Artists' Statements

Rita Briansky

Witness, 1995
40" x 30"
Approaching Storm, 1995
36" x 40"
Reproduced with permission of the artist

I was born in Poland and immigrated with my family to Canada before the war. I was four years old.

The Kaddish series (the series of 18 paintings from which "Witness" and "Approaching Storm" have been taken) is a result of a personal odyssey — a return to my roots in Poland. Although I was aware that many of my relatives had perished in the Holocaust, I knew little else, and I felt the time had come to make my journey into my past. My destinations were Auschwitz-Birkenau, Crakow, Warsaw, Grajewo (my place of birth) and Stockholm.

When I arrived in Crakow by train the driver I hired picked me up and took me directly to Auschwitz-Birkenau. As we approached the town of Auschwitz, he pointed to an electric transformer, and said, "This is the transformer that produced the electricity for the camps." On the other side of the road was a field of poppies. I was struck by the irony of this. I asked him what they did with the ashes from Birkenau. And he said that at first they put the ashes in the river, but they clogged the rivers, so they put them in the soil. It didn't sink in immediately, but as I took the train back from Crakow to Warsaw, and then as I took a car from Warsaw to my town of Grajewo, through the train windows and the car windows, I saw the beautiful fields. Six million Jews, several million Poles, hundreds of thousands of gypsies and political prisoners: so many million people fertilizing the soil....

In Grajewo, my town, there stood the silent witnesses of the massive tragic events. An apartment building now stands on a hill beneath which lies the destroyed Jewish cemetery. A lone tree, sole survivor of the original cemetery, stands as a sentinel on guard. A lovely green meadow grows nearby, on the site where the Grajewo ghetto stood before the inhabitants were murdered and the evidence burned to the ground.

After seeing so much, I went into a state of mourning. When I got home it began to really sink in, and I started painting.

But first, I went to Sweden from Poland and I met my cousin who was the only survivor. He showed me the family album. He was born in Bransk and ended up in the Bransk ghetto during the war. But he escaped the ghetto and joined the Jewish partisans in the forest nearby. He spent a year and a half living with them in the forest. After the liberation, he went back to Bransk and no one was there. It has been documented that all of the Jews of that town were shipped to Treblinka, which is in the neighbourhood, where they were all gassed and cremated. I assume that he got these family photographs from relatives around the world who sent him copies. I was familiar with many of the photos he showed me, but I didn't know who many of the people were. So he gave me their names and their fates. I photographed his album. When I came home, I began painting what I had felt.

I painted "Approaching Storm" using one of my cousin's photographs of my paternal aunt and her husband and one of her children. Without thinking about it intellectually or deliberately planning it, it became right for me to make them part of the beautiful landscape, and it was only later that I realized what I had done: they were part of the landscape, their ashes were. Literally.

There were all kinds of strange occurrences while I was painting the Kaddish series. And the one associated with "Witness" is almost mystical: I can't explain it. Before I went to Poland, before I even knew I was going to Poland, I covered a painting of flowers I had done with white gesso, but I left a little piece of red flower. Then I painted this girl looking back, with swirls of yellow behind her. And I didn't understand what it meant. I put it away. When I came back from Poland, I was looking through my own photographs, and noticed one of the street behind the house where I was born in Grajewo. It was a street of typical Polish houses. There was a space in the lower left-hand corner of the painting that had no meaning. I didn't know what to put there. Suddenly, I looked at these houses and I thought they would fit in there. So, I put them in and then I realized that I was painting a fire — the yellow swirls — and so I just pulled them down and connected them to the houses and intensified the yellow. That little piece of red that I had left became a spark of flame. The girl was running but looking back. It is almost as if, in my subconscious, I was already looking back, even though I didn't even know I was going to go back to Grajewo. I can't explain it. But it happened. Maybe the girl is me, maybe anybody, maybe everybody — running and looking back. Maybe she is me who went to Poland as a witness. Spiritually, she is certainly me. I went to Poland and didn't realize how intense, how meaningful the visit would become. I just went there because I suddenly knew I had to go.

All of these paintings in the Kaddish series, are, I think, the best work I have ever done. They came from so deep inside of me.

Geoff Butler

Don't lose all your marbles, 1983
Alkyd, 86.3 cm. Diameter
Private collection, Wolfville, NS
Reproduced with permission of the artist

Just as warfare is more than a big fight out on a battlefield, so can "war art" not restrict itself to a traditional rendering of military prowess and might. In this painting of a game of marbles, the armaments to back up each player's position are carefully and thoughtfully arranged. One expects this of the player who is dressed in military garb (indeed, he would probably be fired for incompetence if he were not so well-prepared).

The other players are non-military, indicating that "the sinews of war" stretch well behind the lines into all parts of society.

Playing marbles is a childhood game. If a dispute should arise, parents and educators generally tell children that problems can be resolved without violence. It is with some irony that this advice also comes from the mouths of political leaders even as they authorize military action, i.e., the use of violent force, to deal with problems of their own.

Sometimes, this action is taken because it is perceived as an act of last resort and is therefore a rational act.

The phrase, "losing one's marbles," refers to a loss of one's mental capacity. Could warfare be an irrational act, because people's intelligence and imagination are not fully employed to deal with the many types of situations that make war "necessary" ?

Homing in, 1985
alkyd, 91.5 x 121.9 cm.
Reproduced with permission of the artist

We who live in this part of the world are blessed not to have wars fought in our own streets and neighbourhoods. In this painting, there is a missile homing in on a home. I have contrasted this marvel of adult technology with crude, innocent, childlike drawings and paintings on the wall beneath the window. Perhaps to drive the effect of this home in my own mind, I sought the assistance of my own children for this part of the painting.

Nowadays, weapons are said to be "smart." They are so smart, in fact, that recent wars have been described as "virtual wars." There are few, if any, military casualties on the side that has the "smart" weapons, for the weapons are programmed from afar to deliver their lethal charge.

Needless to say, though (or perhaps it is needed to be said), these weapons are going through the windows of somebody's home. Really.

Frances Ferdinands

Of the Wrong Stripe, 1985
Acrylic on canvas with black-and-white Xerox
155 x 94.5 cm
Reproduced with permission of the artist

In 1985 I exhibited a series of eight paintings on the theme of war at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa. The exhibition, curated by its director, Joan Murray, was entitled "Old Wars by Young Artists." In each of the paintings I turned my attention to a general or specific aspect of war that I felt compelled to explore visually. *Of the Wrong Stripe* is a specific reference to the internment of the Japanese by the governments of Canada and the USA during World War II. The painting is meant as a commentary on the innocence, vulnerability, and defenselessness of children and animals. The faded Xeroxes of the soldiers standing watch outside the window, the bloodied exterior dirt floor inside the room, and the halo-effect around the child all serve as indicators of a world turned inside out. The child's striped clothing and skin of the zebra are further reminders of the horror of the concentration camp.

Amy Ainbinder

Transformed into a Flaming Torch, 1991-2
35.5 x 35.5 cm
Mixed media drawing/painting on steel of a Jewish boy in a ghetto
Collection of artist
Reproduced with permission of artist

The title of this work is from a line in Eli Wiesel's book, *Legends of Our Time*. I made it in 1991-92 as part of a series of 18 portraits (14 have been done to date) that are painted on steel square panels. I use steel because it is a hard and cold medium, representing the brutality of the nazi regime, its tortures. It is a difficult and unyielding base to work upon, but fits what I am trying to communicate. I use steel and other metals for their metaphorical potential: they are long-lasting and seemingly indestructible materials and the nazis thought theirs would be a regime of at least 1000 years. I also use induced rust in many works (not in this particular portrait), first, to show that steel is not as enduring as thought, and, second, to pay homage to the artists who risked their lives to record what they saw around them in the concentration camps and ghettos: many used rust to draw and paint with.

I was trying in these early portraits to show people of different ages, gender, and backgrounds whom the nazis targeted for destruction. I got the idea to make a series of square portraits when I saw a photo of a nazi officer's

office with two rows of square portraits (photos) of fellow nazis going around the walls. I wanted to "replace" those portraits with portraits of people they targeted for destruction, the real heroines and heroes of war, not the nazis' "chosen" heroes.

This particular portrait is from a black-and-white photo of a Polish (Jewish) boy in one of the ghettos. In my works I try to capture the "feel" of a person or situation rather than to document an exact or photographic image. Accordingly, I choose colors that reflect how I feel about the images I examine, feelings that have been shaped by the investigative readings that are an integral part of my artistic process. I know viewers will bring their experiences and interpretations to what they see; I can only try to communicate something of how I feel through the choices I make in the image-making process.

In this portrait of the boy, I chose acid-green colors for the left part of the sky to depict the scary mood of the times, the destruction, the upcoming fate closing in on this child as well as on his world. There is little left of the countryside he remembers, except in his imagination. I indicate some of the land outside of the ghetto with just a purple shape of a hill, much like the shape of the boy's posture, which is being pulled down by hunger, weakness and cruel treatment. His world is becoming claustrophobic, which his eyes and personage should reveal. I want the viewer to look at this person, to remember that there were millions of individuals who were hurt and murdered and whose humanity was their strength, their resistance to cruelty. I know it is a luxury to be able to create this work as I am not in the situations I am depicting, but I feel a responsibility to be a good listener and then try to express what I "hear" visually. I feel it is the obligation of those of us who have not been hurt in war and other circumstances, to at least listen to what others have gone through. We cannot change their pasts, but we owe others a deep listening. My hope is that if we can hear one another, we can try to do what is right in this world.

Mother and Child, 1990-92
Mixed media on handmade cotton/linen paper (paper made by artist)
Framed: 94 x 76.5 cm
Collection of artist
Reproduced with permission of artist

The drawing, "Mother and Child" is on some of the first handmade paper I made, which was formed by overlapping many small sheets to create a bigger sheet. This was not a perfect piece of flat and unwrinkled paper, but I chose to use this one as it seemed to fit the mood of the drawing, which later developed into larger drawings and paintings with these same figures and others in them. Some of the later work was drawn and painted on intentionally wrinkled, unstretched canvas, much like this paper.

The paper looks fragile, as it is wrinkled and uneven in thickness, but it is strong. It is the foundation of the drawing. I felt this strength in the mother, who is in her undergarments, about to be shot with her child and other women in her family. The mother is just lightly indicated, but is giving her little girl as much strength and comfort as she can as they both face imminent death. The little girl is drawn a bit more solidly than the mother as I try to capture the daughter's situation of being barefoot and scantily clothed, too. It is winter and these two are part of a group of women who will soon be thrown in a mass grave. Fear and cold, as well as the closeness yet distance between these two figures, is what I am trying to indicate. What must it be like when one is stripped, about to be killed, yet photographed beforehand? The title, "Mother and Child," conjures up images of loving security which the actual drawing denies: it shows the antithesis of comfort and protection, due to no fault of the mother, but to the fault of the world that stands by.

Both works are part of a series I have titled, "Final Solutions: Are We So Different?" The subject matter is genocide, war, human rights and abuses and is meant to examine the specificities of historical events, and the similarities or differences between these experiences. The series is composed of drawings, paintings, prints and sculptures.

About Deborah Schnitzer, Poet

Deborah Schnitzer teaches literature at the University of Winnipeg and in joint programs with various educational sites in the community. Her first book of poetry, *Black Beyond Blue*, was published by Staccato Press in 1997. The work in this special edition of *Canadian Children's Literature* comes from a collection of Holocaust poems whose working title is *Fires Burning, Draw Nearer*; poems from *Fires* have appeared in *Fireweed, Tart Magazine*, and *Canadian Literature*. Other work includes a study of verbal and visual art called *The Pictorial in Modernist Literature* (UMI Press, 1988) and, with Neil Besner and Alden Turner, *Uncommon Wealth: an anthology of poetry in English* (Oxford UP,1997).

Currently, she is involved in writing for a project that explores transformative theologies from visual and verbal points of view, editing a collection with Deborah Keahey about women's experiences with/in academic life called *Madwoman in the Academy: Songs from the Ivory Tower*, staging the production of *More than the love of women* by Michael Kurek, an interdisciplinary work for which she has written a libretto that examines the intimacy between David and Jonathan, and, with Carolynn Smallwood, pursuing the (almost) disappearance of British Modernist poet Anna Wickham.

Personal comment

I celebrate the work that has achieved this edition of *Canadian Children's Literature* and am proud to have been part of the contribution it makes toward the understanding and actualization of justice, memory and care.

Témoignages d'artistes

Rita Briansky

Witness, 1995
40" x 30"
Approaching Storm, 1995
36" x 40"
Oeuvres reproduites avec l'accord de l'artiste

Se souvenant d'avoir été une petite Polonaise de quatre ans immigrée au Canada un peu avant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, l'artiste raconte la genèse de sa série de dix-huit tableaux intitulée Kaddish. Consciente très tôt que la majeure partie de sa parenté avait péri durant l'Holocauste, elle a entrepris un pèlerinage aux sources: un retour en Pologne dans les lieux qui avaient marqué l'histoire de sa famille. Elle a d'abord visité le camp d'Auschwitz-Birkenau, où elle a appris que les cendres des gens exterminés servaient d'engrais dans les champs de Pologne; ensuite, elle s'est rendue à son village natal, Grajewo, où seul un arbre sur un monticule rappelle l'emplacement de l'ancien cimetière juif détruit par les nazis. Elle a fait enfin un séjour à Stockholm afin de voir son cousin, unique survivant de la famille restée en Pologne en 1939. Évadé du ghetto et devenu résistant, ce dernier a reconstruit, après la guerre, la mémoire familiale en collectionnant toutes les photographies qu'il a pu recueillir auprès des parents émigrés. De retour au Canada, Rita Briansky s'est mise à peindre de nouveau en s'inspirant de certains documents familiaux empruntés à son cousin. Quelques-unes de ces toiles font ressortir l'aspect presque mythique de son expérience picturale, comme si les souvenirs de son voyage en avaient évoqué d'autres, plus anciens, inconscients et antérieurs au séjour en Pologne, qu'elles aurait ravivés en peignant ses toiles. Rita Briansky considère que sa série Kaddish est l'oeuvre la plus importante de sa carrière de peintre.

Geoff Butler

Don't lose all your marbles, 1983
Peinture à l'huile (alkyde)
Diamètre: 86,3 cm
Collection privée, Wolfville, N.-É.
Oeuvres reproduites avec l'accord de l'artiste

Les sujets militaires peuvent-ils suggérer autre chose que des faits d'armes? Pour le peintre Geoff Butler, sa toile intitulée ***Don't lose all your marbles*** ("Ne perdez pas toutes vos billes") explore la dimension métaphorique de l'expression "perdre ses billes". Les joueurs, dans leurs costumes militaires et civils, signifient l'étendue des effets de la guerre et l'arbitraire de la violence comme solution politique: en choisissant la guerre, on risque de perdre ses billes comme on peut perdre la raison.

Homing in, 1985
Peinture à l'huile (alkyde)
91,5 x 121,9 cm
Oeuvres reproduites avec l'accord de l'artiste

La toile intitulée *Homing in* ("Téléguidé") fait ressortir l'antithèse entre la violence de la guerre montrée par le missile, censément intelligent, pointé vers une maison et la presque innocence de la vie de tous les jours, suggérée par les dessins d'enfants au bas du mur de la maison. Les armes ne sont pas intelligentes, ni les guerres virtuelles: les missiles sont destinés à des victimes réelles et tuent aveuglément.

Frances Ferdinands

Of the Wrong Stripe, 1985
Acrylique sur toile et reprographie en blanc et noir
155 X 94,5 cm
Oeuvres reproduites avec l'accord de l'artiste

Frances Ferdinands explique l'un des huit tableaux qu'elle avait envoyés à l'exposition "Guerres anciennes; jeunes peintres" de la Galerie McLaughlin d'Oshawa en 1985. La toile intitulée *Of the Wrong Stripe* ("Du mauvais côté") rappelle le traumatisme vécu par la minorité japonaise lors de la Seconde Guerre mondiale: l'intensité du sujet provient du contraste entre le caractère anonyme des militaires et le traitement pictural très particularisé accordé à l'enfant victime.

Amy Ainbinder

Transformed into a Flaming Torch, 1991-2
35,5 X 35,5 cm
Dessin au fusain et matériaux composites/peinture sur acier d'un garçon juif dans un ghetto
Oeuvres reproduites avec l'accord de l'artiste

Amy Ainbinder nous présente une série inachevée de 14 tableaux, inspirée de l'oeuvre d'Élie Wiesel. Le choix du matériau s'avère particulièrement significatif: par exemple, le métal symbolise la brutalité du régime nazi. Très dur à manier, il communique cependant le message que l'artiste veut apporter. Si l'acier renvoie d'abord aux mille ans du rêve national-socialiste, le traitement que lui impose l'artiste peut suggérer ses faiblesses: le métal rouillé était en effet le moyen qu'utilisaient les prisonniers des camps et des ghettos pour dessiner et peindre. Dans ses portraits de personnes de tout âge, A. Ainsbinder cherche à inverser l'ordre héroïque que les nazis imposaient dans leurs documents photographiques. Elle s'attache en particulier à expliciter le portrait d'un enfant juif polonais conçu à partir d'une photo faite dans un des ghettos. Le choix des couleurs et le traitement du sujet doivent amener le spectateur à comprendre de manière intime l'expérience du passé.

Mother and Child, 1990-92
Dessin au fusain et matériaux composites sur papier artisanal de lin et de coton fait à la main par l'artiste
Encadré: 94 X 76,5 cm
Collection de l'artiste
Oeuvres reproduites avec l'accord de l'artiste

Le dessin au fusain intitulé "Une mère et son enfant" est le premier fait sur du papier que l'artiste a fabriqué elle-même. L'aspect chiffonné de ce papier est intentionnel et renforce l'impression de fragilité et d'impuissance de la mère et de son enfant condamnés à mourir dans des circonstances sordides. Le titre, par sa connotation de douceur sécurisante, renforce également l'écart entre l'image protective de la mère et la cruauté du monde. Cette oeuvre s'inscrit dans une série de dessins, de peintures, de lithographies et de sculptures intitulée "Solutions finales: sommes-nous si différents?" qui explore les ressemblances et les différences entre des événements mettant en scène la guerre, les génocides et les violations des droits de la personne.

Deborah Schnitzer

Professeur de littérature à l'Université de Winnipeg, Deborah Schnitzer participe à plusieurs programmes éducatifs de la région winnipéguienne. Elle a publié en 1997 un premier recueil de poésie intitulé *Black Beyond Blue*. Les poèmes figurant dans ce numéro sont tirés d'un recueil en gestation, qui est consacré à la Shoah et dont le titre sera *Fires Burning, Draw Nearer*; ces poèmes ont paru précédemment dans diverses revues littéraires. Elle a fait paraître une étude sur les aspects verbal et pictural de la poésie et collaboré à une anthologie de la poésie anglaise. Elle travaille présentement à divers projets, dont un ouvrage sur l'expérience des femmes en milieu universitaire.