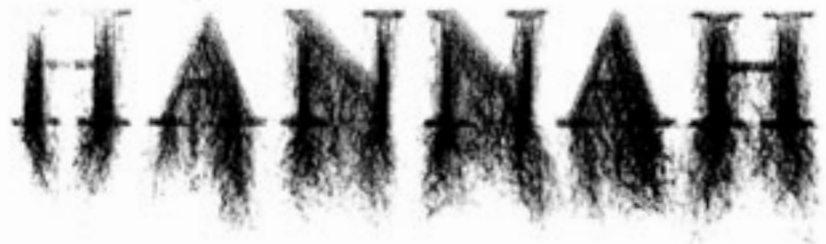
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179 JOHN STREET, 3RD FLOOR, TORONTO

REVIEW BY CATHERINE OSBORNE

The exhibition "From Memory to Transformation" was organized to coincide with a Toronto conference on Jewish women in today's society. Some participating artists were initially reluctant to show their work under the exhibition's theme — Jewish women's voices. The aversion was understandable, as several of the eight artists do not use their particular religious and cultural ethnicity as primary signifiers in their work. So, when scouted out to fit an emphatically targeted theme, there was the very real possibility of labels being attached and content shrinking to one-liners. But curator Mimi Gellman succeeded in creating a sensitive and provocative exhibition.

In this particular case, theme has not limited content. While there is, very definitely, the female impetus and Jewish heritage present, the sentiment is decidedly humanist. The means and themes are expressed in deliberately broad, even subversive, terms that give voice to prevailing questions of identity and disenfranchisement. Mindy Yan Miller, for instance, who has used hundreds of straight pins pierced into the gallery's dry-wall to write out the name Hannah, does let her own sense of alienation growing up in a non-Jewish neighbourhood in Sault Ste. Marie find its way into her work — Hannah, we are told, is the name of a relative. But personal history is the undercurrent, not the focus. On each pinhead she has precariously balanced a long strand of black hair which produces a thin mane running down the wall. The work's seduction is in its frailty and the implica-



Every Word, their Name, Mindy Yan Miller, 1993, hair and pins. Photo: Peter MacCallum.

tion of human frailty. Eerie and gorgeous at the same time, Hannah is clearly vulnerable to being destroyed by even the slightest breeze through the gallery, and knowing that the work will disappear once the show is over reads like a scripted death.

Human vulnerability is also evident in the work of Ruth Liberman, who exposes personal stories in public spaces. A Jew who grew up in Germany, Liberman has recorded across a giant sheet of white paper excerpts from her own memories and stories told to her by relatives. By randomly laying down strips of typewriter ribbon across the page, Liberman writes across the ribbon leaving an inked impression of a phrase or sentence. Text moves across the paper like a blizzard of words, thoughts and ideas that are bunched together or meander off on their own, allowing only glimpses into the content. What content is visible reads as

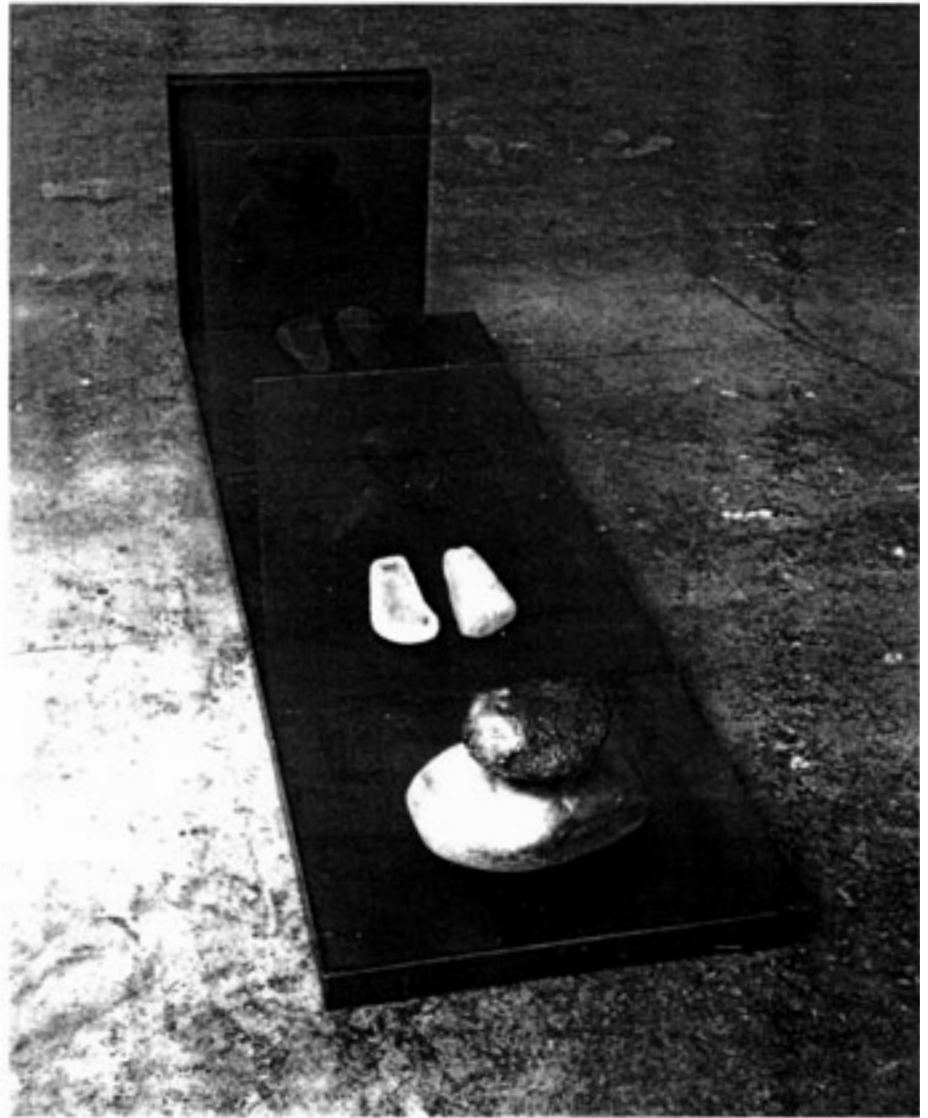
fleeting moments of intimate conversations or dreams. But privacy prevails — given Liberman's poetic license in rearranging the text — and even though personal recollections are openly displayed, the identity of the author remains concealed.

In comparison, one might read Nadine Norman's installation like an open book on Judaism and its irreconcilable connection to Nazism. Norman has stenciled across two walls a repeated pattern of swastikas and sauvastikas (the Buddhist temple emblem that is the mirror image of the Nazi icon) made of pressed ash. Cleverly and campishly toying with a symbolic discourse between ash and the Nazi emblem, as well as the diametrically opposing meanings of swastikas and sauvastikas, Norman sets up other variable contradictions. The feminine hominess of her "wallpapered" room, for instance, contrasts the masculine Nazi

motif (which emphatically overshadows its flipped version). But deterioration or resurgence is uncertain. The ash motifs seem embedded into the wall but falling ash continues to build up in tiny heaps at the base of the walls.

Norman is sharply sensitive to her material and the symbolic duality she feels ash carries, being the physical substance of both death and renewal. Good or bad, history and memory, she suggests, are what determine social order, our existence and identity. Similar concepts show up in all of the works, even within Irene Froelick's weighty and gnarled glass busts, which are given angelic halos of crystallized glass around their foreheads. To less effect, Elaine Brodie's multi-exposed photographs, which layer natural and man-made objects, such as foliage, portraits and figurative statues, are intended to suggest human presence in both physical and spiritual form, though the work is more interesting viewed as luscious studies on atmosphere and texture.

Sylvia Saffy's sculptural works rise confidently above the literal, and hence her work is among the strongest in the show. Her objects and drawings have always floated ambiguously around notions of life cycles and time passages but with her sculpture *Kerer*, scale and medium are the sublime forces. Laid out on the floor is a rectangular sheet of metal and rising vertically from this base are two sheets of glass, dividing the base into three sections. Both materials are cool and distant, but Saffy suggests a human presence by placing between the panes of glass two glass castings shaped like a pair of feet. From the perspective of looking down on the work, the metal plate sets up a boundary, a tiny room without a ceiling, and scale is then tampered with by the life-size glass feet. There are layers of subtlety in this piece, a seductive play between the hardness of her materials and the intangible. Less obtrusively, the



Kerer, Sylvia Saffy, steel, glass, bronze, stone, 70 x 66 x 198 cm. Photo: Richard Max Tremblay

Opposite: detail of *Scroll #1*, Ruth Liberman, 1995.

glass feet are multiplied by reflections in the glass walls.

While the Jewish/feminist mode of this exhibition is treated only as a backdrop for exploring cultural identity in more general terms, some of the work does not go beyond variations of tired themes. Rochelle Rubinstein Kaplan's woodblock prints on veiling are cut into the shape of clothing and are lined up like a family portrait pinned to the wall. But strip away the easily read ghost-like shadow effects and the striped pyjamas as concentration

camp gear, and there is only a simplified revision of familiar motifs. Similarly, Yael Brotman's collage scrolls of women and their tools — sewing machines in particular — are pleasant to look at but any greater message beyond a personal one is, if there, unresolved. Fortunately, the congruence of the entire exhibition and the ability of the rest of the work to hold up to a potentially limited context does forgive the minor downturns.

Catherine Osborne is a freelance art writer based in Toronto.