World in a Jar: War and Trauma

Robert Hirsch

f295 Seminar on 21st Century Photography
B&H Photo
New York City

Welcome to the f295 Seminar on 21st Century Photography, hosted by B&H Photo, New York City. I want to thank Tom Persinger of f295 and B&H Photo for this opportunity for me to present an overview of my pictorial sculpture *World in Jar: War & Trauma*. My project utilizes the camera as a cultural tool to curate and re-imagine key components from historical and original images to explore the workings of our collective societal memory involving loss, popular culture, religion, tragedy, and the nature of evil. This venture evolved out of my response to the events of 9/11 and expanded to include the wider issues of ethnic violence, genocide, religious intolerance, and war. It is shaped by my investigation of historic visual resources, in which

I interpret images to explore life's BIG issues and to ponder what history and images can and cannot teach us. This is done through an amalgam of materials, processes, and tools to produce an open storytelling format, which encourages an array of interpretations, asking us to ponder: "Who we are."

The installation consists of over 1000 individual image jars and ten 40 x 60 inch prints. My image archive becomes an experimental laboratory for inquiries into the nature of vision and its relation to time. Each jar presents its picture twice (akin to a 19th century stereo card) on a black ground, which allows it to be seen from multiple viewpoints and formally gives each image an aura of integrity.

As there is no prescribed arrangement, each image jar serves as an interchangeable viewing block, permitting it to be a perpetual work in progress that recreates itself each time it is installed. This introduction of chance permits each photograph not only to present its own reinterpreted, split-second historical reference, but also informs the context and understanding of the surrounding images.

There are no captions or text references to anchor the images, which allows them to transcend their specific time-based circumstances, encouraging viewers to interact and expand meanings based on their own experiences. This engagement reminds us how photographs continue to seduce us into believing that they are objective records, when in fact all images are *not* what they initially appear to be and require thoughtful examination to discover the numerous differing tales they tell. This open-ended production, emulating how the puzzles and paradoxes of our own memories are constructed, can convey an endless and often contradictory tale about the human condition that exists outside of chronological time.

The project involved researching visual material that was selectively photographed to investigate the nature of the photographic image. This is done in-camera through optical means, such as focus, depth of field, and light rather than by post-camera production (Photoshop), which is kept to a minimum. It is a Socratic process that allows me to engage in a philosophical and visual dialogue with other times, places, and makers, springing from the idea that there is no correct first version of how an image should look. I am not redefining an image as much as I am inquiring into the metaphysical paradoxes and opposing social forces that swirl around how each image is understood. I use camera optics to record pictorial decisions that blend form

and content together by asking each picture a question while examining the origin of the image and how its significance has changed over time. In a conceptual sense, I am a photographic etymologist, examining the evolution of meaning.

Photography's transparent, even scientific, quotidian ability to accurately reproduce realism has been the measure of truth that has dominated the practice. This attitude treats other photographic approaches as capricious whims of emotion, fantasy, and sentimentality, thereby condemning them as untrustworthy. Celebrated photographers are the ones who stick closely to the facts of a situation. These

photographers cast themselves into this mold of alleged impartiality, supposedly removing the impulse to partake in a narrative. Balderdash! Scrutinizing a daguerreotype, Edgar Allen Poe erroneously proclaimed it "discloses only a more absolute truth" about the subject. Such flawed observations can fail to discover what is happening underneath the exterior. Straight photography is rooted within strict unchanging boundaries. What intrigues me is imagemaking predicated on horizons that


change as you move towards them. From this perspective *World in a Jar* explores the space between art and documentary practice where reality combines with imagination to create a new form of authenticity based on how meaning can be discovered during the creation process.

My intent is to make images that evoke an interior state of consciousness and grapple with a subject beyond its external physical structure. This approach can be likened to the Japanese concept of *shashin*, which says something is only true when it integrates the outer appearance with the inner makeup of a subject. American writer Herman Melville referred to the purely surface view of reality
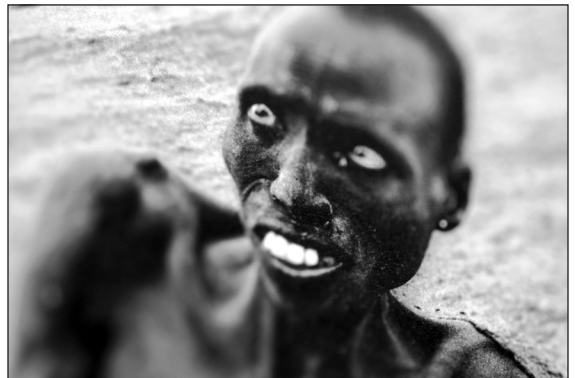
as "a pasteboard mask." Such a multi-sheeted façade conceals the intuitive world of the *"thing in itself"* – a deep structure of cultural, political, and psychological models that inform the realities "behind" or beyond what we can observe with our five physical senses – an idea dating back to Plato's concept of delving into the complex, many-sided, interior panorama of the world. From this standpoint, the story-telling experience of *World in a Jar* is similar to walking at sundown and observing the day does not have an abrupt border with the night. Rather it is a complex and often indistinct progression filled with twists and turns, a penumbra of counterpoints, subtlety, and false appearances – an infinite matrix of compound tales. This reconstructive methodology pushes against the authority the mainline venues and publishers place on the supposed legitimacy of the superficial while appearing sightless to those pushing the medium to communicate the multifaceted nature of being.

World in a Jar calls viewers to get up-close and personal with the images. This intimate psychological dialogue between the viewer and the objects can generate *compassionate empathy*, which provides us with an initial pathway for cognitive and emotional understanding of a subject. The value of a photograph need not be limited to its depiction of subjects and feelings akin to those in our life. An engaging image, when not overexposed in the media, contains within it the capacity to sensitize and stimulate our latent exploratory senses. Such photographs can open a secret window that asserts ideas and perceptions that we recognize as our own, but could not have given concrete form to without first having seen those images. These visualizations that combine the historical with the personal not only bear witness, but also can help us make sense out of a chaotic world. Such stories also can raise our consciousness about our own apathy, thus inspiring constructive action.

The foundational theme of *World in a Jar* is my perceptions of the post-Holocaust world I was born into. In 1961, during the fog of the threat of nuclear annihilation, I watched the trial of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann, who managed the logistics of mass deportation to ghettos and extermination camps, in Jerusalem for crimes against humanity on a black-

and-white TV with my mother's father, whose family had vanished up the death camp's chimneys. I was stunned. My family, like many others, never talked about it. Maybe it was a closely guarded sadness and/or shame for quietly going to the slaughterhouse. I knew my father had left college to enlist in the Army Air Corp *before* Pearl Harbor and spent 5 years in military service during World War II, but I had no perception of the enormity of the atrocities the Nazis had systematically perpetrated. I could not comprehend methodically murdering people, including one million children, based on no more than faith in a fictitious, racist viewpoint. This exploitative philosophy of vain disconnection from others has produced disastrous consequences for all living creatures. I wondered how anyone,

including my beloved religious grandfather, could still believe in a God that would permit abominations such as slavery and near extermination of native populations to continuously happen. This skeptical awakening made me aware that most people would rather believe in an invisible, all controlling and volatile God rather than face the unpredictability of human beings who thoughtlessly repeat the same learned behaviors over and over again. As Russian writer Anton Chekhov observed, "Man will become better when you show him what he is like," emphasizing the essential connection between honest commentary and a flourishing free society.

Seeing the black-and-white photographs made after the Allies liberated the concen-

tration camps, naked corpses of women and men with numbers tattooed on their arms, degradingly piled like so much kindling, made me feel as if my head had been split open and filled with monstrous fiends who pursued total annihilation. No images, before or since, have so profoundly affected me. They left an indelible streak of anxiety upon my psyche. Clearly, everything I had previously been taught to believe about the world was wrong. Suddenly, I found myself bound up with ancient hateful beliefs, a rapidly spreading mental plague that resulted in the horrific deaths of millions of people whose crime was being different from the group in power. Their anguish, sorrow, and terror, like undeveloped film, were latently tattooed inside me.

These appalling, grainy, high-contrast, often poorly reproduced, black-and-white photographic reproductions of the Shoah subconsciously influenced my future direction to work in a similar photographic manner, which seemed to me to be more authentic, permanent, and timeless than the glossy patina of color photographs. In Hebrew school I learned that in the Bible (The Tanach) black appears as a negative lifeless void until God counterbalances it with a positive – light. Yet the celestial projections of New York's Hayden Planetarium absolutely astounded me with the blackness of the eternal and infinite.

It was challenging to try and resolve this paradox while growing up in a world in which everything was converted into black-and-white – books, magazines, movies, photographs, prints, and television. Through observation I realized there were numerous degrees of blackness that affected its meaning. Regrettably the English language defines black as the absence of or complete absorption of light, rarely acknowledging the distinction between a dull, flat black (swart in German) and the intense, luminous black (bleak) that lights the

darkness. Gradually, I learned to value and emulate the essential beauty of black and the accompanying monochromatic grayscale for its graphic positive/negative interplay and capacity to transform the entertaining diversion of color into the critical nucleus of the matter. Eventually I came to see black's *nothingness* as a lush and boundless source for *everything*, especially good and evil.

This monotone outlook guided me to peel color away and make subjective black-and-white photographs based on historic images surrounding the Holocaust starting in my mid-twenties. Nevertheless, it took me 30 years of aesthetic and intellectual wrestling with the enormity of these ghastly crimes before I could at least momentarily think I was not trivializing the subject, as it is so often done in the media, and could use it as a platform to examine the destructive side of human nature. Having taught and extensively written about color photography, it has only been since completing this project that I have begun to make provocative photographs in color.

As a member of "the hinge-generation," Jews living between the experience of the Holocaust and its memory, I believe that as the last of the Holocaust survivors die it is essential for artists to serve as the next generation of witnesses and find innovative ways of preserving this collective remembrance. Memory is mutable and often we forget what we want to remember. Recollection is only as real as the last time it is remembered and the failure to recharge these memories is akin to a belated Nazi victory because what they did will quickly and deliberately be concealed and forgotten. Therefore I think about the village (shetl) where my grandmother's family (the Auerbachs) lived in Lumja Poland, which

was physically obliterated to erase any societal memory of the Jewish life that once informed that culture. Yet even now Holocaust deniers, such as the President of Iran (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad), cynically attempt to rewrite history to demonize Israel and deny the Shoah. Such Islamofascists want to exterminate Jewish society, the core of all Abrahamic monotheistic beliefs, and demolish the humanist values of the rule of law, tolerance, and respect for core rights, such as free expression and protection of minorities and women, that are the hallmark of enlightened civilizations.

That said, I reject the notion of myself as a victim of victims, damaged by calamities committed on someone else in another time. Solutions based on an identity are destined to fail because they value what we are rather than what we do. Besides, I don't believe that actual trauma can be transmitted across generations, but I do think a wounded spirit can be passed on. That said, not much can be accomplished at this point by assigning blame. The paramount problem is whether it is still possible to believe in other human beings. I cannot ignore the cruelty in humankind, but it is my wish for each of us to take responsi-

bility for our actions, find our own place in this life, and carry out small affirmative acts to help change the world.

This dovetails into what I call the *Possibility Scale*, which states there are no artistic impossibilities, only different levels of possibility. It grants permission to suspend traditional rationalism and its doctrine of formulated, step-by-step techniques and grants you the freedom to say: "If I can visualize it, there could be a way to make it happen." This imaginative thinking allows one to visit regions once deemed out of bounds or inhabited by demons in order to push against our limits of understanding. Consider Leonardo da Vinci, Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells,
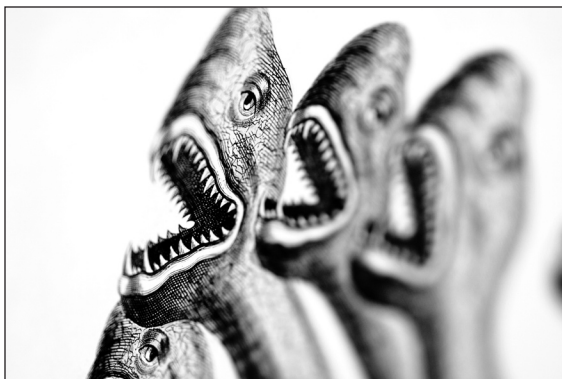
Arthur C. Clarke, Buckminster Fuller, and now William Gibson, the father of cyberpunk science fiction, all whose fantastic works, created outside the margins of their times, anticipated future inventions and societal transformations.

Time is an essential characteristic that informs the making of photographs. Time calls us all and measures change. If there is no change,
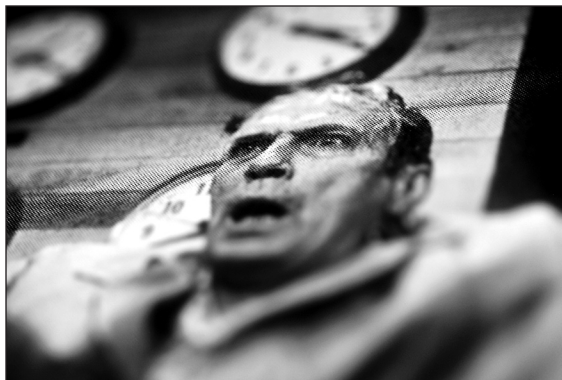
there can be no constructive action. If there are no productive deeds, life stagnates. And we need to act to foster creation, for innovation propels life and provides hope. When people have nothing to look forward to, despair takes hold and wickedness gains a foothold. The real struggle is between hope and evil, for it is at this juncture in time that our imaginative pathways can offer up potential for pioneering improved realities. Can artists and intellectuals play a role in this process? I think it might be a possibility.

Robert Hirsch