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HAARETZ

Painting the Nazi gas chambers with defiant realism
Art that deals with the Holocaust isn't supposed to be abstract, says Mexican-Jewish artist Yishai Jusidman, whose exhibition opens this week in Manhattan.

By [Neta Alexander](#) | Jan.22, 2013 | 5:24 AM



Yishai Jusidman: 'Something about the aesthetics of that monument [the 'Children's Memorial' at Yad Vashem] infuriates me.'

NEW YORK – Among the best-known works in Belgian painter Luc Tuymans' first retrospective in the United States was "Gaskamer" ("Gas Chamber"), from 1986, an oil painting of an empty room whose architecture is based on photographs of the gas chambers in Nazi death camps.

One of the visitors to this exhibition, which opened in February 2010 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was the Mexican-Jewish artist Yishai

Jusidman, who paid particular attention to the explanatory wall text next to the painting.

“In order to avoid controversy, the curators claimed that Tuymans’ painting, which has a rough and even vague appearance, was painted quickly and with an intentional casualness – an artistic choice that expresses the idea that the Holocaust cannot be represented, certainly not in a mimetic, realistic manner,” recalls Jusidman, 49. “In other words, they used the familiar argument that any work of art that seeks to confront that historical catastrophe must recognize that it cannot do so using the usual tools.”

A new exhibition of Jusidman’s works is due to open tomorrow in the gallery of Americas Society on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. It is called “Prussian Blue: Memory after Representation – Yishai Jusidman.” In an interview in advance of the opening, Jusidman again tackled the way Tuymans’ approach is understood. “The curatorial approach to his works, which I doubt faithfully represents Tuymans himself, echoes the closing proposition of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ‘Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus’: ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.’ That is,” Jusidman continued, “the Holocaust belongs to the category of what cannot be represented, and therefore it can only be addressed, if at all, in metaphoric or abstract terms. That is of course not the first time I have come across this approach, but I recall that this particular text really infuriated me, and I felt that I had to respond to it.”

The response of Jusidman, who was born and raised in Mexico City’s Jewish community and has lived for the past few decades with his Israeli wife and their two daughters, was to begin work on the series of paintings that is being shown to the public for the first time this week. The exhibition is scheduled to run until the end of March. Curated by Gabriela Rangel, it consists of 14 paintings of varied size, all but two of which are based on photographs of the gas chambers in the Auschwitz, Dachau and Majdanek concentration camps.

Painting, photograph, both?

In contrast to the aesthetic technique of Tuymans, which emphasizes the artificiality of the painting, Jusidman insists on creating near-exact replications of the original pictures, to the point where the viewer questions whether the

resulting artwork is a painting, a photograph or perhaps some combination of both. Setting aside the charged subject matter, Jusidman's technique on its own could evoke controversy: He uses the pigment known as Prussian Blue, a color with complex meanings and implications in the context of the Holocaust. For one, as Jusidman writes on his website: "The Zyklon B product that was used as a killing agent from 1940 through 1945 often produced blue stains on the walls of the gas chambers by way of a chemical reaction with the brick and mortar. Such stains are still very much apparent in the structures at Majdanek. The cyanide-iron compound of these stains is chemically identical to the painter's pigment known as Prussian Blue." He studied this chemical compound to arrive at the formul

a for the blue pigment he used in the painting series.

In addition, despite the fact that the paintings show spaces without any human figures, Jusidman uses colors known as "flesh tone" or "blush" and the like to give his blue pictures an additional shade, one that hints at the Jews who were murdered in the gas chambers. The result is disturbing: Paintings of various sizes of doors, pipes and "ventilation holes" that turned the gas chambers into an assembly line of mass murder, in a monochromatic blue-gray that gives the works a unique and hypnotic aesthetic.

Despite his direct use of historical materials, Jusidman reiterates that this is not an exhibition about the Holocaust. "My paintings do not deal with the Holocaust, but rather with the possibility of its representation," Jusidman says in an interview with Haaretz Gallery. "That is why I chose to place in the entrance to the exhibition a painting that shows not the gas chambers but rather the impressive building of the Haus Der Kunst, a Munich art gallery that was built as part of the Nazi propaganda machine in 1933. It was important to me for the viewers to understand that they are entering a space that deals with examining the relationship between art, trauma and memory. It was based on the assumption that precisely the current generation, which was born after the war and which has no direct connection with the death camps, must attempt to represent the Holocaust – even if this attempt is doomed to failure."

Dooming victim to silence

In this sense Jusidman is trying to apply the arguments made by the literary scholar Naomi Mandel in her 2007 book, "Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America," against the hypothesis that the Holocaust in general, and the Auschwitz death camp in particular, defies representation. According to Mandel, the claim that the depth of the horror of the Holocaust cannot be expressed in words or art often, and ironically, is used as a rhetorical device that creates a dangerous hierarchy of suffering (she argues that some atrocities can be represented and others cannot) while simultaneously perpetuating the assumption that in any event the victim cannot cause others to understand his suffering, and is doomed to be mute forever.

Jusidman's exhibition, like Mandel's book, is part of a complex and fierce debate that has been playing out for some decades now in both the academic and art worlds. (In the former it includes, for example, the long-running dispute between the French theoretician Georges Didi-Huberman and the director Claude Lanzmann over the use of Holocaust-era photographs and documents). In this context, over the past few decades an impressive corpus of works has been created, in media including photography, painting, literature and film, that grapple with the memory of the Holocaust in a world in which, as Theodor Adorno argued, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."

Among the controversial works exhibited around the world in the past several years are Maurizio Cattelan's "Him," a sculpture depicting Adolf Hitler kneeling in prayer; Marc Adelman's "Stelen (Columns)," which was recently exhibited at the Jewish Museum in New York, consisting of approximately 150 photographs taken by gay men of themselves against the background of Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and which were included as part of their profiles in a gay German Internet dating site; and Israeli artist Nir Hod's "Mother," an exhibition featuring variations on a photograph of a woman that was taken in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943.

And still, despite the fact that it sometimes seems as if nearly every artist alive creates a work about the memory of the Holocaust at some stage in their life, Jusidman stresses that painters actually tend to avoid dealing with the catastrophe of the Jewish people, and that those paintings that are about the

Holocaust are generally abstract, not realistic. “Much like Levi and Lanzmann, I desire to eliminate (or at least minimize) metaphor as my works’ signifying conduit,” Jusidman writes on his Web page.

When asked whether the empty spaces that he paints are a metaphor for the entire Nazi death industry, he rejects the idea, saying: “They don’t represent the historic event, but rather they seek to express our feelings in the face of the memory of that event. If you think, for example, about Yad Vashem,” referring to the Holocaust memorial and museum in Jerusalem, “there is a work there by Buky Schwartz that is called ‘The Pillar of Heroism.’ Why is it called ‘The Pillar of Heroism’ and not ‘The Pillar of Dictatorship,’ or ‘The Pillar of Destruction’? The answer is that Schwartz decided that the pillar is a metaphor for heroism,” Jusidman says.

“To me it seems random and even capricious, and that’s one of the problems I have with metaphorical readings: Anything can symbolize anything. It’s impossible to be totally rid of these readings, but one can try to come as close as possible to non-metaphorical expression, and that’s what I tried to do through the use of materials such as Prussian Blue, ‘flesh tones’ and the acid the Nazis used in the process of delivering the gas. In that sense, the creative process uses the same materials that were used for killing, and in so doing I attempt to bring up for discussion the questions about representation and [the subjectivity] of painting, compared to photography.”

As Jusidman himself notes, more than a few artists, including Israelis such as Roe Rosen, Yael Bartana and Boaz Arad, have tried to unpack the way the Holocaust has been memorialized in the past few decades. But nevertheless there is something surprising about a Mexican artist’s choosing to deal with the gas chambers and to mount an exhibition in a New York gallery associated with art from Latin America. “My parents were born in Mexico, but their parents were Jews who fled from Europe because of persecution. I have an aunt who lives in Israel, and I went to a Jewish school in Mexico City, so I always had a connection to the religion and to Hebrew. As a teenager I joined Hashomer Hatza’ir, and after high school I lived on Kibbutz Ga’ash for half a year. Since then I visit Israel

fairly often. In any event, I don't think an artist has to have a direct connection to the Holocaust in order to deal with the subject," he says.

'Perpetuity of painting'

Jusidman, who also tries in his exhibition to examine painting as a medium, and not only in the context of the Holocaust, has in the course of his long career shown an exhibition devoted to images of clowns, and in a 2007 solo exhibition in New York called "The Economist Shuffle," he explored the link between photography and painting through a series of paintings based on images from "The World This Week" section of the weekly magazine The Economist.

"The basic idea," he explains, "was to take figures from the news, who pop into our lives and then disappear just as quickly, and to give them the perpetuity of painting."

This idea comes up again in the new exhibition, when Jusidman translates photographs into paintings while meticulously recreating the tiniest details. He sees this technique as a response to the kitsch and emotional manipulation of art about the Holocaust. "In 1993 I visited Israel," he says, "and I went to Yad Vashem a few years after they dedicated the 'Children's Memorial,' in memory of the children who perished in the Holocaust, and which uses candles, mirrors and a maze of reflections to induce a strong emotional reaction. Something about the aesthetics of that monument infuriates me. I thought it had a sentimental and manipulative atmosphere, and I don't think manipulation should be used to get people to identify with what happened in the Holocaust. In that sense I think that art cannot compete with history. I want to cause viewers to stop and think, but I don't think that has to involve a particular kind of lighting or sad music, like in Spielberg's 'Schindler's List' – that's a Disneyland approach. That is the aesthetics of an amusement park."

When asked whether he is worried about reactions to the exhibition, Jusidman says: "I don't think so. I am curious about them. I'll be surprised if someone is hurt by my work. There are very many provocative works on the Holocaust, and I don't think that my works fall into that category. I don't mean to hurt anyone, that is not part of my strategy. The only people who will ever be hurt are those

who claim that one must not attempt to represent the Holocaust in any art medium, and I find it difficult to agree with them.”