

Gender identity and the Holocaust

A young Israeli artist looks at the Shoah from a transgender perspective, bringing a startling 'eye' to a topic many have been blinded to.

By Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua | May 23, 2014 | 12:40 AM



Organic Soaps, 2013 Glycerin, human hair, fingernails, ashes, fragrance Various sizes. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Gil Yefman didn't need #BringBackOurGirls to become outraged about violence against women around the world – though it does make his first New York solo exhibit, “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn” (To Me You Are Beautiful) seem all the more relevant. An Israeli native whose grandmother left Transylvania well before the outbreak of World War II, he became attuned to the particular plight of female Shoah victims through a series of unusual circumstances that make his exhibit at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in Soho such a bracing departure from most Holocaust-themed art.

“A dear friend handed me his deceased mother’s yellow wool and I started crocheting,” says the 35 year old, who was born and raised on kibbutz Ramat Yohanan and whose work is collected by the Rubbell Family Foundation and the Jewish Museum of New York. “I just naturally started knitting gold stars and it freaked me out because the whole topic is so taboo for a young artist in Israel. It’s become a cliché and often examined in a non-interesting way.”

But after getting an encouraging nod, he persisted, finding the mechanics of the craft a metaphor for what he was doing – spinning yarns.

“When you crochet you see every loop, which is called an eye,” says Yefman. “To me each eye has its own narrative, there are shifting points of view. I never rely on status quo but am curious about the other side, the otherness.”

To Yefman, who has examined issues of gender identity through his work and in life, by taking hormones, that otherness became the female viewpoint.

“Most Holocaust education is based on the deaths, the aftermath, but not everyday life, which is much harder to look at,” he says. “The hardship of everyday life has been repressed, particularly as it relates to women.”

As Yefman began to research stories of Jewish sexual slavery, which ironically he first encountered in school through the required book “House of Dolls” by Ka-tzetnik 135633, he found himself relating more than most. “Before I realized I was a woman inside a man’s body, I became anorexic and felt betrayed by nature, ashamed of my body,” he says. “Then as I grew to become a woman, I began to accept myself more, but I also felt very vulnerable, suddenly with breasts, my femaleness, all of which had been inside of me and was now on the exterior, as if I were turned inside out.”

That quality informs the first piece you notice upon entering Feldman Gallery, which is “Tumtum,” a giant, colorful crocheted ball of orifices, breasts, genitals, eyeballs and tongues that sways and sounds off in a manner both playful and obscene. The piece was created for the “About Stupidity” exhibition at the Petah Tikva Museum but also was displayed as part of “Otherness – I is Somebody Else” at L’Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton in Paris last year.



Tumtum, 2012 Knitting, Fraday cage, iron net construction, sound 78 3/4 inches diameter. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, N.Y.

“Tumtum is slang for ‘stupid,’” says Yefman, “but it also is a Biblical pre-medical term that refers to ambiguous genitalia, people who are considered freaks, pushed to the margins of society the way Holocaust survivors have been.”

Viewers are encouraged to touch, pull and push this mass of protruding organs and appendages that at times belches, at others lets out loud heart beats or deep breaths, giving off the sense of a body raw, exposed, violated, defiled and bleeding, hanging by a thread, or in this case yarn. It's also as striking metaphor for rape in an exhibit with an ironic name and dedicated to the topic of sexual violence against women during the Holocaust.

But irony, shocking contrast and the juxtaposition of beauty and horror is at the core of Yefman's striking show, whose esthetically pleasing quality is also one of its most confounding ones. Jewish tour groups like March of the Living, for example, are often seen walking through Auschwitz with Israeli flags held aloft as shields, symbols of nationalist pride and reclamation. But to cloak oneself in Yefman's "Baby Blanket," which looks like an afghan any grandmother might have knit, except for its swastika pattern, would be to allow the horrors of the Holocaust to penetrate, to get a little too close for comfort. And isn't that the ultimate taboo?

"As an artist I feel the urge to seduce," says Yefman. "To make you want to approach the work and feel that it's OK to explore this topic, and once you're already in, then you have to confront all these unresolved questions and issues, and hopefully you'll walk away haunted enough to engage in further dialogue. The point is to not be afraid to open up, to allow for freedom of expression."

One of the ways Yefman entices you to interact is by relying on craft, employing domestic materials that are handled intimately, like soap, a loaded metaphor regarding the Holocaust. "The survivors were called 'sabonim,' or soap by the Zionist settlers who made them feel ashamed for so willingly going to the camps and to their deaths," says Yefman. "And that lack of compassion is something that can't be forgiven and should be part of the Holocaust narrative and how we treated survivors. But there's another interesting aspect about soap: You use it to cleanse, to wash away dirt, you put it close to your skin."

In this case, his brightly colored bars, embellished with swastikas, gruesomely accented with human hair and fragments of nails, made in an alluring array of scents with "only the finest organic ingredients," get under your skin.



Organic Soaps, 2013 Glycerin, human hair, fingernails, ashes, fragrance Various sizes. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, N.Y.

There is also the matter of appropriating Nazi symbols for contemporary consumption (last week's arrest of a Holocaust-denying, swastika-clad New York cabbie notwithstanding). "When you take a symbol like that and use it in a modern merchandising way and incorporate it into daily life, you bring something from the past to the present. It's no longer somewhere back there. You're forced to touch it, and figure out how it makes you feel" Yefman says.

His ceramics, too, don't offer the usual distance of black-and-white archival images of atrocity. They draw you in because the materials are familiar and the abstracted patterns on them are esthetically alluring. Then upon closer inspection you realize that the images are made of piles of bones, the very ones associated with death camps. But these are tiles – meant for a shower or kitchen – and that's what makes them all the more impactful. He takes them out of the vaults and into the home.



Decomposition No. 1 and 2, 2012 Unique hand-painted ceramic diptych 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches each. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, N.Y.

"Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn" also includes video, silkscreen prints and a performance piece in which Yefman lies inside one of his crocheted Sex Slave crocheted dolls, his eyes popping out lifelessly from a disattached body shown on her back, legs bound up like one of the victims of Block 24, the brothel of Auschwitz, a place that gets ignored on tours of the death camp.



Sex Slave, 2008 Knitting, mattress, bed frame, toilette mirror, chair Variable dimensions. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, N.Y.

“The Holocaust is a topic that gets trotted out every year for Yom Hashoah then returned neatly to its safe box,” says Rochelle Saidel, founder along with Sonja Hedgepeth of Remember the Women Foundation, which partly sponsored Yefman’s show. “But you never hear of women’s experiences other than Anne Frank or Hannah Senesh.”

She and Hedgepeth, who are also editors of the ground-breaking book “Sexual Violence Against Women in the Holocaust,” met Yefman during a conference in Israel last spring and struck up an immediate friendship.

“I saw this guy knitting in the front row of one of my panels and had to know who he was,” she says. “He told us of his unique and innovative work on the same subject, and we fell in love.”

Saidel and Hedgepeth wrote the introduction to the catalogue for his Tokyo show last year, an exhibit that garnered a warmer reception than he anticipates this work might have back at home.

“I’ve had people in Israel cry or shout at me that my work is perverse,” says Yefman. “But then a woman survivor came to one of my shows and she told me how moved she was. And that validated me more than anything. She told me it should tour around the world.”

The next stop is an exhibition at the Dvir Gallery in Tel Aviv. Yefman is not sure how his fellow Israelis will view his work, the antithesis of all those atrocity photos, which he says constitute a sort of Holocaust porn.

Ironically, it’s actual pornography that he uses in “Time Table,” a series of silkscreen portraits of real Nazi women posed like X-rated calendar girls, researched over the course of years, sourced from archives at Ravensbruck, the predominantly female concentration camp, as well as books like “Hitler’s Furies,” about women in the S.S.

“I wanted to understand how women who had been nurses, wives, teachers, ordinary women, could become these sadists. And in some cases, there were reasons. But really, the land was fertile for breeding that level of sadism,” says Yefman, who offers text accompanying each portrait, each telling its own narrative.

“Of course, one of the points in turning these perpetrators into victims was to degrade them sexually,” says Yefman of the images which picture Eva Braun, her back tattooed with the symbols of the companies that fueled the Nazi

war machinery, from Bayer to Knorr to Kodak and Volkswagen in one, and a notorious S.S. guard with her legs spread-eagle with the gates of Birkenau behind her in another. You'll never look at "Schindler's List" the same way again. But you also just might take a closer look at the images of women on billboards and on packages.



Eva Braun from Time Table, 2012-2014 One of 12 silkscreens on paper Image: 15 ½ x 11 inches Paper: 21 x 15 inches Edition of 8. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, N.Y.

“The pornography I used is stuff I found on the Internet today,” says Yefman. “So in one case I superimpose an anorexic body dressed in lingerie with a Nazi woman and suddenly she fits right in with the images next to her. She’s that thin.”

And that's the other shocking question the show raises. By ignoring the sexploitation of women during the Shoah have we, as a society, failed to condemn sex crimes the way we condemned war crimes through the Nuremberg trials? Why didn't we ever bring back our girls?

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