

# Visual Representations of the Holocaust

BY GABRIELLE MOSER

It has been more than sixty years since the sociologist, composer, and critic Theodor Adorno proclaimed, “poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Adorno argued the atrocities of the Holocaust changed the very way we thought about human nature and this, in turn, greatly affected the way we approach the visual representation of the Holocaust. Art could no longer lift us out of our everyday reality “after Auschwitz” because the Holocaust was now a part of that reality, too gruesome to be ignored. For many artists and thinkers, the Holocaust challenged our collective memory by presenting us with events we could never imagine happening. It became impossible for us to understand how humankind could create something as spectacularly beautiful as the Sistine ceiling and also be responsible for the inhumanity witnessed at Auschwitz.

Despite these issues of representation, artists have continuously attempted to create art about the Holocaust: to depict visually what is sometimes impossible to represent in words; to work through the issues of atrocity and tragedy with paint, clay, paper, concrete and even materials like straw or plastic action figures. Both first- and second-generation artists have engaged in the struggle to create works that interpret and represent the horrors of the Holocaust and, in so doing, have discovered remarkable

and powerful ways to visually depict the collective and personal experience of this trauma.

First- and second-generation artists, and those artists who do not have a direct connection to the events, all approach visual representations of the Holocaust in significantly different ways. For first-generation artists, visual representations of the Holocaust have centred on the documentation and recording of their experiences. According to Pnina Rosenberg, curator at the Ghetto Fighters’ House in Israel, first-generation artists produce Holocaust-related art to leave a stamp on the world when their lives are at risk; as documentation and visual representation of the inhumanity or evil they have witnessed; and as a form of spiritual protest. The production of art, after all, is an individual creative effort that marks out one’s unique identity and perspective. The very act of creating art in an inhuman and oppressive system, like that which existed in the Holocaust, is therefore an act of resistance.

For second-generation artists, making art about the Holocaust is, in part, about interpreting and understanding what happened to their parents and grandparents. It can be seen as an attempt to work through and contextualize their parents’ trauma and represents the continued impact of the Holocaust on those who did not directly experience it. Their art focuses more on the evocation of emotions and responses in their viewers than on the act of documentation. Art Spiegelman, for example, transformed his father’s account of the Holocaust into a Pulitzer prize-winning graphic novel, *MAUS*, which combined documentation with interpretation. When we read *MAUS*, we learn of Spiegelman’s father Vladek’s experiences, and also how those experiences have affected his son throughout his life.

The importance and immediacy of the Holocaust is also called up by the second-generation’s use of specific and unique materials in making their art. The artist Gabrielle Rossmer, for instance, has searched through documents in the German museum of the town where her grandparents were held until their death in 1942 and made copies of the letters, papers and telegrams related to her family. By placing these copies on the floor of the gallery and inviting visitors to sift through them, Rossmer challenges us to examine the gaps that exist between the memory of an event and the documentation of it. Marina Vainshtein, a third-generation artist from California, has taken this emphasis on materiality to new extremes by covering most of her body with tattoos of Holocaust imagery. Vainshtein says she is working to reclaim the Jewish body by marking it permanently and uses the Holocaust images to represent the internal traumatic scars of her grandparents externally.



*Ceramic Shoes by Jenny Stolzenberg from the Shoes of Memory Exhibit.*

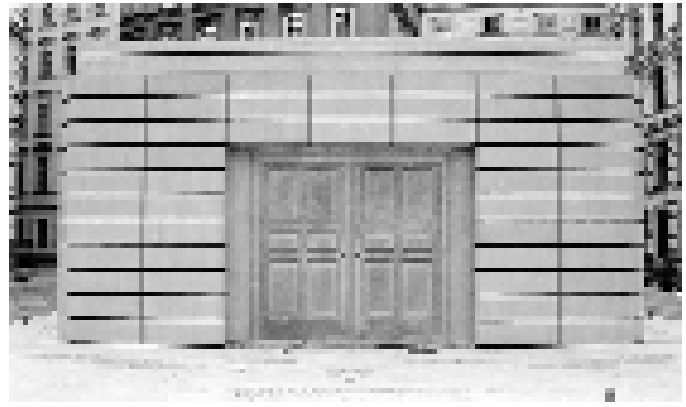


Gabrielle Rossmar, *In Search of the Lost Object: Sleeping on the pas 1991 (detail)*  
Installation, Dimensions vary

Jenny Stolzenberg is a second-generation artist from London, England who has taken up the medium of clay to create ceramic works that address her family's Holocaust history while also evoking the memory of all victims in *Shoes of Memory*. Inspired by the piles of shoes, clothing, hair, glasses and suitcases found in the warehouses of Auschwitz at liberation, the seventy pairs of ceramic shoes that make up *Shoes of Memory* evoke the memory of the millions of lives that were lost in the Holocaust. Meticulously researched and rendered in clay, Stolzenberg's shoes return a sense of identity to the victims of the Holocaust by rescuing the shoes from their anonymity in the piles at Auschwitz. Her father, a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, rarely spoke of his experiences, either because he did not want to burden her with the stories, or because he could not face re-living the memories. Despite his reticence, Stolzenberg felt compelled to create beautiful and unique pieces of art which, for her, represent an "exploration to understand and come to terms with" her family's history. She visited Auschwitz and was deeply moved by the experience. She also studied shoe designs from 1930s England and Europe in order to render accurate replicas of the type of shoes worn by Holocaust victims. She feels that art which represents atrocity does not, itself, have to be shocking, even if the circumstances it attempts to portray are horrific.

*When artists approach visual representations of the Holocaust, they are taking on a set of complex and difficult issues surrounding memory, loss, representation and materiality.*

Another category of artists who have visually represented the Holocaust in their work are the people who Stephen Feinstein classifies as "empathizers." These are people who have not directly experienced or been affected by the Holocaust, but who take it up as a theme to address concepts of memory or contemporary social issues. Jenny Stolzenberg has been particularly inspired by some of these artists and the way they approach atrocity and the Holocaust. She cites the work of painter Anselm Kiefer, for instance, who paints semi-figurative acrylic works about German



Rachel Whiteread's Memorial to the Victims of the Holocaust at Judenplatz in Vienna.  
The memorial is designed as a library turned inside out.  
Photo credit: Florida Center for Instructional Technology

history and the horrors of the Holocaust on canvas, incorporating materials like straw, ash, clay and steel into his images. Another inspiration for Stolzenberg was British artist Rachel Whiteread's public monument in Vienna, the *Judenplatz Memorial to the Victims of the Holocaust*. Made of poured cement and moulded from the spines of books, Whiteread's memorial is haunting in its permanent and tangible marking of a neighbourhood that experienced trauma and loss. Like Stolzenberg's work, Whiteread's memorial represents a horrific event in a beautiful and understated manner, thereby sparing the viewer from being re-traumatized by reminders of the horrors of the Holocaust.

Rather than trying to lift the viewer out of our everyday reality, these artists attempt to remind us of our history and to demonstrate that these issues are still a part of our reality today. Through their innovation and creativity, these artists have demonstrated the ways in which contemporary art can evoke the past while addressing current social justice issues in compelling and unique ways.



The majority of Marina Vainshtein's body is covered with tattoos of Holocaust imagery.