

World in a Jar: War and Trauma



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San Jose

much we don't know. I see no reason for evil; it just is. Immanuel Kant refers to this as "Radical Evil," part of our human condition that each of us has a responsibility to overcome. What is truly evil is allowing intimidation, humiliation, oppression, and loss, pain, suffering, and violence to continue when it could have been, but was not, prevented.

Conclusions

Quantum physics has shown that our world operates on chance and random action, thereby dispatching religions and their notions of predestination, heaven and hell, as well as political ideologies, such as Marxism, which champion "Materialist Historical Inevitability." Mainstream religions have never accepted or understood these ideas, for scientific analysis threatens their power and control that is built on maintaining ignorance. Therefore I embrace a twenty-first century union of scientific reasoning and artistic expression. This sets aside monotheistic and utopian systems based on exclusiveness because they make tolerance of difference impossible to achieve and produce artificial distinctions, which are powder kegs of conflict that result in war and trauma. It is precisely the notion of righteous elitism that grants a mantle of moral superiority to commit atrocious immoral acts.

People have asked if working with such subjects and images is depressing, but just as darkness is another shade of light, this state of mind can be a compelling motivator when used to commune your own soul. Darkness can bring a silent calm that restores our mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. Often compelling art is the result of angst and tears. Regardless, it is better to confront this aspect of human nature than to ignore it, while not forgetting to acknowledge



the past for the purpose of focusing on the present. For much of my contentment comes from being fully engaged in thinking, making, and writing about the world. I reflect on what the ancient Israelites called *hochma* - the science of the heart - the capacity to see, to feel and then to act as if the future depended on you.

The "*Possibility Scale*," states that 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 technique and grants you the freedom to say: "If I can imagine 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. Think of Leonardo da Vinci, Jules Vern, and H. G. Wells, whose fantastic works, created outside the margins of their times, anticipated future inventions and societal transformations. Time measures change. If there is no time, there is no change. If there is no change, there is no action. If there is no action, there is no creation. And we need to foster creation, for creation propels life.

Robert Hirsch

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This is because evil threatens human reason by challenging our hope that the world makes sense. Consider the California man who parked his SUV on the railroad tracks in an unsuccessful suicide attempt, resulting in the deaths of a dozen people on the train. What about former President Reagan's Secretary of the Interior James Watts who welcomed environmental destruction as a sign of the coming apocalypse and rapture? Are these acts of evil? Evil begins on an individual level. People commit evil deeds that are within their reach, making the most of their opportunities, and doing what they think they can get away with.

Human Evil

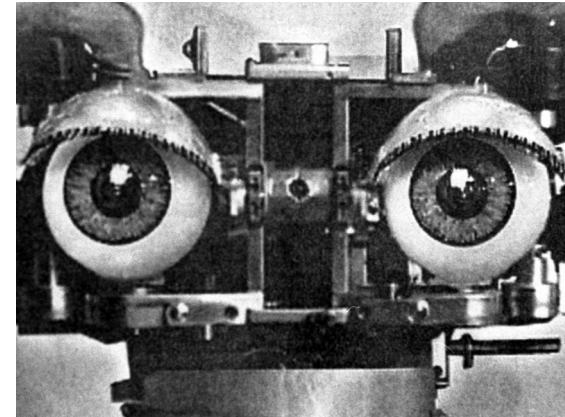
In the past people believed in Natural Evil, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, which were brought on by God to punish the wicked. Today we view evil in terms of human cruelty with Auschwitz as its extreme manifestation. Whether expressed in theological or secular terms, evil poses a problem about our world's intelligibility. It makes no difference if it is in Bosnia, Cambodia, the Middle East, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, or here at home, evil confronts philosophy with fundamental questions: What makes ordinary clerks and teachers carry out despicable acts? Can there be meaning in a world where innocents constantly suffer? Can

belief in divine power or human progress survive a cataloging of evil? Is evil profound or banal? Are the people who oversee these policies dim-witted dunces or sinister geniuses? In 1949 Theodore Adorno lamented: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," summing up the dilemma artists faced not only after World War II, but also Vietnam, and now 9/11 and the War on Terror.

Moral Evil

Traditional philosophers, such as Hegel, sought to protect God from a world that contained evil. Inescapably, such efforts – combined with those of literary figures like Alexander Pope, Voltaire, and de Sade – eroded the belief in God's benevolence, power, and significance, until Nietzsche finally claimed God was dead. They also generated the distinction between natural and moral evil that we now take for granted. In terms of Western philosophy's response to the Holocaust as an ultimate moral evil, there are two basic and contradictory responses. One, that can be traced to Rousseau, insists that moral principles demand we make evil comprehensible. The other, having its origins with Voltaire, insists that morality demands that we do not. On the other hand, in the Himalayan tradition, many Yogis believe there is no such thing as Evil, seeing it as a form of ignorance and false belief. I have strived to adopt this later philosophy, but thus far have been unsuccessful.

So where does this leave me? Godly men cannot explain how an omni-present, omni-benevolent, and omni-competent deity permits evil and suffering except with appeals of blind faith. I embrace the alternative to blind belief, which is not unbelief, but a different kind of conviction – one that tries to acknowledge uncertainty. In our complex world, wisdom is recognizing how



Welcome,

I want to thank Jo Farb Hernandez, Theta Belcher, and Jonathan Brilliant of the Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery and Brian Taylor of the Art Department for this opportunity to present and talk about *World in Jar: War & Trauma* at San Jose State University. As my installation is here for you to view, I am going to tell you about some of the key concepts, themes, and driving forces that contributed to the making of this work in hopes of expanding your interpretation of the project. Accompanying my talk is a PowerPoint presentation of selected individual project images, views of the work in my studio, and construction shots of the original installation (images are available at: www.lightresearch.net).

World in a Jar: War & Trauma has allowed me to personalize impossibly large themes by dislocating the specifics in favor of the general. It is built on my interest in historical research and what history and images can and cannot teach us. It has given me the pretext to retrieve and re-examine history, collect books and pictures that intrigue me, and to rework and reinterpret these images.

Plagiarist or Transformer

By making representations of representations I take on issues of originality and reproduction. Originality is the ability to think and act independently and in turn to express ideas in a fashion different from previously recognized views of a similar subject. Fresh ideas come from re-contextualizing the past. Our society's intellectual heritage is founded on a culture of transformative art – one of borrowing, sharing, re-borrowing, and amending – the full range of ways new art builds on and emerges from the old. In music one can hear how Scott Joplin borrows from W.C. Handy, George Gershwin borrows from Joplin, Igor Stravinsky and Miles Davis from Gershwin, Aaron Copland from Stravinsky and Davis, and now movie composer John Williams from Copland. Consider one of our cultural icons: *Steamboat Willie*, the 1928 Walt Disney cartoon that introduced Mickey Mouse. *Steamboat Willie* borrowed from, and played off of, Buster Keaton's 1928 silent film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, which itself borrowed from a 1910 song, *Steamboat Bill*. Disney snatched creativity from the culture around him, mixed that with his own talent, and then imprinted that mixture into the character of our culture. Select an art form and you will find this 1-2-3 combination of snatch, mix, and imprint.

In this project most of the images were made from other photographs, as well as from drawings, paintings, and prints. The recycling process allows me to engage in an historical dialogue with other times, places, and makers. In this role I see myself as a **transformer**, actively distilling and/or subverting a subject into what I consider to be its core visual values. By photographic means I subtract all the unnecessary information to arrive at my visual statement. Through the actions of looking, selecting, re-photographing,

including re-photographing my own pictures, and editing, I transform the images and in turn they transform me.



My intention is to *evoke* an inner state of consciousness and grapple with a subject beyond its physical external structure. This approach can be likened to the Japanese concept of *shashin*, which says that something is only true when it integrates the outer appearance with the inner makeup of a subject. Herman Melville referred to the surface view of reality as “a pasteboard mask.” This mask hides an intuitive world of the “*thing in itself*,” an idea that delves into the interior panorama of the world. Life is not a straightforward, smooth continuum with pointed delineations. Walking at sundown one observes the day does not have an abrupt border with the night. Rather it is a complex and often indistinct progression, a penumbra filled with counterpoints, subtlety, and false appearances. Although Photoshop has become a verb, people still want to believe their own eyes, even when they are aware they are only seeing pixels.

During the mid-twentieth century, Henri Cartier-Bresson’s concept of “The Decisive Moment” became enshrined as the gold standard of 35mm photographic truth. Now we can have countless dynamic decisive digital moments.

Just because something is in flux doesn’t mean it isn’t true. What we refer to as The Truth is where myth commingles with fact to form a reality, which is why allegory continues to be a favorite means of expression for moral, political, and spiritual messages.

Illness

When I was five I got sick with Rheumatic Fever and was deathly ill for months. I recall lying in bed at night crying because I thought I was going to die. I realized my parents couldn’t help me and I was alone in the world. It made me acutely aware of my mortality at a young age and I lost my child-like sense of indestructibility.

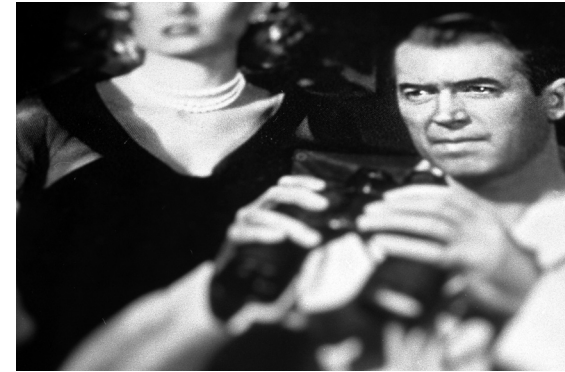
Religious Training

While recovering from Rheumatic Fever I spent a number of winters with my mother’s parents in Miami Beach. My grandfather was religious and I went to Hebrew school three times a week including Saturdays. But I didn’t feel like one of God’s children. I challenged the teachings and the Old Testament stories and was placed in a special class for disrupted boys who were ruled over by the lumbering and pockmarked Mr. Stein, who we referred to as Frankenstein. Eventually I did make my Bar Mitzvah, officially becoming a man in the eyes of Judaism, which ironically empowered me to drop out of the Temple, which I did. I do not believe in an afterlife and I don’t think that morality or the meaning of life depends on religion. What matters are our actions in the one life we are given to live.

Standardization: Coloring Within the Lines

I was never a good student until I got to college. In grade school I was much more interested in drawing elaborate land, sea, and air battle scenes than in learning how to read. My first experience

contains within it the capacity to sensitize and stimulate our latent exploratory senses. Such photographs assert ideas and perceptions that we recognize as our own, but could not have given concrete form to without first having seen those images.



That said, I don’t think that images alone can bring about social change. I am reminded of Dr. Martin Luther King, JR’s, observation that: “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Images have a capacity to make us aware and to draw us in, but we need to understand the context and history from which they came.

The Double Image & The Uncanny

Photography is seeing double. A photograph becomes a stand-in for the original. The photographic process reveals our cultural quest for copies, from the simulacra of Las Vegas to art forgeries. In the catalog essay for this project (available at: www.lightresearch.net), Gary Nickard discusses Otto Rank’s *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1925), in which the uncanny – that is the seemingly intense sensation of the supernatural, strange, unfamiliar, weird, and unsettling – arises from the doubling of reality in the form of ghosts, reflections, shadows, and twins, and how this

erie notion can include photography. In one sense, a photograph is a shadow or reflection that is formed by a lens and captured onto light-sensitive material. If a photograph can be identified as a category of Rank’s “double,” then it can also serve as an example of the “uncanny,” an “energetic denial of the power of death.” In *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes concluded that the relationship of the photograph to the double, its confusion with reality and time, constitute an uncanny concern with death. Thus it is precisely the direct and real connection between the subject and its image – the certainty of an existence within the past – that death and photography become inextricably bound.

Death and American Culture

In popular American movies Arnold Schwarzenegger machine-guns hundreds of bad guys and audiences cheer. Quentin Tarantino’s bloodletting two-part saga of revenge, *Kill Bill* (2003 & 2004), treats death as a comic book experience. But on a personal level we as a society are reluctant to discuss or clearly look at death. It is necessary to consciously make the decision about when to look at things that are upsetting and when to look away because maturity comes from the threat of mortality. I held my dog Koko as the vet “put her to sleep,” and heard her cry out as unconsciousness overtook her as her life force vanished. I leaned into my father’s deathbed and photographed him moments after he died. We are motivated by death. Death makes us realize that we only have a short time to prove that our existence was meaningful. Death is the ultimate teacher.

Evil

Through out the ages philosophers have wrestled to define the nature of Evil with little success.



context of the images surrounding it. As there is no set arrangement, each time the jars are installed new meanings and dialogues emerge.

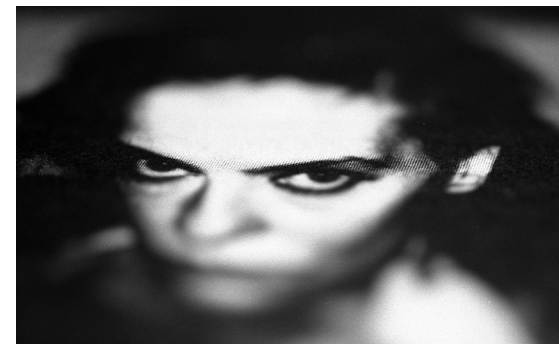
Although we are psychologically primed to find meaning in tragedy, happy endings are often paradoxical and we are simultaneously inclined to doubt, mistrust, reject, and even fear them. Prescribed endings define and disappoint, gratify, and frustrate. They also deny one the pleasure of open-ended experience. *World in a Jar* conveys an endless tale, which plays on the idea that art can stand outside of the confines of chronological story time.

The Power of Images

Images are not always used as a force for good. Terrorists recognize this power and purposely create and distribute abominable images that make what is cruel in their hearts even crueler in order to intimidate and impose their will

upon others. Reportedly, the current top selling bootleg DVD in Baghdad is of a man being beheaded with a knife. In our own country the defining image of the Iraq invasion has shifted from the media moment of the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein to the sadistic amateur snapshots made in Abu Ghraib Prison that were originally sent as emails to the aftermath of recent chlorine bombs posted on online by insurgents. The result of such hideous pictures has been a simultaneous protective indifference and an inculcation of compassion.

A significant ingredient that makes such photographs remarkable is the *empathy* they generate, for it is empathy that provides us with an opening – an initial pathway for cognitive and emotional understanding of a subject. More importantly the value of a photograph is not limited to its depiction of subjects and feelings akin to those in our life. An engaging image



with a standard examination, the Iowa Test, was a disaster because I quickly and randomly filled in the boxes with my # 2 pencil so I could get back to drawing my *Teddy the Bear* cartoon strip for our mimeographed class newspaper. When the results came back my parents were informed I would have to repeat the third grade and was sent to what is now called a Special Education class and subjected to even more tests. None of the experts seemed to take note of my contrarian nature or diagnose my real disability, which is a minor form of dyslexia that causes me to invert numbers and letters. In the days before phonics, I eventually learned to read and spell, with the help of my mother, by memorizing every word I encountered. Other such experiences with the Cooter Job Placement Test, the PSAT, and SAT taught me that factory-style school is about standardization and does not value spirit nor measure creative intelligence or imaginative problem solving abilities.

Recently Bates College in Maine released 20-year study of their student performance and found the graduation rate of students who got into Bates without submitting their SAT scores was slightly higher than those who did. This indicates standardized tests create artificial performance standards that are better at *limiting* opportunity than at predicting one's ability to

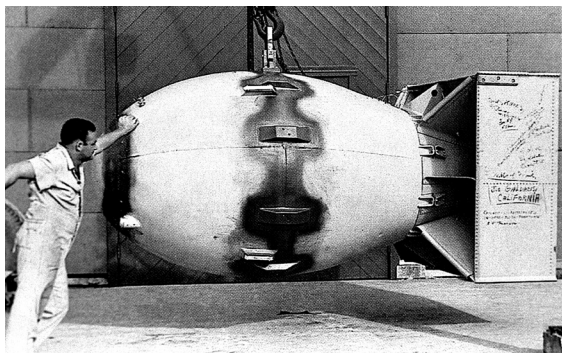
think in imaginative ways, which affects many artists. Unfortunately the vast majority of institutions continue to use such test scores as the bar for admissions consideration.

The American Civil War

The past is heavy; it has weight. My late father was a native Floridian and like many Southerners he had a fascination with the American Civil War. Although it may not have been his original intent, Abraham Lincoln political savvy ended a society whose power and wealth was built on the brutality and violence of slavery. When I was a child we took summer road trips from New York through the South where I encountered the remnants of Jim Crow racism, such as not being allowed to use certain water fountains or restrooms, which left me continually baffled. We visited major Civil War battlefields and rummaged through endless antique and pawnshops as my father searched for firearms and memorabilia. Before gun laws became strict my father, who was a Lifetime member of the National Rifle Association (NRA), had more than 50 nineteenth century firearms on display in our house, including a blunderbuss. Our chief father/son bonding activity was target shooting. In our TV room my father had a reprint of the 1911 *Photographic History of the Civil War* edited by Francis Miller. I spent time looking at the thousands of photographs in this 5-volume collection, which I now have and used in making this project.

The Atomic Bomb

Going to elementary school during the Atomic Age of the Cold War I was required to take part in the "Duck and Cover" drill. A siren would sound through the school's PA system. Without explanation our teachers led us in front of our hallway lockers where we were instructed to



silently get down on our knees and put our hands over our heads as we heard the bomb doors being closed and locked behind us. I knew the US had dropped two atomic bombs on Japan as I watched *Godzilla* (1954), a monster created by atomic testing who ravished Japan. *Life* magazine printed photos of people building and stocking fallout shelters as well as arming themselves to fend off unwanted visitors. Then the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) took the country to the brink of nuclear war. Living through such everyday threats of nuclear terror made me an existentialist before I even knew what one was.

Post Holocaust World

In 1961, during the fog of the nuclear threat, I watched the Adolf Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem on TV with my mother's father whose family had vanished up the death camp's chimneys. I was stunned. My family had never talked about it. 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 had no perception of the enormity of the atrocities that the Nazis had systematically perpetrated. It was impossible to comprehend murdering an entire group of people based on the accident of birth and I wondered how anyone, including my religious grandfather,

could believe in a God that allowed such things to happen. To top it off I saw photographs from the concentration camps, which was like being punched in the stomach. My head was split open. No images, before or since, have so powerfully affected me. They left an indelible streak of anxiety upon my psyche. Clearly everything I had been lead to believe about the world was wrong, as I suddenly found myself bound up with ancient hateful beliefs that resulted in the horrific deaths of millions of people. Their angst was tattooed inside me.

As a member of what is referred to as "the hinge-generation," Jews living between the experience of the Holocaust and its memory, I believe that as Holocaust survivors die it is essential for artists to find innovative ways of remembering what happened, and the failure to do so is akin to a belated Nazi victory. Even now Holocaust deniers, such as the President of Iran, cynically take actions to erase the Holocaust in an effort to discredit the legitimacy of the Jewish people and the state of Israel.

In my mid-twenties I began making images about with the Holocaust, but it took me over 25 years to effectively deal with the subject. I reject the notion of myself as a victim of victims, damaged by calamities committed on someone else. I don't believe that actual trauma can be transmitted across generations, but I do think a wounded spirit can be passed on.

Civil Rights Movement

My rude awakening to the Holocaust sensitized me to the 1960s Civil Rights struggle. My parents refused to let their thirteen-year old boy get on a bus to attend the 1963 March on Washington, but I did *small acts*, such as not eating lunch and giving that money to "Snick" (The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee). We

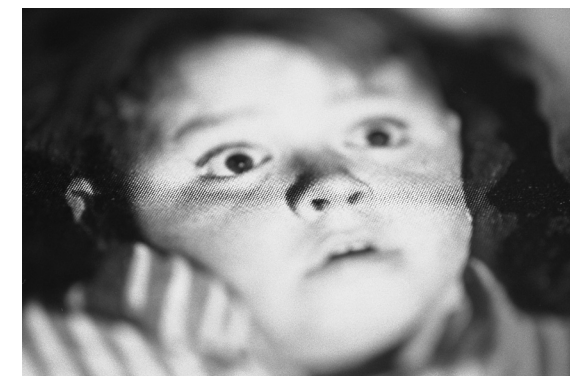


humans seem to feel hopelessly overwhelmed and powerless when confronted with more than two people suffering, but the images of white officials turning dogs and fire hoses on peaceful demonstrators reverberated within me. I cut these photographs out of magazines and montaged them on my bedroom wall. I couldn't believe this was happening in America, especially when the bodies of three voter registration workers - James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were found buried in an earthen dam 6 weeks after they went missing during the 1964 Freedom Summer in Mississippi. Although it has taken 40 years, seeing the 79-year old former Ku Klux Klan leader and part-time preacher convicted for one of the most heinous crimes of the civil rights era was belated good news, for the only way to stop bullies is to confront them. The battleground of good and evil is within us and so is the ability to do something about it. Using recent history as a guide, when fiends attack one must fight or be mowed down. The act of facing and unmasking cruelty is itself a victory over evil.

The Vietnam War

I became aware of the Vietnam War in junior high school from looking at *Life* and *Newsweek* every week. Initially I felt patriotic. I read about the

Domino Theory and thought it sounded prudent to stop the Communists from taking over Southeast Asia. However, after seeing photographs in 1963 of the Buddhist monk who set himself on fire to protest anti-Buddhist policies of the US backed government my imagination failed me. In the spring of 1965 I went to my first anti-war rally in New York's Central Park. By the time I graduated high school I was regularly attending and photographing these protests and in 1967 was involved in anti-war activities of Vietnam Summer. In 1971 I was drafted and eventually declared, "mentally unfit" for military service. Ironically, three years later I was accepted into the Peace Corp, but was denied final admission because of my so-called military record.



Montage: An Open Narrative

Traditional narratives provide meaning and alleviate us from the distress of uncertainty. *World in a Jar* is a free-form montage that rethinks the customary narrative format by presenting an archive of what I choose to remember, without attaching a fixed ending. Each jar is a building block for a new structure. It is a flexible configuration that allows this to be a perpetual work in progress, recreating itself each time it is installed. It permits each photograph to not only present its own split-second historical reference, but also informs the