

**Soft Body/Hard Truth**  
**An Essay by Dr. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Dr. Rochelle G. Saidel**  
**for the Catalogue of Gil Yefman's H Exhibition**  
**The Container, Tokyo, Japan, August 19 - October 28, 2013**

For us, the letter "H" stands for Holocaust. It also reminds us of Hitler, Himmler, and Heydrich, the three most known perpetrators of Nazi genocide. Included in their heinous projects was a system of bordellos, or brothels, in which privileged male prisoners could visit female prisoners who were used as forced sex slaves. In the patriarchal and twisted Nazi world, some (female) prisoners were forced to be prostitutes for other (male) prisoners. The purpose of this system was to encourage male prisoners to work harder at their slave labor, and thus earn as a bonus a visit to the concentration camp bordello.

Using the soft medium of crochet hook and yarn, artist Gil Yefman recreates the hard core material often overlooked in Holocaust history. His "H" scenario is a copulation chamber in a concentration camp brothel. Most visitors to the Auschwitz memorial are not aware that Block 24, to the immediate left of the overhead entrance sign "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" (work makes one free), was a bordello. This was but one of a system of brothels that was spread throughout the Nazis' concentration camp network. While the precise total is unknown, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum recently put the number of Nazi brothels at 5.000.

Gil Yefman is the perfect artist to reflect on the absurd world of Nazi brothels, in which female concentration camp prisoners were sex slaves who were forced to service Nazi officers and privileged male prisoners. Yefman uses sexuality and gender as a filter in an attempt to free society from gender restrictions. In this extraordinary piece of performance art, the artist is part of the doll that he created to bring his message to those who view and experience his art. Not only is Yefman brave to present and participate in this reflection on one form of sexual abuse under the Nazis, but he also asks viewers to show their courage and do likewise in relation to their own contemporary cultures.

Yefman's choice of a doll is especially poignant to us, because it reminds us of a fictionalized Nazi brothel in Ka-Tzetnik's book titled *House of Dolls*. The novel is said to be based on information

that Ka-Tzetnik (Yehiel Dinur), a Holocaust survivor and writer, learned about his own sister. By means of his skillfully crocheted slave "worker-doll," with the artist performing as her head, Yefman asks us to consider how these women were used. This doll could also be a post-modern/postmortem victim of deadly experimental surgery.

The doll's, or the artist's, wistful gaze is focused on images of beautiful nature surrounding Ravensbrück, the Nazi women's concentration camp from which many of the forced sex slaves came. Ravensbrück was also the training ground for female SS-auxiliary guards. Yefman's bordello installation is illuminated by a "*Schlampelampe*" (tramp lamp) a neon signal for the Nazi perception of these objectified women.

Yefman's multi-breasted doll, which oozes black milk, refers to "*Todesfuge*" (Death Fugue), a post-Holocaust poem by German language poet Paul Celan. In the words of the poet: "Black milk of morning we drink you at night/we drink you at noontime and at dawn/we drink you at dusk/we drink and drink." Celan's words refer to the memory of concentration camp slave labor for German masters.

Yefman asks us to confront an uncomfortable truth, and his discourse of discomfort is present at every turn in the room. Who went to "use" these women? The artist invites the visitor to his room to interact with his doll. This invitation to engage with his creation is challenging. How does interacting in a room evocative of a Nazi concentration camp bordello cross boundaries of personal space?

What occurred in these Nazi brothel rooms, with their regulation sexual positions and peep holes to ensure compliance, is a form of sexual violence that is part of the story that transpired in Hitler's concentration camps and elsewhere in Nazi-occupied Europe. Like that of other instances of sexual abuse in wartime, this story has often been overlooked or purposely left out of history.

Through our book, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* [make link], as well as the research and cultural projects of Remember the Women Institute, we are dedicated to integrating sexual violence into the history of the Holocaust, so that it is not forgotten in future generations. We know that in addition to the Nazi bordellos, there were various instances of sexual

violation that included rape, personal sex slaves, forced nudity, "medical" experiments, and other atrocities. Reflecting on first seeing photographs depicting the horrors of the Holocaust, Susan Sontag wrote in her essay, "In Plato's Cave" (*On Photography*, 1977): "One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany." Similarly, Gil Yefman's work forces viewers to see something unexpected and have their own epiphanies and enlightened understanding about the sexual violence enacted during the Holocaust, as well as the ongoing issue of rape and sexual abuse.