



"MIRRORING EVIL: NAZI IMAGERY/ RECENT ART"

JEWISH MUSEUM, NEW YORK

LINDA NOCHLIN

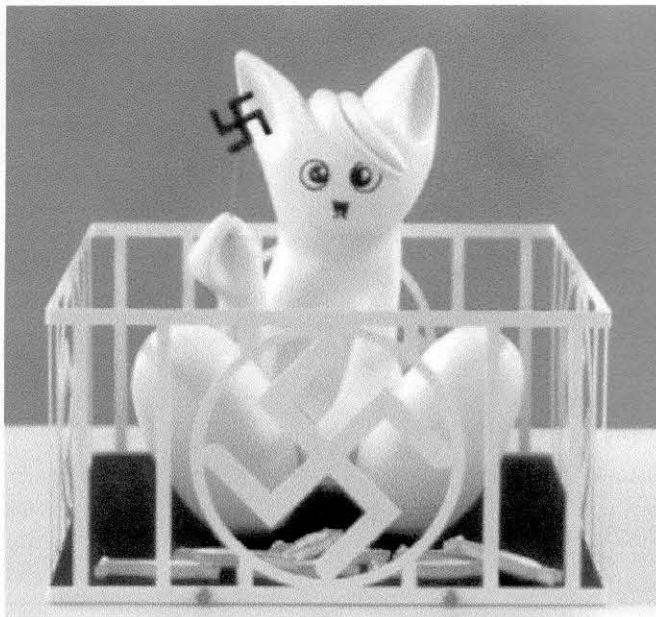


Roe Rosen, *Live and Die as Eva Braun #2*, 1995, acrylic on paper, 10 3/4 x 6 5/8".

Despite the barrage of negative criticism that greeted "Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art" when it opened in mid-March—from hysterical outrage to self-satisfied dismissals of both the art and the ideas put forward—it is an uncommonly thoughtful if profoundly disturbing show. Like two other important recent exhibitions on the East Coast—the Gerhard Richter retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Barnett Newman retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, both of which in their own manner touched on questions raised in "Mirroring Evil"—the Jewish Museum exhibition demands careful and respectful looking and meditation. By "respectful" I do not, of course, mean to recommend pompous solemnity, which would be out of keeping with the palpable air of irony, satire, playfulness, and send-up that permeates the material on view—on the contrary. I mean that the pieces should be considered in detail and in an appropriate context of postmodernity—which is to say, an art that emphasizes diversity rather than homogeneity; that rejects a single master narrative of history or its representation; that provides a potent critique of modernist orthodoxy in both theory and practice; and above all, that is inevitably imbricated in the world of the commodity and that of popular culture.

The word "mirroring" in the show's title can only be understood as an ironic reference to realism or the reflection theory of representation that backs it up, since the evil in question is anything but simply "mirrored" at the Jewish Museum. Indeed, the young artists who participate in the show (and, this is crucial, they are nearly all young) make clear their complete separation—temporal, spatial, ideological—from that *univers concentrationnaire* that is their ostensible subject. At the same time they make clear that this ostensible subject, already prepackaged and fetishized in "Holocaust" memorials, local shrines, documentaries, theater, and novels, can now be represented—and thereby distanced—only through the visual apparatus of popular culture: the pop icon, the fetish, most notably, the toy. To do otherwise would be, to put it bluntly, obscene. Indeed, there is little obscenity per se in the works on view in "Mirroring Evil," although several deal with the raw material of the obscene and the salacious, the shocking and the excessive. No neo-Nazi would get a kick out of the show. Nor is there anything anti-Semitic in its iconography. Indeed, it must be noted that the only works at the Jewish Museum that could possibly be described as obscene are those in the "counter-exhibition" by the figural expressionist Zoran Music, created in 1970: "We Are Not the Last" consists of vaguely brushed barren landscapes, delectably painted piles of corpses, and blurred, generic, gape-mouthed screaming heads. Making something appealingly aesthetic out of the experience of the camps seems to me obscene, as does the attempt to ennoble through nifty brushwork senseless suffering and waste. Yet I am sure that many people want and expect this sort of representation of the Holocaust

and admire the work's soulful beauty.



Alain Séchas,
Enfants Gâtés
(Spoiled children)
(detail),
1997,
wood,
plastic, and
mirrors,
dimensions
variable.

Before turning to specific works in "Mirroring Evil" I would like to place them within the several possible categories of response to the Holocaust, aside from the Holocaust Memorial per se. First of all, there is realism, a category that might include photojournalism—the documentary photographs or films of the actual sites of outrage, like those familiar images taken after the liberation of the death camps at Auschwitz or the even more horrifying footage confiscated from Nazi archives of Jewish corpses being hauled to mass graves—and the drawings, paintings, and sculpture inspired by such documentary material.

Then there is what one might call the modernist response, which may include both negation and silence, a refusal to represent, following Adorno's often cited (and miscited) statement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Claude Lanzmann's remarkable film *Shoah* (1985), which adamantly refuses all representation of the actual visual material of the Holocaust and focuses on the (present-day) testimony of a variety of witnesses, is a case in point. Among such "refusals" in the visual arts might be considered the work of Barnett Newman, whose intransigently reduced yet heroic abstraction may well be thought of in relation to the trauma of World War II and the camps, although it cannot of course be reduced in toto to such a response. Yet the modernist approach may also include strategies of allusion, evocation, and analogy as well as outright refusal. One might think in this respect of the work of Christian Boltanski, who once actually declared that all of his work was "more or less about the Holocaust" and whose installations, like *Shadows*, *Candles*, and *Monuments*, certainly evoke the event powerfully, if indirectly. In this category one could also place the early work of Gerhard Richter, for example *Uncle Rudi*, 1965, which, in its evocation, through the blurred banality of a black-and-white re-presentation, of what specifically the artist's German-officer relative was up to on the Russian front before he was killed, brings the painting into the realm of modernist suggestive reticence. Still other work under the modernist rubric is that of the late, little-known sculptor Olga Bernal, an Auschwitz survivor living and working in France whose near-abstract relief sculpture *Train to Auschwitz*, 1995, a simple wooden rectangle fashioned of black dowels with a windowlike opening "barred" by violin-bow hairs, recalls the terrible transport without actually representing it.

Finally, there is what one might shorthand as the postmodern

response, which this show has brought to a wider public. In categorizing the pieces in "Mirroring Evil" by their specific cultural moment, I do not mean to imply that they are all similar; in fact, there is a wide range of approaches and media on view here. But almost all of them are marked by an intense, or at least tense, relationship to the artifacts and strategies of the contemporary media and entertainment industry—global in its scope, perhaps, but inevitably "American" in its cultural resonance, and this despite the fact that only one of the artists in the show was born in the United States (although several now live here).

Deriving its material directly from Hollywood films, Piotr Uklanski's *The Nazis*, 1998, is an installation of fourteen-by-ten-inch color glossies of movie actors decked out in full Nazi regalia for their roles, exuding a palpable aura of sadomasochistic glitz and glamour. When Uklanski's installation was first shown at London's Photographers' Gallery, 166 images deployed in a frieze around the perimeter of the space, it created a scandal. "OUTRAGE AS LONDON GALLERY HIGHLIGHTS 'GLAMOUR OF NAZISM'" the *Evening Standard* trumpeted. The installation refers to such deadpan celebrations of Pop glory as Warhol's celebrity portraits and, less Pop, more deadpan highbrow, but, like this work, consisting of an entirely masculine cast of characters, Gerhard Richter's *48 Portraits*, 1971–72. Both Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1987–89) and Susan Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism" (1975) should be required reading for this piece, although the ordinary spectator can respond to it quite directly, if with a certain amount of equivocation. The erotic charge of the Nazi uniform, the visual presence of such matinee idols as Dirk Bogarde, Clint Eastwood, Ralph Fiennes, Max von Sydow, and many more adorable actors caught in their sinister role-playing, the fun of identifying who is who—"Isn't that Frank Sinatra?"—has to be weighed against our twinges of guilt at admiring, getting a visual charge out of, well, Nazis. This may be especially true for the female spectator, whose so-called power of the gaze has so often been challenged. Indeed, the unremitting masculinity of Uklanski's cast of characters has been called into question by one of the two women in the show, Elke Krystufek, who, in her feminist rejoinder to Uklanski's piece, inserts images of her own nude body into works by the Polish artist, images that are at once "sexy, scary, and purposefully self-indulgent," to borrow curator Norman Kleeblatt's words from the catalogue.

Continuing the sexual motif in the medium of video is Maciej Toporowicz's disturbing video *Obsession*, 1991. Combining scavenged images from Nazi propaganda, Leni Riefenstahl films, and movies like Visconti's *The Damned* (1969) and Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1973) with clips from Calvin Klein ad campaigns, the video is at once very disquieting and very seductive. Toporowicz is not implying that all these images are the same but demonstrates, on the contrary, that their differences are easily elided by both modern technology and the power of women's body parts to arouse desire. And of course, this sort of commodity-based fetishization works, indeed is highly effective. Even this seventy-one-year-old grandmother of two felt a few inappropriate quivers of the flesh during this film, evoked by the fleeting vision of Kate Moss's seductively backlit little rump fading into memory gems from *The Night Porter*.

Yet the sexual is not the only realm of provocation at stake in "Mirroring Evil." Alan Schechner's *It's the Real Thing—Self-Portrait at Buchenwald*, 1993, raises issues of self and history, victim and viewer, in a manipulated photograph that has aroused anger and antipathy. Schechner has put technology to work by digitally inserting an image of himself (holding a can of Diet Coke) into a photograph of Jewish victims lying emaciated in their Buchenwald bunks. The artist has placed himself into a photographic context

that is at once a cliché and every Jew's nightmare of the camps. Who hasn't asked him-/herself, "What if it were me?" In the imaginary incorporation of the self into the cast of victims, the red-and-white Coke can, represented in luminous color in an otherwise black-and-white image, shines out like a talisman separating now from then, me from them. Additional irony is implied by the fact that this is *Diet Coke*. On the site of starvation, of ultimate deprivation, now reigns the logo of weight loss: Less is more.

A very different postmodern project vis-à-vis Nazi practice is undertaken by Christine Borland, a Glasgow-based artist. In investigating the notorious Auschwitz doctor Joseph Mengele, whose "scientific experiments" were actually sadistic opportunities to torture and mutilate his Jewish victims, Borland at once exposes the venality and failure of science and demonstrates the impossibility of objective portraiture of her ostensible subject. Her installation, *L'Homme Double*, 1997, is a completely conceptual work, in which she gave six academically trained forensic sculptors blurred photos of Mengele along with verbal descriptions of the subject. Each of the resulting busts, which call to mind those so-called anthropological studies of racial types, based on measurements made with calipers and other pseudoscientific paraphernalia, is amazingly different from the others, erasing any possibility of objective representation. In style, however, they are related to the neoclassical Nazi art of, say, Arno Breker in their monumental realism and, disturbingly, are not a little reminiscent of Gerhard Richter's *Two Sculptures for a Room by Palermo*, 1971, which are cast in the same monumental mold. Who is Mengele? this installation asks. How do portraits, even ones that attempt to be "objective," construct rather than merely "mirror" their subjects? This multipartite work, each bust distinct from the next, demonstrates quite literally the impossibility of "mirroring evil." If Mengele is indeed evil incarnate, he nevertheless cannot be successfully mirrored.

But most chilling in this show is not monumentality but its opposite, the reduction of menacing objects and situations to the status of toys or miniatures. The relatively large number of works dealing with Nazi imagery in the form of toys or "playful" objects is a striking feature of the show. Ernst van Alphen, in his provocative catalogue essay, "Playing the Holocaust," suggests that play, like art, is "a mode of transforming an insufferable reality into something normal—something sufferable." He continues: "In the context of modern art, toys are often considered bizarre or of marginal interest, but in the context of Holocaust representation they are provocative, even scandalous." Among the most controversial items in the show is Zbigniew Libera's *LEGO Concentration Camp Set*, 1996. Of course there is something perverse about the idea of children using LEGO blocks to build a model concentration camp. Libera was originally going to do a hospital or a prison (shades of Foucault!), but he ended up with the concentration camp, which includes some of the carceral aspects of both these building types—and more. Yet no child will ever play with these sinister blocks, as the "set" itself only exists at a remove—as a series of photographed images on the surfaces of the boxes supposed to "contain" them. In other words, *LEGO Concentration Camp* is a product of freewheeling imagination, existing only in a kind of hypothetical reality. In the case of other works based on toylike miniaturization, such as Tom Sachs's *Prada Deathcamp*, 1998, or his *Giftgas Giftset*, 1998, featuring logos by such international style setters as Chanel, Hermès, and Tiffany, the distancing effected by trivialization manages to create shock without the threat of trauma. Sachs's pseudoproducts function as a way of managing past horror through the blackest of black humor, which is a characteristic of Jewish humor. Of course it isn't funny, it's outrageous, but then again, many Jewish jokes aren't funny—they are bitter and ironic commentaries on life and its

terrors. Sachs's *Manischewitz Luger*, 1996, a pistol and a swastika-bearing display case made out of Manischewitz matzoh boxes, presents death in familiar packaging, transforming the banality of evil with the sting of the outrageous. The horror of the Holocaust, such reasoning might go, has been so often iterated that it has sunk to the level of cliché. What can bring back the original shock? Reviving the corpse of feeling with a salutary slap in the face.

One of the most complex and multivalent—and courageous—works in the show, Roee Rosen's *Live and Die as Eva Braun*, 1995, is a mixed-media installation that also exists in the form of an artist's book and proposes itself as a virtual-reality scenario. Rosen's piece, pairing text with sixty black-and-white drawings on paper, retro in character, asks the viewer to perform the role of Hitler's mistress, Eva Braun, in a manner that is both detailedly everyday and completely mad, over the top, the imagery both childish and infinitely sinister, with Caspar David Friedrich panels suddenly transformed into pornographic silhouettes and boys and girls doing naughty things to each other in teddy-bear-embellished glades. In the artist's book on view with the installation, *Live and Die as Eva Braun: Hitler's Mistress, in the Berlin Bunker and Beyond, An Illustrated Proposal for a Virtual-Reality Scenario, Not to Be Realized* (Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1997)—and unfortunately placed so near the ground in the installation context that I had to kneel to read it—critic Roger Rothman denominates Rosen's piece a "manic memorial." "In rejecting the will-to-silence of the melancholic position," Rothman continues, "*Live and Die* adopts instead the gregarious, ironic, absurd, excessive, obscene position we understand as characteristic of mania." Rosen's work responds to the need for memorialization but does so "from the other side," something like the way in which Alice sees the world from the other side of the looking glass. The experience of *Live and Die*, both textual and visual, is unforgettable, like nothing else. We are whisked, internally as it were, from Hitler's appearance in the bunker to a close-up embrace complete with a hallucinatory account of the smell of Hitler's sweat and the tickle of his whiskers; his "bluish-white bespeckled skin," to the meticulously planned suicide and a graphically described visit to hell—all filtered through the wild imagination, replete with down-to-earth maniacal specificity, of the artist who invents this mad scenario.

My major criticism of the show is the self-exculpatory film at its conclusion. While the film includes some interesting information from the artists, it also contains some rather banal pronouncements and self-justifications. This is a show that needs no excuses, and it seems to me counterproductive to take the sting out of the work with "explanations" that often confound representation and history. "They can do what they want, but it will not change history," declares one antipathetic participant in the postexhibition film. But who says any of the artists in the show intended to "change history" with their work? Surely they are projecting new ways of reacting to history and, even more, to the popular reduction of that history to mass-media entertainment or "product."

"Mirroring Evil" is a powerful, thought-provoking, and exciting show. Although the final film is not uninteresting in the variety of the reactions represented, the exhibition does not need such labored and self-questioning justification: The works speak for themselves. Norman Kleeblatt should be proud of what he has done, both in his choice of theme, the objects on view, and the highly intelligent catalogue he has produced. Go and see for yourself.

"Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art" will be on view at the Jewish Museum, New York, through June 30.