

The Holocaust Art of Gershon Iskowitz, Isaac Applebaum and Yehouda Chaki:
A Critical Approach in Relation to the Philosophical Writings of Emmanuel Levinas,
Hannah Arendt and Julia Kristeva

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ABSTRACT

The Holocaust Art of Gershon Iskowitz, Isaac Applebaum and Yehouda Chaki:
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Hannah Arendt and Julia Kristeva

Suzanne Beth Rackover

This study is a philosophical exploration of the Holocaust representations of three Canadian Jewish artists. The focus is on selected works by Gershon Iskowitz (1921-1988), Isaac Applebaum (b. 1946) and Yehouda Chaki (b. 1938). The objective is to explore these works in relation to the writings of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Julia Kristeva (b. 1941) respectively. Some of the issues to be addressed are: how Iskowitz's representations correspond to Levinas' ethics; how Applebaum's installation *Man Makes Himself* (1985) exemplifies Arendt's ideas on totalitarianism and the "banality of evil"; and how Chaki's images in the exhibition *Mi Makir: The Search for the Missing* (1999) are representations of the abject as defined by Kristeva.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
1 – Introduction.....	1
2 – Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of ethics and the Holocaust imagery of Gershon Iskowitz	6
3 – Isaac Applebaum’ <i>Man Makes Himself</i> (1985) in relation to Hannah Arendt’s concepts of totalitarianism and the “banality of evil”.....	27
4 - The Abject as defined by Julia Kristeva in Yehouda Chaki’s <i>Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing</i> (1999).....	47
5 – Conclusion.....	61
FIGURES.....	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	91

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1.** Gershon Iskowitz. “Action” (1941). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Pen, black ink, watercolour and gouache on wove paper. 39 x 52 cm.
- Figure 2.** Gershon Iskowitz. “Condemned” (1945). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Pen, black ink and watercolour on wove paper. 71 x 54 cm.
- Figure 3.** Gershon Iskowitz. “Buchenwald” (1944-45). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Pen, black ink, watercolour and gouache on illustration board. 42 x 55 cm.
- Figure 4.** Gershon Iskowitz. “Selection Auschwitz” (1947). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Pen, black ink, watercolour and gouache on illustration board. 41 x 50 cm.
- Figure 5.** Gershon Iskowitz. “Torah” (1951). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gouache and black ink on illustration board. 43 x 53 cm.
- Figure 6.** Isaac Applebaum. “Page from Jim Keegstra Notebook”, *Man Makes Himself* (1985). Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Xerox.
- Figure 7.** Isaac Applebaum. “Keegstra Poster”, *Man Makes Himself* (1985). Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Serigraph. 45 x 60 cm.
- Figure 8.** Isaac Applebaum. “Detail from Installation”, *Man Makes Himself* (1985). Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa. Silver photograph. 40 x 50 cm.
- Figure 9.** Isaac Applebaum. “Detail from the installation”, *Man Makes Himself* (1985). Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa. Silver photograph. 40 x 50 cm.
- Figure 10.** Isaac Applebaum. “Detail from the installation”, *Man Makes Himself* (1985). Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa. Silver photographs. 40 x 50 cm each.
- Figure 11.** Isaac Applebaum. “Page from Holocaust Scrapbook”, *Man Makes Himself* (1985). Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa.
- Figure 12.** Isaac Applebaum. “Detail from Holocaust Scrapbook”, *Man Makes Himself* (1985). Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa.
- Figure 13.** Isaac Applebaum. “Detail from Holocaust Scrapbook”, *Man Makes Himself* (1985). Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa.

- Figure 14.** Alfredo Jaar. “Four views of the installation”, *Real Pictures* (1994). Multimedia installation.
- Figure 15.** Jack Burman. “Detail from the installation”, “*Remain Silent*”: *Auschwitz-Birkenau* (1994-1997). Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa. Photograph.
- Figure 16.** Jack Burman. “Detail from the installation”, “*Remain Silent*”: *Auschwitz-Birkenau* (1994-1997). Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa. Photograph.
- Figure 17.** “Detail from the installation”, *Facing Death: Portraits from Cambodia Killing Fields* (1998). Photographic Resource Center at Boston University, in cooperation with the Photo Archive Group, El Segundo, CA.
- Figure 18.** Yehouda Chaki. “Detail from the installation”, *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing* (1999). Ink, latex and acrylic on paper. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. 55 x 75 cm each.
- Figure 19.** Yehouda Chaki. “Detail from the installation”, *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing* (1999). Ink, latex and acrylic on paper. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. 55 x 75 cm.
- Figure 20.** Yehouda Chaki. “Detail from the installation”, *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing* (1999). Ink, latex and acrylic on paper. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. 55 x 75 cm.
- Figure 21.** Simon Glass. “Detail from Merciful and Gracious”, (1995). From the exhibition *Y----H!* (1997). Silver print with gouache. 49 x 39 cm.
- Figure 22.** Simon Glass. “Detail from Merciful and Gracious”, (1995). From the exhibition *Y----H!* (1997). Silver print with gouache. 49 x 39 cm.
- Figure 23.** Simon Glass. “Golem I”, (1995). From the exhibition *Y----H!* (1997). Blue toned silver print with gouache. 58 x 38 cm.
- Figure 24.** Simon Glass. “Golem II”, (1995). From the exhibition *Y----H!* (1997). Blue toned silver print with gouache. 58 x 38 cm.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Holocaust of the Jewish people under the reign of Hitler seems to us the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, where evil appears in its diabolical horror.¹

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995)

Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, and six years later Germany invaded Poland. The invasion marked the beginning of World War II, during which six million Jews, one million of whom were children, were systematically murdered along with millions of other people. Having one-third of its population obliterated between 1939 and 1945 left an indelible mark on the Jews of the world. In the years since the end of the war and the liberation of the concentration camps, countless texts, films and works of art have been produced that address this dark period in the history of the Jewish people.

This thesis is concerned with representations of the Holocaust by three Canadian Jewish artists: Gershon Iskowitz (1921-1988), Yehouda Chaki (b. 1938) and Isaac Applebaum (b. 1946). Selected works from these artists will be discussed in conjunction with the writings of three contemporary philosophers, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), Julia Kristeva (b. 1941) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) respectively. The main theoretical objective here is to demonstrate how the writings of some key philosophers can provide a point of entry for analyzing works of art dealing with the Holocaust. Specifically, this thesis is interested in showing intersections between art, philosophy and

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London: Routledge, 1988), 162.

biography in the works of Iskowitz, Applebaum and Chaki (each of whom was personally touched by the Holocaust) and how their experiences inform their art.

Chapter 2 of this thesis deals with the images Gershon Iskowitz produced between 1939 and 1943 while confined to the Jewish ghetto in his home town of Kielce, Poland, during his internment in Auschwitz and Buchenwald between 1943 and 1945, and those produced directly following the war while living in Munich and Toronto. Iskowitz was eighteen at the time of the invasion, old enough to have vivid memories of the events that took place. As such, his works can be considered as testimony to the atrocities of the Holocaust. What he experienced and witnessed left indelible memories, and he continued to paint his recollections of the Kielce ghetto and the concentration camps until 1954.

In conjunction with five works produced by Iskowitz during this period, Chapter 2 explores the philosophical writings of Emmanuel Levinas. A component of Levinas' ethical philosophy tells us that all individuals are "usurpers," which is to say that the Self's existence is assured by forcefully taking the position of others. Levinas calls this "assassination," but goes on to explain that "the advent of conscience" alerts the "I" to the fact that with usurpation comes horror.² In documenting the death of his entire community in the Kielce ghetto and the suffering and death he witnessed in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Iskowitz grapples with the concept of ethical consciousness and responsibility that is explored by Levinas.

Chapter 3 focuses on Isaac Applebaum's photographic installation *Man Makes Himself*, which was exhibited for the first time in 1985 at the Mercer Union Gallery in Toronto, Ontario. Applebaum was born in 1946 in Germany in the Bergen-Belsen

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 100.

displaced persons camp. With his parents he immigrated to Canada in 1948. In *Man Makes Himself* Applebaum's response to the persistence of racism in Canada is influenced by his identity as a child of Holocaust survivors. *Man Makes Himself* was created following his return to Germany in 1985 to view the remains of the concentration camps. A previous inspiration was the preliminary hearing, in Alberta, in 1984, of anti-Semitic high school teacher Jim Keegstra.

In this chapter individual elements of *Man Makes Himself* are addressed in relation to some of the ideas addressed in two books by Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Two of these ideas are the genesis of totalitarian regimes and the notion that thoughtlessness is a component of evil. Also addressed in this chapter is an exhibition on the subject of genocide entitled *The Space of Silence*, mounted in 2001 at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. *Man Makes Himself*, one of the exhibition's three installations, is discussed as it pertains to the two other installations: "*Remain Silent*": *Auschwitz-Birkenau* by Canadian artist Jack Burman, and *Real Pictures* by Chilean artist and architect Alfredo Jaar.

The fourth chapter considers the exhibition *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing* (1999) by Greek-born Canadian artist Yehouda Chaki. Chaki was a year old when World War II broke out and he spent the six years of the war in hiding with his parents and brother. In *Mi Makir*, which deals with his experiences and recollections of the Holocaust as well as his responses to it, Chaki produced a body of work that not only evokes the experience of survivors, but also remembers those who did not survive.

In an effort to better understand Chaki's work, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection will be explored. Kristeva explains: "The abjection of the Nazi crime reaches its apex when death ... interferes with ... what is supposed to save me from death."³ Kristeva's conception of the abject is addressed in relation to the images of memory and death in Chaki's *Mi Makir*. The discussion also includes, by way of comparison, a brief look at the exhibition *Y----H!* (1997) by Canadian Jewish artist Simon Glass.

Two recent and highly influential publications on the subject of art and the Holocaust are Ernst van Alphen's, *Caught By History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (1997) and James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (2000). Van Alphen discusses how literature and art are used to better teach and understand the Holocaust, while Young grapples with the question of how artists of this generation represent the Holocaust, an event they have only experienced through the memories of others. The approach of this thesis differs in that it provides an in-depth discussion of Holocaust art from the philosophical perspectives of Levinas, Arendt and Kristeva. At the same time it presents a rigorous exploration of three Canadian Jewish artists from a social, historical and philosophical perspective.

While there are an abundance of Canadian Jewish artists working on the subject of the Holocaust, little critical attention has been paid to contemporary representations of the Holocaust in Canadian art,⁴ the exceptions being the recent exhibitions *Afterimage* (2000) and *Memories and Testimonies* (2002). Furthermore, although solo exhibitions by

³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

⁴ While there is an abundance of Canadian Jewish artists who have worked on the subject of the Holocaust, beyond those discussed in this thesis, such as Rita Briansky, Herzl Kashetsky, Peter Krausz, Nomi Kaplan and Ghitta Caiserman-Roth.

Iskowitz, Applebaum and Chaki have received critical coverage, there has been little attempt to rigorously explore of their work from a social, historical and philosophical perspective. In choosing to focus on one philosopher for each artist, the intention here is not to suggest a formula-like, one-to-one relationship of artist to philosopher, but to develop a systematic method of analysis. Other valid connections between artist and philosopher will be explored in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER TWO

Emmanuel Levinas' concept of ethics and the Holocaust
imagery of Gershon Iskowitz

The intention of this chapter is to discuss several works of art by Polish-born Canadian Jewish artist Gershon Iskowitz in reference to the ethical philosophy of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. The discussion will focus on Iskowitz's works on the subject of the Holocaust, which were produced between 1941 and 1954 and will demonstrate how parallels can be drawn between these works and some of Levinas' writings, in particular, the Levinasian notion of the ethical encounter and responsibility for the other.

When one examines these works done by Iskowitz, their subject matter is indisputable; they are clearly a product of the Holocaust. In contrast, it is not clear that the Holocaust was the source for Levinas' writings. However, Levinas' second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, which was published in 1974, is dedicated "to the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism."⁵ By virtue of this statement it is reasonable to conclude that the development of Levinas' ethical philosophy is closely related to the events of the Holocaust. Although Iskowitz would not have been familiar with the writings of Levinas when he produced the works discussed in this chapter, it is fair to say that Levinas and Iskowitz shared a parallel reality and therefore a similar world-view.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher, 1981).

It is significant that Levinas' philosophy has its roots in the Jewish theology. In fact, the basic precepts of the ethics espoused by Levinas can be related to the infamous articulation of the Golden Rule by the third century rabbinic scholar Hillel: "Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you."⁶ This precept would have been familiar to both Iskowitz and Levinas.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in 1906 in Lithuania. In 1923 he left his homeland to escape the pogroms and to pursue his education. He first moved to France where he studied for five years at Strasbourg, and then in 1928 he went to Freiburg, Germany to take classes with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). At the outbreak of World War II Levinas was a naturalized French citizen living in France with his wife and daughter. Several years earlier he had been certified as an army translator, and in 1939 he was drafted into the French army, where he assumed that role. Ultimately, Levinas spent the majority of the war as a prisoner of war in a forced labour camp, having been captured early on in the conflict. In an interview Levinas explains what life was like for him as a Jewish prisoner of war:

I was taken prisoner in Rennes with the Tenth Army on its retreat. After several months' internment in France, I was transported to Germany. Here I was directly restrained to a special status: registered as a Jew but spared by my uniform the destiny of those who were deported, grouped together with other Jews in a special commando ... It was not a period of torture ... we would be looked at by the villagers as *Juden*. The villagers certainly did not injure us or do us any harm, but

⁶ Cited in Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.), 218.

their expressions were clear. We were the condemned and contaminated carriers of germs.⁷

His wife and daughter were fortunate enough to find safe haven in a monastery for the duration of the war, whereas the rest of his family, who had remained in Lithuania, failed to escape the Nazi terror.⁸

In the early stages of his academic career, having attended Husserl's lectures for a year as well as having read Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Levinas was an exponent of phenomenology. However, it soon became apparent that he was not completely satisfied with this mode of thought. Although phenomenological practice includes a discussion of ethics, it is not its main concern. According to Adriaan Peperzak, in his essay "Levinas' Method," for Levinas: "The only way to express the impact made by the other in positive terms is to use ethical language."⁹ Peperzak goes on to explain that: "'intentionality' is the fundamental and central notion of Husserlian phenomenology [while] Levinas' thought moves beyond the principle of intentionality towards something prior, something he calls 'pre-original' and transcendent."¹⁰

When Levinas first put forward his concept of ethics, the prevailing thought was that before ethics can be addressed, one must first address the nature of being. As the basis for his philosophy, Levinas takes a different position. He attempts to separate ethics and ontology, despite the fact that the philosophical tradition within which he is working believes that "ethical enquiry [is] dependant on ontological insights."¹¹ In the preface of

⁷ Jill Robbins, ed. "Interview with Francois Poirié: Intellectual and Personal Biography, Part 1," *Is It Righteous to Be?* trans. Jill Robbins and Marcus Coelen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 40-41. This book is a compilation of several interviews given by Levinas over the course of his lifetime.

⁸ Peter Steinfels, "Emmanuel Levinas, 90, French Ethical Philosopher," *New York Times*, 27 December 1995, B-6.

⁹ Adriaan Peperzak, "Levinas' Method," *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹¹ Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1996), 35.

Totality and Infinity (1961) his first major work, we first encounter his use of the word *éthique*. He states: “ethics is an optics,”¹² a decidedly cryptic definition for a word that is essential to Levinas’ philosophy. An oft-quoted passage from *Totality and Infinity* explains in greater detail what ethics is for Levinas:

A calling into question of the Same – which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same – is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other by the Same, of the Other by Me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge.¹³

While every sentence in this passage seems to make the same proposition, in fact each one adds something new to Levinas’ idea of ethics and further explicates the terms that are often repeated in his writings. According to Colin Davis, in his book *Levinas: An Introduction*, “By the end of this short passage ... the original proposition has been modified, its scope dramatically extended to the point that the relationship between Same and Other has become the site where both ethics and knowledge are at stake.”¹⁴

In essence the Same, or Self’s, knowledge of the Other makes the Same ethically responsible for the Other: as soon as I (Same) encounter you (Other), or gain knowledge of you, I become responsible for you. Levinas does not regard this encounter as an empirical event; instead, he sees it as original, essential and fundamental. This is because the I becomes aware, when it encounters the Other, that despite the fact that the Other is

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ Davis, 36-37.

different, it can be known to exist. As well, this encounter makes the I aware that it is neither alone in the world, nor part of a whole made up of Others that are the same as the Self.¹⁵ This originary encounter, according to Levinas, is an ethical one that permeates human relations. For example, once the I (Same) encounters an Other, the I is forced into the realization that it is not alone in the world. It is unhappy with this knowledge because the I's "power and freedom are put into question" as a result of the encounter.¹⁶

Why is this an ethical encounter? Levinas explains that at the time of the encounter the I is given a choice of how to react to the Other. Will the I turn away from the Other or take responsibility for the Other by acting ethically toward it? This choice is the basis of Levinas' ethics, which it should be emphasized are not prescriptive. Rather Levinas is describing a situation -- the encounter between the I and the Other -- and understands that this encounter is just as likely to result in violence as in amicability.¹⁷ It is the ethical responsibility of this encounter that will be explored in the discussion of Iskowitz's Holocaust works.

Gershon Iskowitz was born in 1921 in Kielce, Poland; a *shtetl* located approximately 130 kilometres south of Warsaw. Kielce had a population of about 70,000 people, approximately one-third of whom were Jewish. Iskowitz was the third of four children, with two older brothers and a younger sister. His father, Shmiel Yankl, earned his living by writing short satirical pieces for Yiddish newspapers published in Kielce, Warsaw and Radom. The Iskowitz family lived in a one-story stone house, part of which functioned as a *shtibl*, a small neighbourhood synagogue and place of study.

¹⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 49.

In Adele Freedman's book *Gershon Iskowitz: Painter of Light*, she writes that of the four children, Gershon was "the wild-child, nervous, temperamental, and disrespectful of authority. He would not answer any questions put to him by relatives or family friends unless they were phrased in a manner he considered appropriate."¹⁸

Iskowitz was four when he was enrolled in a nursery school sponsored by the Lublin Yeshiva and his family expected that he would spend his life studying, eventually becoming a rabbi. On the contrary, Iskowitz failed to graduate from the Lublin Yeshiva nursery school, the first of many schools and institutions he would leave prematurely. Iskowitz was taken out of the nursery before his sixth birthday, but not before learning Hebrew and developing "a lasting contempt for institutional life. "'I'm not an insider' is how Iskowitz explains this episode in his life. 'I had to be outside all the time.'"¹⁹ This experience foreshadows an important aspect of Iskowitz's life, that he was unable to remain for any length of time in a formal art institution and chose to remain somewhat on the outside of the art world that surrounded him.

At the age of seven his father enrolled him in a Polish public school, where the principal recommended that Iskowitz be placed in the fifth grade due to his excellent grasp of Polish, in which he had been privately tutored during the previous year. However, due to fears that the twelve-year-old boys would beat Iskowitz up, he was placed in the third grade and was subsequently beaten up by the ten-year-olds. Of the students at the school, only eighteen were Jewish, and twice weekly the Jewish students were required to attend a religious lesson taught by a Roman Catholic priest. In the two and a half years that Iskowitz attended the public school, the same sermon was repeated

¹⁸ Adele Freedman, *Gershon Iskowitz: Painter of Light* (Toronto: Merritt Publishing Company Limited, 1982), 24. All biographical information on Iskowitz within this thesis comes from this source.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

at each lesson, that the Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. This was testament to the hostile attitude toward Jews in the 1920s in Poland. In the period between World War I and World War II there were over three million Jews living in Poland (the largest Jewish population in Europe), making up almost ten percent of the entire Polish population and although the constitution set up after World War I prohibited racial, religious and national discrimination the Jews found no allies in Poland during this period. The faith, customs and religious practices of the Jews set them apart from the rest of the Polish population. Quotas were imposed on the Jews limiting the numbers in higher education and the professional fields. Jews were prevented from working for the government, state-run monopolies and state-run banks. As well, beginning in the 1930s many anti-Semitic political parties were elected to positions within the rightist, dictatorial government, rendering the Jewish political parties powerless.²⁰

Rather than enrolling Iskowitz in another institution after he left public school, Iskowitz's parents allowed him to spend his time doing as he pleased, namely drawing and painting.²¹ It was then that Iskowitz developed a daily routine that would continue until his death. Each day he would allot a time for drawing and painting: during his youth it was a half hour in the morning; after he came to Canada he reserved the entire night for painting. One of his favourite activities was going to the movies, which provided not only escape, but lessons in life. "They were a bridge to a community outside the impoverished, tension-filled ghetto [and] the faces flickering across the screen were ... models in a life class."²²

²⁰ Seltzer, 652-53.

²¹ Freedman, 26.

²² Ibid., 19.

Kielce was a quiet town, but by no means idyllic. In 1937 the Polish Nazi party organized a fierce pogrom in which Iskowitz's older brother Yosl was injured. Following the pogrom fear spread throughout the Jewish section of the town. Jewish stores were picketed and vandalized, and residents knew that to leave the ghetto area after dark meant certain terror. "You knew something was going to happen," says Iskowitz. "It was too much. I was really scared ... The Jews only wanted a miracle to rid them of the Poles. When the Germans came [in 1939] it was just a relief."²³ No one could predict what was to come. In 1939 Iskowitz was accepted into the Warsaw Academy of Fine Art, and at the end of August he took the train to Warsaw with the expectation of beginning school. However, on September 1, 1939, before school had begun, the Nazis invaded Poland and Iskowitz, now age 18, was forced to return to Kielce.

Almost immediately the invading Germans burned down the Kielce synagogue. All Jews were required to register their names with the Polish authorities and all able-bodied Jewish men were forced into labour. Gershon and his brother Yosl both went to work in the Ludwikow iron foundry, which bordered the ghetto. This gave them the opportunity to travel outside the ghetto each day. But on March 31, 1941, the Nazis sealed the Kielce ghetto. No one could enter or leave without a passport, and as a result over 4,000 Kielce Jews died in a typhus epidemic that followed. As black market prices for necessities increased exponentially, many others died of hunger. Yet, there were still 21,000 Jews to be liquidated if Kielce was to become *Judenrein* (rid of Jews). The majority were sent to Treblinka to be exterminated. Iskowitz was among the few thousand who were sent to slave labour camps.

²³ Ibid., 30.

That Iskowitz was able to survive the horrors of the ghetto and the concentration camps can be partly attributed to his desire for artistic creation. At night as the other prisoners slept Iskowitz would often stay awake drawing. "He used anything he could get his hands on, bits of brown paper and German inks bribed from the guards, coffee substitute, stray pieces of cardboard."²⁴ One day he volunteered to help clean up the rubble after the Allied bombing of Weimar. One of the bombed-out shops was an art supply store, and lying in the rubble were cakes of watercolours and drawing paper, which he sewed into his jacket and smuggled back into the camp.

Iskowitz explained that doing art "kept me alive. There was nothing to do. I had to do something in order to forget the hunger. It's hard to explain, but in the camp painting was a necessity for survival."²⁵ Drawing was so necessary to Iskowitz that he risked certain death, if he were caught. Even so, he was compelled to continue to record what he saw around him. Although art production was strictly forbidden, at times Iskowitz was able to exchange portraits he drew of Polish labourers and even German soldiers for slices of bread, further ensuring his survival.²⁶

Iskowitz produced numerous works while in the Kielce ghetto and in the concentration camps, but only three have survived: *Action* (1941), *Buchenwald* (1944-45), and *Condemned* (1945). Iskowitz hid *Action* in an attic in Kielce before he was sent to Auschwitz, and it was only recovered when a friend returned to Kielce after the war and retrieved it for him. *Condemned* and *Buchenwald* were produced during his years in the camps. He hid them under the floorboards of the barracks and managed to carry them out with him after the liberation. It is unlikely that at the time Iskowitz thought of these

²⁴ Ibid., 42.

²⁵ Loren Lerner, *Memories and Testimonies* (Montreal: Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2002), 9.

²⁶ Freedman, 42.

works as documents of the Holocaust; rather, he simply drew to sustain himself. He states: “I did it for myself ... I needed it for my sanity, to forget about my hunger. I needed it to calm down.”²⁷

That day in 1941 when the Kielce ghetto was sealed turned into a violent celebration for the Nazis and it would inspire Iskowitz’s earliest surviving drawing of the Holocaust, entitled *Action* (1941) (Figure 1, p. 67). A watercolour and ink sketch on paper that measures 38 x 56 cm, *Action* depicts an oft-repeated scene from that day where a mother clutches her child as a Nazi officer attempts to wrench her away. The image is a preview of the real horror that was to come. After seizing the girl, the Nazi officer throws the child up in the air and shoots her as her mother looks on. Iskowitz sketched *Action* as he stood on the roof of a nearby building.

In *Action*, Iskowitz used muted yellows and browns to highlight the rough and hastily drawn pen-and-ink lines. The horror of the event is made palpable by the expressions on the faces of the mother and child. Their eyes are fathomless, vacant black holes, whose darkness is highlighted by the surrounding pale skin. The tattered clothing and rough hair of the mother and child reflect the harshness of life in the Kielce ghetto. As the Nazi officer yells and pulls on the child’s hair, the mother pleads with him, but he is deaf to her cries. His claw-like right hand is extended, forming the beginning of a fist; as if he will strike the mother if she does not obey. The blackness of the officer’s uniform, suggested by a cross-hatching technique, serves to highlight the brown of his gun holster. One can perhaps consider the prominence of the holster as foreshadowing the event that Iskowitz chose not to depict, the murder of the child.

²⁷ Ibid.

The scene presented in *Action* is only a precursor to what can perhaps be described as the ultimate abomination, the reckless, needless and ruthless killing of an innocent child. Emil Fackenheim states in his book *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections after Auschwitz* that:

The more than one million Jewish children murdered in the Nazi holocaust died neither because of their faith, nor despite their faith, nor for reasons unrelated to the Jewish faith [but] because of the Jewish faith of their great-grandparents [who brought] up Jewish children.²⁸

The child depicted in *Action* is so young that it is unlikely that she could have an understanding of her faith or of why she was being persecuted. To the Nazi officer, her murder was no more than sport and convenience, one less Jewish child who needed to be transported to her death. In his essay "Useless Suffering" Levinas expands on Fackenheim's thought: "the million infants killed had the innocence of infants. Theirs is the death of martyrs, a death given in the torturers' unceasing destruction of the dignity which belongs to martyrs."²⁹ For Levinas, these children were murdered, like martyrs, because of their faith. However, a martyr is traditionally defined as someone who sacrifices him or herself rather than renounce their faith or religious beliefs. How can one reasonably describe a child as having religious beliefs?

The second surviving image from the war years is *Condemned* (1945) (Figure 2, p. 68), a watercolour and ink sketch of 69 x 51 cm. A passage from *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, Primo Levi's account of his experiences in the camp, appears to describe the face of the prisoner in Iskowitz's *Condemned*. In the chapter entitled "The Drowned and the Saved" Levi writes:

²⁸ Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections after Auschwitz* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 70.

²⁹ Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 163.

Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand ... an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen.³⁰

Levi's description coupled with Iskowitz's image reveals the universality of the suffering experienced at Auschwitz. Their individuality stripped away, men simply became a number, each one indistinguishable from the next. Levinas might see the man in *Condemned* as suffering from an excess of evil. In his essay "Transcendence and Evil" Levinas explains that one can suffer so much that "the world slips away and isolates man, and [he] closes himself to words of consolation," making one exist only for death.³¹ Levinas believed that evil was "a counter-nature, a monstrosity, what is disturbing and foreign of itself," and that this excess of evil would eventually lead to the end of the world. Levinas believed that evil is not only opposite to good, but opposes life itself.³²

The blank expression on the prisoner's long, emaciated face, the chipped teeth and the wrinkles around his eyes might lead one to believe that this is an older man, yet we do not know. The excessive amount of work and the dire conditions in the camps, coupled with malnutrition, took such a great toll on people that they appear to age decades in a few short years. Although the experience in the camps was identically shared by everyone, if one looks more closely at the image it becomes apparent that this

³⁰ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 90.

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil." *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 179.

³² *Ibid*, 180.

is in fact a portrait. Despite the universal horror, Iskowitz was concerned with maintaining the individuality of his subject. Consumed by death even while still alive, the man barely reacts to the fact that he has been selected to die. The black shadow cast by the right side of his face can perhaps be read as reflecting his state of mind as well as his future.

In the winter of 1944, about three years after arriving at Auschwitz, Iskowitz and the other prisoners were moved to Buchenwald. Although travel by train was arranged for some of the journey much of it was made on foot. The rations for the eight-day, 257-kilometre trek were half a can of horsemeat and a loaf of bread. Many died from exhaustion and starvation along the way.³³ The image *Buchenwald* (1944-45) (Figure 3, p. 69), depicts the first selection after arriving at the camp. *Buchenwald* evokes the horror of the largely arbitrary selection process, by which the Nazis chose from among the prisoners who would live and who would die. While Iskowitz was fortunate that he was not selected, he was forced to watch helplessly as other men, most of whom were no worse or better shape than he, were herded off to the gas chamber.

Buchenwald is a watercolour and ink on brown paper that measures 38 x 51 cm. This image differs slightly in technique from the two previous drawings in that Iskowitz uses the colour of the paper as part of the image. The skin of the prisoners, parts of the sky, the ground and the buildings are all constructed through the brown support. The prisoners stand out from the background through the heavy ink cross-hatching that defines their uniforms and faces. The rest of the image is filled in with black ink and Chinese white. Iskowitz's figures can be seen as individual portraits of the men waiting in line for selection. Their features are as defined as their personalities. The relief on the

³³ Freedman, 44.

faces of the few who have been saved is subdued (right), in contrast to the dejection in the eyes and the gestures of those being sent to die (left). In fact, the man marching to his death at the center of the image appears to be the same subject as in the image *Condemned*.

We also see that relationships, unlikely friendships, have developed between the men in the camp, who have come from all over Europe to be thrown together in the most horrible of situations. In particular, the viewer is drawn to the man in the front who is cradling his face in his hands, in relief and perhaps astonishment. Around his waist is the arm of another man who is thankful that his compatriot will live for one more day. Behind these men is a third figure who grasps his friend's shirt, not wanting to let him go. The man holding his head in his hands, however, is not only expressing relief; he is reacting to the man on the ground who is bleeding to death on the snow. His large hands react in horror to the dying man on the ground; at the same time they shield him from the condemned prisoners.

In his book *Difficult Freedom* Levinas asks: "What is an individual if not a usurper? What is signified by the advent of conscience, and even the first spark of spirit, if not the discovery of corpses beside me and my horror of existing by assassination?"³⁴ Iskowitz's man with his hands to his face seems to embody these questions. His expression is a mix of relief and horror, but it also shows understanding, that only by chance is he not himself lying on the ground or being marched away to die. His conscience tells him that he exists by assassination. If we consider this situation within the context of Levinas' ethics, we see that he realizes that he is not alone in the world, and that his action, or inaction, directly affects the lives of others. However, Levinas is

³⁴ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 100.

also clear that we cannot blame the prisoners in the camps for the deaths of the other prisoners “For an ethical sensibility ... accusing oneself in suffering is undoubtedly the very turning back of the ego itself.”³⁵

Selection Auschwitz (1947) (Figure 4, p. 70) is less detailed. Iskowitz no longer paints individual portraits; rather, the prisoners are merely naked, ghostly specters, one indistinguishable from the next. *Selection Auschwitz* is rendered in watercolour and ink, like the previous images, but the way Iskowitz laid down the pigment is quite different. The contrasts are much sharper, with the blackness of the background enhancing the nakedness and pathetic whiteness of the prisoners. The fact that this work was done from memory, two years after the war, might explain why the image is less specific. Or perhaps the figures represent the collective victim. What is unmistakable, however, is the larger-than-life aspect of the guard, who towers over the prisoners and is a testament to the fear the guards were able to instill.

While Iskowitz may not remember (or chooses not to depict) the faces of the men with whom he stood in line, he is able to recall the details of the Nazi officer. His hand, raised high in a gesture that commands the prisoner to step out of line, is large, seemingly large enough to pick up the prisoners with one hand. The selected man is so roughly drawn that Iskowitz hardly provides the details of his face, yet the dejection he feels is made visible through his body language. His arms dangle at his sides, his head and shoulders are slumped, his emaciated legs seem too weak to support his body, and he is barely able to move. While we do not know if the others in line ultimately survived the selection (and the war), we do know that the selected prisoner did not, simply by the fact

³⁵ Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” 163.

that Iskowitz has isolated him in the foreground. His destiny is further implied by the enormous difference in size and scale between him and the camp official.

If one looks at these images, particularly *Selection Auschwitz* and *Buchenwald*, in relation to the basic precept of Levinas' ethics, that the Same's knowledge of the Other makes the Same ethically responsible for the Other, one might presume that it is incumbent on the other prisoners to sacrifice themselves to save those who are condemned. Levinas often quoted from Dostoyevsky's *The Brother Karamazov* to further elucidate his thinking about responsibility for the Other. In the novel, Alyosha Karamazov states: "We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others." Levinas never explicitly answers this problem, although, according to James Hatley in his book *Suffering Witness*, "Auschwitz maintains a question that Levinas claims cannot be resolved, that can only be underlined."³⁶

Hatley goes on to discuss the notion of reason in relation to war, explaining that in the case of Auschwitz, the Nazi machine went far beyond reason and Auschwitz was and remains a place devoid of all reason and all humanity. He specifically explains that at a time when the Nazis would have benefited by diverting their interests away from the death camps and toward the military campaign, they chose to increase their activities in the camps: "As soon as Auschwitz became unprofitable, as soon as it interfered with important objectives, one would give it up as an extravagant waste of time and materials. And yet, the Nazi war-machine increased its efforts to destroy Jews precisely when it needed the resources [elsewhere]."³⁷ How does this apply to the problem of prisoners not acting to save their condemned compatriots? Hatley continues: "In the abyss of

³⁶ James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 96.

³⁷ Ibid.

extermination, in the world-betrayed, one no longer acts according to the dictates of reason but in a mode of self-deception, of a forgetfulness of what reason could never justify, of a denial of the priority of the Other's face ... In annihilation ... one would forget that responsibility to the Other that precedes one's very existence."³⁸ In other words, according to Hatley, the extreme and unprecedented case of the Holocaust, where reason is pushed aside and one no longer takes responsibility for the Other, disrupts Levinas' ethics.

In an interview with François Poirié in 1986, reprinted in its entirety in *Is It Righteous To Be?* (2001), Levinas speaks further about responsibility. In particular he answers the question "Am I responsible for the evil that the other commits?"³⁹ His answer seems vague and insufficient for an issue of this magnitude. He explains that while we are never absolved of our responsibility toward the Other and for the Other, when one becomes involved in actual events, responsibility becomes more complex because such situations always necessitate involvement with more than one person and therefore "the context of the situation has to be taken into account:"⁴⁰

In the face of the other, I hear my responsibility for him. In the encounter I am concerned ... But along comes a third party: new responsibility. Unless one is able to decide by a clear and just judgement which one of the two concerns me first. I must compare them, render an account. It is the entire problematic of justice.⁴¹

Hatley states: "In the scenes of Auschwitz ... one finds in instance after instance the refusal on the part of one human being to respond to another human being *as if* he or

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Robbins, "Interview with Francois Poirier," 55.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

she had a face,⁴² *as if* he or she were capable of addressing one.”⁴³ Hatley goes on to explain that the face of the Other does not disappear, but *haunts*. While in the moment of horror, as the events were unfolding, Iskowitz may have attempted to ignore the pleas of his compatriots by pushing aside the face of the Other, the faces still would have haunted him. Those haunting faces are in turn found in his drawings.

One of the later paintings Iskowitz produced in his series depicting the Kielce ghetto is entitled *Torah* (1951) (Figure 5, p. 71). The subject matter of this image necessitates a discussion of the Bible or Torah in light of Iskowitz’s work. Loren Lerner argues that, given his religious training, Iskowitz believed that “the Torah is a living organism that embodies the secret life of God, the order of creation and the mystical body of the community of Israel.”⁴⁴ A brightly coloured image, *Torah* is one of several works by Iskowitz that depict the liquidation of the Kielce ghetto in 1941. Levinas believes that “the link between God and man is not an emotional communion that takes place within the love of a God incarnate, but a spiritual or intellectual relationship which takes place through and education in the Torah.”⁴⁵

In *Torah* we see vividly coloured flames rising high above the buildings and enveloping the background. Running toward the viewer is the rabbi, the Torah clutched in his hands, and a young woman named Miriam who had been Iskowitz’s next door neighbor. Did Iskowitz actually witness this scene? It seems unlikely that with the whole town in flames, the only two people in the street were the rabbi and Miriam. Nonetheless,

⁴² In this situation face has a particular connotation. Levinas defines the face as “not of the order of the seen, it is not an object, but it is he whose appearing preserves an exteriority which is also an appeal or an imperative given to your responsibility: to encounter a face is straight-away to hear a demand and an order. Robbins, “Interview with Francois Poirier,” 48.

⁴³ Hatley, 92.

⁴⁴ Lerner, 13.

⁴⁵ Levinas, “Loving the Torah More Than God,” *Difficult Freedom*, 144.

the fact that Iskovitz chose to paint an image of the Torah being saved only emphasizes how important scripture was in his life before 1939, and that in spite of all the atrocities he witnessed during the war, the word of God and Jewish life were still of great personal significance.

Discussions of God, particularly what was perceived to be God's absence in the concentration camps, were frequent during the Holocaust and in its aftermath. Many people asked how God could allow the Chosen People to suffer in such a way. In "Useless Suffering" Levinas asks: "Did not the word of Nietzsche on the death of God take on, in the extermination camps, the signification of quasi-empirical fact?"⁴⁶ But we would be remiss if we accepted this *quasi-empirical fact*. Levinas certainly does not. Within the context of his discussion on theodicy⁴⁷ and *the end of theodicy*, in "Useless Suffering," he explains that to turn one's back on God as a result of the Holocaust is tantamount to turning one's back on everyone who died in the Nazi genocide. This would be no better than to become like the "would-be 'revisers of history'" who deny the occurrence of the Holocaust entirely.⁴⁸

In February and March of 1981 Levinas took part in a series of interviews with Phillipe Nemo that were broadcast on Radio France-Culture and later published in the book *Ethics and Infinity*. In one of the interviews he discusses his continued attachment to God and religion: "Religion is in fact not identical to philosophy, which does not necessarily bring the consolations which religion is able to give."⁴⁹ He also says that

⁴⁶ Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 162.

⁴⁷ Theodicy is the vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil.

⁴⁸ Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 163.

⁴⁹ Phillipe Nemo, *Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 118.

“assuming responsibility for the Other is a way of testifying to the glory of the Infinite.”⁵⁰

The conversation goes on to discuss the nature and content of the Bible, which Levinas believes is dominated by the ethical. Furthermore, he asserts, “I am sure of the incomparable prophetic excellence of the Book of Books, which all the Letters of the world awaited or upon which they comment.”⁵¹

To conclude it is worthwhile to address Levinas’ notion of *il y a: there is*, which has been described as “one of the first and most abiding examples of Levinas’ original thought.”⁵² *There is* is discussed in several of his major works. In his essay “There Is: Existence without Existents,” he describes what it is and what it is not:

The *there is*, inasmuch as it resists personal form, is ‘being in general’ ... *there is* transcends inwardness as well as exteriority; it does not even make it possible to distinguish these ... we could say that the night is the very experience of the *there is*, if the term experience were not inapplicable to a situation which involves the total exclusion of light ... we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness ... It is not the dialectical counterpart of absence, and we do not grasp it through a thought. It is immediately there. There is no discourse ... [It is] a means of access to beings.⁵³

Levinas goes on to discuss the *there is* as being “an existence where horror is the dominant emotion ... a subject is stripped of his subjectivity, or his power to have private existence. The subject is depersonalized ... horror turns the subjectivity of the subject ... inside out.”⁵⁴ *There is* is the unconscious state prior to the face-to-face encounter that obliges one to act ethically. It can perhaps be argued that everyone imprisoned or murdered in the concentration camps, lived in a perpetual state of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁵¹ Ibid., 117.

⁵² Emmanuel Levinas, “There is: Existence without Existents,” *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), 29.

⁵³ Ibid., 30-32.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 32-33.

Levinas' *there is*, a state of unconsciousness induced by the horror that they experienced on a daily basis.

Although the Nazis tried to strip Iskowitz of his identity by terrorizing him and forcing him to live in a perpetual state of horror, he maintained a measure of subjectivity by continuing to create. His images are witness to the horror. The portrait-like faces in *Action*, *Condemned* and *Buchenwald* are perhaps an attempt by Iskowitz to ensure that the prisoners were not turned into objects by the Nazis, but remained subjects like he did. In the ghostly specters of *Selection Auschwitz*, Iskowitz remembers those who were lost and bears witness to the atrocity that was the Holocaust and in *Torah* he remembers those who perished in Kielce while highlighting the fact that despite the devastation of the Holocaust Jewish life continues.

CHAPTER THREE

Isaac Applebaum's *Man Makes Himself* (1985) in relation to Hannah Arendt's concepts of totalitarianism and the "banality of evil"

This chapter will address the work of Canadian Jewish artist Isaac Applebaum (b. 1946). In particular, his installation *Man Makes Himself* (1985) will be discussed in relation to the writings of political theorist and philosopher Hannah Arendt. While Applebaum examines discrimination, hatred and identification in his work, the juxtaposition of the elements in *Man Makes Himself* can also be considered as an exemplification of Arendt's explorations of totalitarianism and the banality of evil. Special attention will be paid to how anti-Semitic high school teacher Jim Keegstra figures in Applebaum's work and how he relates to Arendt's writings. This chapter will also look at how *Man Makes Himself* is situated within the context of two recent exhibitions: *The Space and Silence* (2001), and *Facing Death: Portraits From Cambodia's Killing Fields* (2001).

In 1979 Applebaum accompanied his mother to Germany where she was to testify against "Bloody Brigitta," a notorious female guard at Auschwitz. Applebaum states: "After the trial my brother and I spent the rest of our stay in a kind of intense haze. It was there and then that I realized *this was worth working on.*"⁵⁵ In *Man Makes Himself* Applebaum considers racism in Canada in light of his identity as a child of Holocaust survivors. The installation was originally exhibited in 1985 at Mercer Union in Toronto. A review written at the time by Phillip Corrigan for *C-Magazine* describes it in full:

Isaac Applebaum -- "Man makes himself" installed/exhibited eight portraits from Chinatown [Toronto], five men and three women; five assorted pages (numbers 18, 27, 33, 36 and 37) from a book of images, and captions (in English, German and Hebrew [Yiddish is also included]) of the NSDAP (Nazi)

⁵⁵ Isaac Applebaum, correspondence with the author, 6 January 2003, via e-mail.

repression and genocide of Jews at Lodz, Oldenburg, Winitz and Belsen...image of one (or two) white naked male(s) (portrait and torso) with one three-quarter body image; a grainy print marked Jim Keegstra; and a table of four curled and cropped face photographs resting in sand and a book of handwritten (in different hands) extracts of classroom notes from [Jim Keegstra's anti-Semitic social studies] lectures.⁵⁶

Corrigan's description of *Man Makes Himself* gives a complete inventory of the individual works in the installation. Applebaum describes *Man Makes Himself* as being "about anti-Semitism ... about received memory ... about hate and anti-Semitism as I had and was experiencing it," as well as about racism in Canada. He continues: "I grew up in a community of concentration camp survivors and people who lived in forests or work camps and such. Some spent WW2 in Siberia others in Moscow, etc. There were many stories ... I was awash in this world of war, displacement and renewal."⁵⁷

Isaac Applebaum was born on October 25, 1946, in a displaced persons camp in Bergen-Belsen. His parents both of whom were from Warsaw, realized that there was nothing left for them in Poland and decided to leave Europe. When an opportunity arose to go to Canada, Applebaum's family was selected for immigration on the strength of his father's claim to be a tailor, despite the fact the he was not. The family arrived in Winnipeg in 1948. From 1967 to 1970 Applebaum studied psychology at the University of Manitoba, then in 1970 he moved to Toronto where he studied photography at the Ryerson Polytechnical Institute for the next three years.

⁵⁶ Phillip Corrigan, "Camps at Ground Zero," *C-Magazine*, no. 5 (Spring 1985): 25.

⁵⁷ Applebaum, correspondence with author. While in some of his later work such as *UN* (1988) and *Cruelty of Stone* (1990) Applebaum deals with his Jewish heritage, especially as it relates to Israel, it is in *Man Makes Himself* that he directly addresses the Holocaust, or more particularly the entire Nazi regime from 1933 to 1945.

In 1985 Applebaum decided to return to Bergen-Belsen, the infamous concentration camp which was turned into the displaced persons camp following the war. After visiting the British army camp at Bergen-Holm and walking the five kilometres to Bergen-Belsen, Applebaum discovered that nothing remained of the buildings that had once housed the prisoners. All that signified the site was a visitors' centre that held a small memorial museum. Inside were photographic installations that illustrated the history of the camp and the Nazi-system of persecution. Applebaum states: "I spent the afternoon walking around the camp, thinking about what was there and such. I still remember that afternoon as being *very* strong and I'm glad I did it. It answered some questions I had."⁵⁸

But *Man Makes Himself* found its original inspiration elsewhere, in the story of high school teacher Jim Keegstra, who was tried in the mid-1980s under section 319 of the Criminal Code of Canada.⁵⁹ The code stipulates:

Every one who, by communicating statements in any public place, incites hatred against any identifiable group where such incitement is likely to lead to a breach of the peace is guilty of an indictable offence ... Every one who, by communicating statements, other than in private conversation, wilfully promotes hatred against any identifiable group is guilty of an indictable offence.⁶⁰

Keegstra had been the social studies teacher in Eckville, Alberta, for almost fifteen years before anyone realized, or cared to notice, that he was teaching his students an anti-Semitic version of history. In fact, Keegstra was so well regarded in Eckville, a town with

⁵⁸ Isaac Applebaum, response to Loren Lerner's questionnaire for "Canadian Artists of Eastern European Origin." <http://art-history.concordia.ca/eea/artists/applebaum.html>

⁵⁹ Keegstra was convicted of the offence. However he served no time in jail and was fined only \$5,000.

⁶⁰ Criminal Code of Canada, (1985). "Offences Against the Person and Reputation: Public Incitement of Hatred," Part VIII, Section 319, Retrieved 10 December 2002, from <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/C-46/>

only 800 residents, that he was elected to the town council by acclamation first in 1974, then again in 1977. In 1980 he was elected mayor, again by acclamation.⁶¹

At Keegstra's preliminary hearing in 1984 it was reported that "former Eckville High principals ... claimed to believe that Keegstra was only giving his classes a critical analysis of history."⁶² However, the county superintendent had seen things differently, and in 1981 an investigation was launched. According to the investigation, rather than a "critical analysis of history," Keegstra's teaching was "straight indoctrination."⁶³ At Keegstra's own testimony at the Board of Reference he admitted that he had been teaching his opinion, but that if students had wanted, they had access to other points of view in newspapers, magazines and textbooks. It came to light, however, that students who had handed in reports or tests with answers other than those provided by Keegstra in class were automatically penalized.

The preliminary hearing presented an opportunity for Applebaum to gather the material on Keegstra that was later used in *Man Makes Himself*. For example, the installation includes selections from student notebooks and a lithographic reproduction of a portrait of Keegstra that Applebaum found in an Alberta newspaper. The pages that Applebaum had taken from the notebooks of three of Keegstra's students (all members of the same family) were compiled into one notebook and placed on a table in the centre of the exhibition space (Figure 6, p. 72). Applebaum directed the viewer's attention to the particularly inflammatory passages by underlining them in black marker. For example, on February 25, 1981, in a lesson on World War II, Keegstra explained that the war was

⁶¹ David Bercuson and Douglas Wertheimer, *A Trust Betrayed: A Keegstra Affair* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1985), 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁶³ Richard Rhodes, *Isaac Applebaum* (Montreal: Centre Saidye Bronfman, 1991), 12.

fought to “spread and expand Communism and give Zionism (sic) Judaism the state of Israel.” On February 26, 1981 he continued this lesson, stating that Jews had died in the concentration camps as a result of a typhus epidemic, that after the war only six gas chambers had been found, and that the Nazis had built the gas chambers to delouse the prisoners, not to kill them.⁶⁴

The image of Keegstra (Figure 7, p. 73), a grainy silkscreen printed from a newspaper portrait, was placed on the centre wall of the installation. According to Richard Rhodes, the “portrait image of Keegstra leaving the courthouse is a relatively banal image. It is not a monstrous image that could be construed as a condemnation of one man. Keegstra is just another man.”⁶⁵ While Keegstra is the inspiration behind the installation and the image on which the installation pivots, Applebaum is not content to stop there. It is only in examining the entire installation that the artist’s objectives become clearer. Viewers who enter the exhibition space to see *Man Makes Himself* are confronted with a row of ten black and white photographs (when originally exhibited in 1985 there were only eight), grouped in twos, of people of Chinese descent (Figures 8 & 9, pp. 74 & 75). Applebaum had set up a booth in Toronto’s Chinatown and asked people at random to be photographed. The result is a set of black and white images that Rhodes describes as having a “conservative stolidity.”⁶⁶ On the opposing wall is a row of black and white photographs of naked white males, many of whom are posed in contorted and unnatural positions (Figure 10, p. 76). Why this opposition? How does the installation ultimately project a cohesive message? How does the persecution of Jews in Nazi

⁶⁴ Pages from “Jim Keegstra Notebook,” *Man Makes Himself*, 1985.

⁶⁵ Rhodes, 12.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Germany, and Jim Keegstra's hatred relate to the images of Chinese people and Caucasian males?

In 1985 when *Man Makes Himself* first opened at the Mercer Union Gallery in Toronto, John Bentley Mays of the *Globe and Mail* summed up the purpose and place of the opposing wall portraits. He states: "The contrast between the almost sullen impenetrability of the Chinese faces, and the personable, happy-go-lucky Caucasians is the contrast between displacement and privilege, imprisonment in stereotypes and the freedom to act enjoyed by those who make the stereotypes."⁶⁷ Although Applebaum may identify with the white males because he also occupies a place of privilege and is free to act and think as he wishes, the portraits of the men and women of Chinese descent are strong reminders that just one generation earlier his parents had been displaced persons, discriminated against and marked for death because of their ancestry. In light of the above statement, it is clear that the Chinese faces could just as easily been Jewish faces fifty years earlier.⁶⁸ This juxtaposition is particularly appropriate because the restrictions placed on the Chinese in Canada, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mirror those placed on the Jews in Nazi Germany prior to World War II.

The use of the opposing sets of portraits also indicates the persistence of both stereotyping and discrimination. Placed alongside the elements of the Keegstra narrative

⁶⁷ John Bentley Mays, "Isaac Applebaum and Michael Balfe: Photographic Installations, at Mercer Union," *The Globe and Mail*, 7 February 1985, E-4.

⁶⁸ The correlation between the Jews and Chinese is most compelling when one considers it within the context of the treatment of Chinese in the history of Canada. Beginning in the 1860s, when the economic situation in Canada (particularly British Columbia where the majority of Chinese immigrants resided) became stagnant the Chinese population became scapegoats for the unemployment problem. Ultimately legislation was enacted to restrict occupational competition, limit immigration and revoke their rights of citizenship.

and the Holocaust memorial scrapbook,⁶⁹ which contains photographs and captions describing the history of the persecution of European Jews under Nazi rule, the opposition of the Chinese men and women with white males are reminders of how the racist ideologies espoused by Jim Keegstra (which were also espoused by the Nazis) can turn into practice.⁷⁰ Hannah Arendt deals with extensively with these ideas in her writings, in particular in her texts *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).

Arendt was born in 1906 in Hanover, Germany, into a middle-class Jewish family. While not entirely assimilated into non-Jewish society, her parents were members of a professional class that was involved in liberal politics. In the 1920s Arendt entered the University of Berlin and began what appeared to be a brilliant career as a philosopher, first under the tutelage of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), then under Karl Jaspers (1883-1969). When the Nazis came to power in 1933 Arendt was forced to flee to Paris. In 1941 she managed to escape to New York.

Ten years later Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which Bernard J. Bergen characterizes as a “peculiar history” and many other critics described as “lacking a rigorous approach to theory formation and testing.”⁷¹ Arendt defended her work by stating: “One of the difficulties of the book is that it does not belong to any school and

⁶⁹ The Holocaust memorial scrapbook, produced by the people in Bergen-Belsen, is one of many produced following the war. “The Yizkor Bikher—memorial books—remembered the lives and destruction of European Jewish communities according to the most ancient of Jewish memorial media: words on paper. For a murdered people without graves, without even corpses to inter, these memorial books often came to serve as tombstones. James E. Young *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorial and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1993), 7.

⁷⁰ An example of this would be how quickly after his ascent to power Hitler put into the place the Nuremberg Laws which completely disenfranchised the Jewish population of Germany, and led to the Holocaust.

⁷¹ Bernard J. Bergen, *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and the Final Solution* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1998), 2.

hardly uses any of the officially recognized or officially controversial instruments.”⁷² In other words her book defied categorization but what is more significant than the singular methodology that she employed in *Origins* are the continual questions she asked her readership. Bergen explains:

The thrust of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is to raise the question of whether we are missing the point by defining the Final Solution solely as the kind of event we must seek to prevent in our own time ... [as well as to make clear that] the twentieth century is not marked by the ambiguities of political thinking, but by the brute fact of totalitarianism.⁷³

Of particular interest to Arendt is the manifestation of totalitarianism during the Nazi era in Germany and during Stalin’s rule in Russia. She writes: “What is unprecedented in totalitarianism is not primarily its ideological content, but the *event* of totalitarian domination itself ... the deeds of its considered policies have exploded our traditional categories of political thought ... and the standards of our moral judgement.”⁷⁴

When Arendt published *Origins* in 1951 she firmly believed that history had produced only two totalitarian regimes, Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. In *Origins* Arendt discusses several factors that set the totalitarian regime apart from the despotic, tyrannical or dictatorial regime. She states:

Wherever it rose to power, it developed entirely new political institutions and destroyed all social, legal and political traditions of the country ... totalitarian government always transformed classes into masses, supplanted the party system ... by a mass movement, shifted the center of power from the army to the police, and established a foreign policy openly directed toward world domination.⁷⁵

⁷² Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 402.

⁷³ Bergen, 3.

⁷⁴ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 405.

⁷⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 460.

She further explains that these conditions are not the only defining characteristics of totalitarianism. What further distinguished Hitler and Stalin's regimes was their peculiar use of the law. Arendt explains that in traditional interpretation, the law is meant to establish the "standards of right and wrong for individual behavior"⁷⁶ and act as a stabilizing factor in a given society. In the totalitarian regime laws are established to fulfill an ideology, to move the society closer to what is thought to be the ultimate will of nature. In the case of the Nazis, the race laws that led up to the Final Solution, were intended to move Nazi Germany one step closer to its ideological goals of ridding the world of the Jewish people, and then to liquidate everyone else who did not conform to the Aryan ideal.

While *Origins* certainly brought Arendt a certain amount of fame, it is *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* that brought her infamy. In 1961, when Arendt went to Jerusalem to observe and report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi SS Lieutenant-Colonel who was Chief of the Jewish Office of the Gestapo, few could have predicted the firestorm of controversy that would be set off by her account of events. Serialized in *The New Yorker* in 1961, and published in book form in 1963, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* still inspires debate nearly forty years after its original publication. Readers found particular fault with three aspects of the report. Julia Kristeva explains:

First, her accusation that the Ben-Gurion government, as well as Gideon Hausner, Eichmann's prosecutor, put on a show trial to be used as propaganda; second, her criticisms of the European Jewish councils (*Judenrate*) ... and third, her portraying Adolf Eichmann in a way that downplayed his

⁷⁶ Ibid., 462.

criminal personality and focused on an abstract construction for which he served as the intellectual proof: “banality of evil.”⁷⁷

Arendt was also accused of being unsympathetic, even anti-Semitic. Gershon Scholem, a long-time friend and correspondent of Arendt’s, writes in a letter:

Why does your book evoke such a feeling of bitterness and shame ... for the author? After reading your book, I am not in the least convinced by the notion of the “banality of evil.” This banality seems rather more of a slogan than the result of the kind of in-depth analysis you presented far more convincingly ... in your book on totalitarianism ... If this is to be more than a slogan, it must be taken to a deeper plane of political morality and moral philosophy. I regret that, given my sincere and friendly feelings toward you, I have nothing positive to say about your theses in this work.⁷⁸

Although they wrote one another several times on the subject of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* their disagreement was so bitter that their friendship ended over the book.

In the “Postscript” added to the 1964 edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt unapologetically discusses the controversy, which she regarded as the “object of an organized campaign.”⁷⁹ She staunchly defended herself by writing that many people had misread or misunderstood *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, particularly her concept of the “banality of evil.” She did not rescind or recant much, if any, of what was written in the report, although she did take the opportunity offered by the postscript to attempt to clarify some of her thoughts. In its opening she writes: “This book contains a *trial report*,”⁸⁰ and she continues: “This ... book does not deal with the history of the greatest disaster that ever befell the Jewish people, nor is it an account of totalitarianism, or a history of the

⁷⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 145.

⁷⁸ Anthony David Skinner, ed., “Jerusalem, June 23, 1963,” *Gershon Scholem: A Life in Letters, 1914-1982* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 397-98.

⁷⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 282.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 280.

German people in the time of the Third Reich, nor is it ... a theoretical treatise on the nature of evil.”⁸¹ It was not her intention to posit a thesis in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, but to attend and report on the trial. Yet in the postscript she explains that although “neither an explanation of the phenomenon [banality of evil] nor a theory about it” is contained in the text there was a lesson to be learned from the trial. She states: “Remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man — that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.”⁸²

Despite Arendt’s claim that no particular thesis was meant to be put forward in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* many thinkers have weighed in with interpretations of the text, especially the phrase the “banality of evil.” For Jerome Kohn in his essay “Arendt’s Concept and Description of Totalitarianism,” the banality of evil expressed “that there is nothing in evil for thought to latch onto ... not that Eichmann’s acts are commonplace, but the massiveness of the evil he inflicted on the world defies thought.”⁸³ According to Julia Kristeva in her recent book on Arendt, “Eichmann gave [Arendt] the opportunity to prove that because the vast majority of those who enacted Nazism were not sadistic monsters or inveterate torturers, they shared this *banal*—because it was widespread and because it was often deemed innocuous—condition of renouncing personal judgment.”⁸⁴ In his essay “A Note on the Banality of Evil,” Stephen Miller says, “this notion of a thoughtless, bureaucratic man was what she meant by the banality of evil.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ibid., 285.

⁸² Ibid., 288.

⁸³ Jerome Kohn, “Arendt’s Concept and Description of Totalitarianism,” *Social Research* 69, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 644.

⁸⁴ Kristeva, “Hannah Arendt,” 148-49.

⁸⁵ Stephen Miller, “A note on the banality of evil,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 57.

For Arendt, her concept of the banality of evil was simply a *different* view of evil. Ultimately she was defended by the rationale that “she wasn’t writing about the nature of evil when she spoke of the banality of evil. She was only writing about the nature of Eichmann, whom she regarded as a banal man.”⁸⁶ In using the phrase “the banality of evil,” Arendt wished to express that in Eichmann she saw a “*normal* person [who was] perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong,”⁸⁷ not because he was stupid or had no conscience but because he failed to think. He displayed “sheer thoughtlessness”⁸⁸ and was “fuelled by a delirium of blind loyalty [to Hitler] that substitute[d] for thinking.”⁸⁹ This *thoughtlessness* did not absolve him of guilt, and Arendt supported the death penalty sentence handed down by the court because it was commensurate with his crimes.

While there is no indication that Arendt’s writings influenced the creation of *Man Makes Himself*, it would not be implausible to suggest a relation between the two, beginning with the title of the installation. According to Robert Wistrich in his *Partisan Review* essay “Understanding Hannah Arendt”:

Crucial to the Arendtian theses is that totalitarian domination seeks to *refabricate* [my emphasis] man, to radically transform a human nature which is assumed to be infinitely malleable. In the totalitarian project, humanity is ultimately regarded as raw material to be reordered in the name of so-called laws of nature and history.⁹⁰

Arendt adds: “The fanaticism of members of totalitarian movements ... is produced by the lack of self-interest of masses who are quite prepared to sacrifice themselves.”⁹¹

⁸⁶ Miller, 57.

⁸⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 26.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁸⁹ Bergen, 34.

⁹⁰ Robert Wistrich, “Understanding Hannah Arendt,” *Partisan Review* 65, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 31.

⁹¹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 348.

The title *Man Makes Himself* can be read as a response to totalitarianism, as well as a warning to anyone who might be enticed by such a regime. Under totalitarianism, members of a society who once had minds of their own are swept up by the movement and become, much like Eichmann, completely thoughtless. People who once knew right from wrong are blinded by the regime and are refabricated to act in ways they never would consider previously in order keep their position (non-position) in the collective. Arendt goes on to explain that the German people became so enamoured with Hitler and the Nazis that when the war was clearly lost, the Nazis “consoled ... [a] badly frightened population with the promise that the Fuehrer ‘in his wisdom had prepared an easy death for the German people by gassing them in case of defeat.’”⁹² Would the German people, completely transformed by the Nazi regime, have willingly entered the gas chambers? It is uncertain. However, the inclusion of the notebooks from Keegstra’s students shows that one should always be sceptical and never accept anything as fact without investigation.

The Holocaust memorial scrapbook (Figure 11, p. 77), which was compiled by the people living at Bergen-Belsen following the war as homage to those lost in the Holocaust, was given to Applebaum’s parents while they were still at the camp. In its original form the memorial book is an assemblage of “photographs confiscated from German camp guards and officials; it documents in horrific detail a history of the Holocaust.”⁹³ The scrapbook begins in 1933 with the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in Germany, which systematically stripped the Jewish population of all their rights as

⁹² Ibid. Arendt cites Friedrich Percyval Reck-Malleczewen, *Tagebuch eins Verzweifelten*. (Stuttgart, 1947), 190.

⁹³ Rhodes, 12.

citizens and human beings, and it continues up until the defeat of the Nazis and the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945.

In *Man Makes Himself* Applebaum reversed the order of the pages of the Holocaust memorial scrapbook so that it begins with the liberation of the camps and ends, as Applebaum puts it, with “images of some of the first acts of discrimination and maltreatment of German Jews in the 30s.”⁹⁴ By reversing the order Applebaum is perhaps trying to shock the viewer or to provide a new strategy for reading history: the “new” first page of the album show extremely graphic images of piles of Jewish bodies being buried by the Nazis (who were forced to perform this task by the Allied armies after the liberation of the camps) (Figures 12 & 13, pp. 78 & 79). The terrible images are also a message that this is the result of totalitarianism. As the viewer continues to turn the pages it becomes clear where the totalitarian regime and terror began: with the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws.

While Hitler is not solely responsible for the Holocaust, he is the author of the racist ideologies espoused in *Mein Kampf* (1925) that became policy and practice during World War II. It is worth considering *Mein Kampf*, which was written while Hitler was in prison, in conjunction with the ideas that Jim Keegstra taught his students for almost fifteen years before he was finally banned from teaching.⁹⁵ One of the most frightening

⁹⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁵ Keegstra began teaching in Eckville in 1968. Although many of the teachers as well as a succession of principals were aware of what he was teaching few complained as many thought that “*what* Keegstra taught was ... far less important than *how* he taught it.” Moreover, complaints by parents to the school board more often related to Keegstra’s anti-Catholic references, rather than his anti-Semitic teachings. According to Bercuson and Wertheimer “His anti-Catholicism is not fundamental to his world view in the way his anti-Judaism is” and therefore he could cease teaching his anti-Catholic without greatly affecting his curriculum. Bercuson and Wertheimer state: “After Keegstra was dismissed, many commentators pointed out that Eckville had not Jews. They claimed that Keegstra would not have been tolerated for long if there had been Jewish children in his classes, exposed to his biases, and prepared to complain to their parents.

links between Jim Keegstra and the Nazis is their reliance on the infamous forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Produced in Paris in the 1890s by an agent of the Czarist secret police, the *Protocols* “purported to be made up of conversations, instructions and dialogues of the secret leaders of the world Jewish conspiracy.”⁹⁶ In 1919, just after the end of the First World War, the *Protocols*, which had been all but forgotten in the thirty years since its creation, re-emerged and circulated widely throughout Europe. Despite the fact that in August 1921 *The Times* of London proved it was a forgery,⁹⁷ the Nazis used “the forgery as a textbook for global conquest.” By the 1940s the circulation of the *Protocols* in Nazi Germany was second only to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.⁹⁸

The Protocols has been called a “warrant for genocide” ... because it was used by the Nazis in their ideological war against the European Jews which culminated in the Holocaust. The work has helped convince millions of non-Jews that the Jews carry the germ of conspiracy with them wherever they go—that each and every Jew is rooted to this plot, which has determined the course of history from far back in time to the present day.⁹⁹

Jim Keegstra believed in the validity of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and felt that it was his duty to teach his students about the supposed worldwide Jewish conspiracy. He was certain he possessed the truth that the Holocaust never happened. He claimed: “The ruins of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Poland [were] not proof of anything ... because ‘it was closed for ten years after the war’ and ‘who knows what the Communists did with it.’”¹⁰⁰

But for many years Eckville’s Catholic children complained to their parents about his anti-Catholic biases and still Keegstra stayed and taught.” Bercuson and Wertheimer, 67-69.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁸ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 241.

⁹⁹ Bercuson and Wertheimer, 27.

¹⁰⁰ *The Edmonton Sun* May 19, 1983.

According to Rhodes, *Man Makes Himself* “does not seem especially interested in stopping focus on Keegstra.”¹⁰¹ We must remember that surrounding the image of Keegstra are the portraits of the Chinese men and women as well those of the oddly posed Caucasian men. By including these images, it could be that Applebaum is commenting on the similarities between the early actions taken against the Jews in Nazi Germany, in the form of, for example, the Nuremberg Laws, to those taken against the Chinese in Canada at the turn of the twentieth century. Richard Rhodes explains:

The rolled portrait photos of still more Chinese men lying next to the student’s book on a bed of mortar dust [ashes] at the centre of the installation make a cross-racial connection. They feel like the ghosts of the crematoriums. They figuratively exchange place with the Jews of the Holocaust.¹⁰²

Man Makes Himself, in which “the two series of portraits on either side of [the installation] remind us that the body is the seat of memory, the ultimate refuge of a person’s identity,”¹⁰³ is ultimately about memory and identity. The portraits of the Chinese men and women (who are stoic and indisputably of the same *race*) are nonetheless individualistic. We identify the figures as Chinese but we must remember that each person has his/her own history, identity and memories. Their faces prompt us to recall that we tend to categorize people rather than see them as individuals. The inclusion of the two series’ of portraits is also a reminder that these people are all members of the same community, “these men [and women] are part of a shared reality.” Furthermore, by putting the image of Keegstra in the centre of the two series, we are reminded that those

¹⁰¹ Rhodes, 12.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰³ _____, “Isaac Applebaum: *Man Makes Himself*,” *The Space of Silence* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2001), wallboard.

positing “insidious notions of ethnic purity” are attempting to permanently divide the community, regardless of the individual identities within the collective.¹⁰⁴

In 2001 *Man Makes Himself* was included in the exhibition *The Space of Silence* mounted at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. Also included was the installation *Real Pictures* (1994) by Alfredo Jaar and a series of photographs by Jack Burman entitled “*Remain Silent*”: *Auschwitz-Birkenau* (1994-1997). *Real Pictures* is an installation that is a memorial to the 800,000 Tutsi men, women and children who were massacred in the Rwandan genocide that took place between April and June of 1994. In August of that year Jaar went to Rwanda to observe the scenes for himself after having “witnessed in real time on ... television ... [the] flood of images that showed the tragedy from every angle, sparing not one obscene detail. Hacked-up dead bodies rotting in the sun. Close-ups of faces twisted in murderous fury. Roads littered with mutilated corpses. Thousands of orphans herded into refugee camps.”¹⁰⁵ He also intended to capture the scenes on film and he returned home with 3,000 images, that he later incorporated into *Real Pictures*. Jaar explains: “I have always been concerned with the disjunction between experience and what can be recorded photographically. In the case of Rwanda, the disjunction was enormous and the tragedy unrepresentable.”¹⁰⁶ As a result Jaar made the decision not to put the images that he took on display and instead set up an installation made up of ninety-nine small boxes. Inside each box he placed a picture, and on each lid he provided a description of what was inside. Jaar then took the boxes and stacked them in piles he called monuments. For the viewer who enters the dimly lit exhibition space, it

¹⁰⁴ Rhodes, 12.

¹⁰⁵ _____, “Alfredo Jaar: *Real Pictures*,” *The Space of Silence* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2001), wallboard.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

is like entering a graveyard, as each box is the gravestone of one of the people massacred in the Rwandan genocide (Figure 14, p. 80).

“Remain Silent”: *Auschwitz-Birkenau* by Jack Burman is a series of colour photographs taken in January and February of 1994 of the remains of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. What Burman captured in the photographs was not the horrific past but present-day Auschwitz-Birkenau: “The beauty of the golden light of the early morning. Vast, deserted spaces. Empty ruins” (Figure 15, p. 81).¹⁰⁷ However, one would be remiss to see only beautiful landscapes here. To ensure that the viewer remembers that Auschwitz-Birkenau is the site where the systematic murder of one million people took place, Burman juxtaposes the visually stunning images with documents from the Holocaust that “focus on the facts and bring together evidence.”¹⁰⁸ For example, his image of a pile of artificial limbs bridges the gap between that present and the past. Each limb in the pile belonged to an individual who was likely selected for death immediately upon arrival at Auschwitz (Figure 16, p. 82). Ultimately “the past recomposed from these scattered fragments projects the horror of the war and the concentration camp universe onto the present.”¹⁰⁹

The Space of Silence was presented in conjunction with and as a response to a collection of portraits from The Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Cambodia entitled *Facing Death: Portraits From Cambodia's Killing Fields* (Figure 17, p. 83). The discovery of these photographs by several American journalists and their subsequent exhibition across North America was fraught with controversy because the photographs

¹⁰⁷ _____, “Jack Burman: Remain Silent,” *The Space of Silence* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2001), wallboard.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

are portraits of prisoners taken by the Khmer Rouge moments before the subjects were executed. In the end, 1.4 million men, women and children were murdered or died during the Khmer Rouge's three-and-a-half-year reign in Cambodia, over 14,000 of them at the Tuol Sleng prison.

After considering the images in *Facing Death* and the works by Burman and Jaar, the place of Isaac Applebaum's *Man Makes Himself* within the context of these two exhibitions becomes clear. It is evident that *Man Makes Himself* explores the same issues addressed in the other installations; for example, Burman presents the viewer with the *industry* of genocide (the remains of Auschwitz-Birkenau), while Jaar presents the reduction of individuals to species (with the simulated gravestones of the massacred Tutsis). In *Facing Death* we have the faces of human beings who, regardless of their anonymity, are individuals with a history, as were the Rwandan victims. In the text that accompanies *Man Makes Himself* in the *Space of Silence* exhibition, the installation is described as presenting "the industry of the death camps that reduces the individual to a species before doing away with his body, [in opposition to] the acute memory of individuality possessed by every living being."¹¹⁰

Hannah Arendt explains that totalitarian regimes

attempt to make men superfluous ... [they are forced into a] world of the dying, in which men [and women] are taught they are superfluous through a way a life in which punishment is meted out without connection to the crime, in which exploitation is practiced without profit, and where work is performed without product ... the inmates are vermin ... they are degenerate.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ "Man Makes Himself," wallboard.

¹¹¹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 457.

In *Man Makes Himself* Isaac Applebaum unmasks the horror of totalitarianism. The installation shows the viewer how individuality is stripped away and how ordinary people are swept up into the frenzy of a racist ideology that has as its only outcome death on a massive scale. It also shows us that racist ideology and genocide are not a thing of the past. In examining Keegstra and his beliefs, the installation gives us a sense of the insidiousness of Keegstra's racist notions and how these notions are spread and kept alive.

There are, however, some positive aspects to the Keegstra affair. In 1986, after Keegstra had completed his term as mayor, Margaret Andrew, the mother who first complained about the anti-Semitic content of Keegstra's class, became the first female mayor of Eckville. Also, her children, who have since moved away from Eckville, were taught valuable lessons by their high school experience. Blair Andrew explains in a 1990 interview: "The Keegstra affair 'opened my eyes I don't take anything for granted anymore Keegstra made you think for yourself after you left school, even though he may not have intended that ... now we've formed our own opinions.'"¹¹² After the first trial in 1985 several of Keegstra's former students were sent to see the Nazi concentration camps first hand. Others, however, despite years of court cases, still believe that what he taught was the truth. According to Sandra Cordon, a journalist and former student, some of her former classmates have expressed their belief that "the international conspiracy exists, the media are dupes, and opponents of the conspiracy theory simply prove its existence."¹¹³

¹¹² Canadian Press, "Keegstra affair 'opened my eyes': Eckville students see positive five years later," *The Montreal Gazette*, 22 July 1990, A-7.

¹¹³ Sandra Cordon, "Jim Keegstra betrayed a sacred trust, ex-student says," *The Montreal Gazette*, 14 December 1990, B-1.

CHAPTER FOUR

The abject as defined by Julia Kristeva in Yehouda Chaki's
Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing (1999)

Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing is an exhibition of works by the Montreal artist Yehouda Chaki on the subject of the Holocaust. First mounted at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa in 1999, *Mi Makir* continues to tour Canada and the United States extensively. It was also presented at the Avraham Baron Gallery at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel. Included in *Mi Makir* are approximately 200 rough and tattered portraits, each measuring 55 x 75 cm. The portraits are hung in rows that completely cover the gallery walls. Chaki explains: "Putting all the images together, they become a lot more powerful. Like the marches to the camps, or being herded into trains, or the burial mounds, they were always massed together. It was never one at a time. They were leaving by groups, they were deported by groups, they were dying by groups."¹¹⁴

Chaki's work in *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing* can be interpreted as an articulation of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. Kristeva employs psychoanalysis and political commentary in her well-known book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, which was published in French in 1980 and translated into English in 1982. Kristeva presents a succinct definition of abjection in a 1980 interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch that was published in *Partisan Review*:

L'abjection [the abject] is something that disgusts you, for example, you see something rotting and you want to vomit—it is an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from

¹¹⁴ Linda Jansma and Herbert Aronoff, *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing* (Montreal: FMR Books, 1999), 25. This is the catalogue that circulates with the exhibition *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing*.

which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside.¹¹⁵

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva elaborates on these ideas when she writes that “the abject has only one quality of the object and that is being opposed to I.”¹¹⁶ Because the abject is a part of us (albeit a part we “permanently thrust aside in order to live”¹¹⁷), the boundary between the subject and the abject is imaginary. Within the context of a discussion of the Holocaust the abject can also refer to the place of the Jews under the reign of the Nazis. Jews were considered abject; they were seen as being opposed, or opposite, to the Nazis, as well as to the larger European community.

This chapter will also briefly discuss the exhibition *Y----H!* (1997) by Canadian Jewish artist Simon Glass. Like *Mi Makir*, *Y----H!* also addresses the Holocaust and even shares some of the characteristics of Chaki’s installation. However, rather than using imaginative representations, Glass chooses to embellish documentation from the Holocaust, including photographs taken by the Allied forces at the time of liberation as evidence of atrocities committed by the Nazis. Glass’ work is quite controversial, and while there are intersections between *Mi Makir* and *Y----H!*, there are also differences that will be explored.

Yehouda Chaki was born in Greece in 1938, just months before the start of the Second World War. For the six years of the war he and his parents and his brother found safe haven with a Greek Orthodox family. Members of his extended family were not as

¹¹⁵ Ross Mitchell Guberman, ed., *Julia Kristeva Interviews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 118.

¹¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

fortunate as they were all killed at Auschwitz. Chaki explains: “I never met a single close relative. I never knew my grandmothers or grandfathers, any of my uncles, aunts or cousins.”¹¹⁸ After the war, like many other European Jews hoping to escape the horrors and memories of war-torn Europe, the Chaki family immigrated to Palestine (now called Israel), hoping to find a Jewish homeland. Chaki was only seven at the time. He says that “when we arrived, I didn’t speak a word of Hebrew ... the only way I could express myself was through drawing and painting.”¹¹⁹ When Chaki was nine a doctor who was visiting the family home to treat his brother saw his paintings and was so impressed that he offered to pay for Chaki to go to art school in Tel Aviv.

Mi Makir seems to have been influenced primarily by these early years in Greece and Israel. Chaki says, “holidays were awful. Neighbours would invite their whole family for Passover and Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot and we were just four without the possibility of inviting anybody.”¹²⁰ Chaki left in Israel 1960 for Paris to study at the Ecole des beaux arts. Upon completing his studies in Paris he was “immediately selected to show at the Salon d’Art Moderne in Paris.”¹²¹ In 1963, after marrying, Chaki settled in Montreal, where he continues to reside.

The exhibition *Mi Makir* was widely regarded as a departure from Chaki’s typical artistic production. Internationally renowned for his brightly coloured, heavy impasto, figures, flowers and landscapes, many of his contemporaries were surprised when the Robert McLaughlin Gallery first mounted the show in 1999. Few knew that for over three decades, in the privacy of his studio, Chaki had been working on the harrowing portraits

¹¹⁸ Jansma and Aronoff, 22.

¹¹⁹ Bill Brownstein, “Acclaimed painter is prankster, too,” *The Montreal Gazette*, 17 May 1992, D-3.

¹²⁰ Jansma and Aronoff, 22.

¹²¹ Brownstein, D-3.

revealed in this exhibition. The images stem directly from the specific connotation the artist gives to the phrase *mi makir*:

Mi Makir is about an item from *Kol Yisrael*, Israeli Radio. Every day at 2 o'clock after the news, they would broadcast an item about missing people: *Ha'mador le'khipus kruvim shel ha'soknuth ha'yehudit sho'el mi makir ve'mi yode'ah ...* which means, 'the department of missing people of the Jewish Agency is asking, Who knows or has information about ... ?' They were looking for news of relatives who survived, or didn't survive, the war.¹²²

Chaki explains that for those thirty or forty seconds everyone in his household would hold their breath, hoping that a name they knew would be read out. What appears to have deeply impressed Chaki were the expressions that crossed his mother's face during the broadcasts as she strained to understand the Hebrew, or afterwards when disappointment set in. When it was explained that, "they were not looking for anyone she knew, or that no Greek Jews were looking for anybody."¹²³ Chaki explains that while listening to the broadcasts he would attempt to visualize the relatives that he never met. Although he knew their names "it was impossible to put a face to the name. Everything was foggy and unclear."¹²⁴

Despite his strong ties to the Holocaust, Chaki did not want to be associated with that period of history while studying in Paris in the early 1960s. His attitude changed after moving to Montreal when he met his wife's family and began to feel and understand what he had lost. Shortly after arriving in Montreal he started working on the images included in *Mi Makir* (Figure 18, p. 84).

¹²² Jansma and Aronoff, 21.

¹²³ Ibid., 22.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

From the beginning Chaki worked in a relatively straightforward manner, by using traditional materials on a paper attached to a wall. Soon he became dissatisfied with what he was producing and moved the paper to the floor. “In fact, I used to put two or three sheets of paper on the floor and do one after the other. I spoiled many, but it didn’t matter. The freshness and the freedom that came out of it were fantastic.”¹²⁵ Using long brushes, artists’ inks, black acrylic and white latex house paint, Chaki began to produce the images seen in the exhibition. It was an energetic process that, he says, gave him as much pleasure as when he would paint a colourful landscape or a vase of flowers.¹²⁶

The works began as portraits of no one in particular, but before long Chaki quickly began to regard the faces differently. “They could have been anybody, faces that didn’t survive, but then I started putting my own face there and faces from my wife’s family. I tried to see things the other way around.”¹²⁷ It was at this point that he realized how intensely personal these works had become: they were actually about people who had survived the war, the death camps, and the Nazi terror. At the same time they were also about those who had been less fortunate, such as his family. In these works “Chaki shows sorrow ... sorrow that encompasses the past, present and future of humanity.”¹²⁸ Linda Jansma, curator at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, describes the works as: “frightening portraits of people [Chaki] never knew.”¹²⁹ Although Chaki worked on *Mi Makir* for over thirty years, it was only in 1999 that he felt that his work on the theme of

¹²⁵ Ibid, 28.

¹²⁶ Yehouda Chaki, interview with the author, 23 January 2003.

¹²⁷ Jansma and Aronoff, 23.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 9.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 8.

the Holocaust was ready to be displayed. Jansma speculates: “Perhaps more to the point, *he* was ready.”¹³⁰

Placed in the upper right-hand corner of each portrait is a different number, each of which corresponds to an actual victim of the Holocaust. “The numbers came as I was looking for names of Holocaust victims, of survivors, something to do with real names. I discovered the Nazi lists of numbers with the person each number corresponded to, with their name, date of birth and place of origin.”¹³¹ Each one is a memorial to someone who died in the Holocaust. “The face remains unclear ... still the number sees it as a specific person.”¹³² In *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, Primo Levi describes the significance of the (tattooed) numbers: “I have learnt that I am Häftling [prisoner]. My number is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die. The operation was slightly painful and extraordinarily rapid ... It seems that this is the real, true initiation: only by ‘showing one’s number’ can one get bread and soup.”¹³³

Chaki considers the portrait images as unfinished and regards the act of exhibiting them as part of the creation process. They are presented in the gallery unframed with pushpins holding them to the wall. Chaki explains that one’s first instinct is to treat the images with great care due to their fragility. However, he instructs the galleries that such care is unnecessary. He states: “Maybe they will tear and there will no longer be corners to those faces. They will look like antique pieces that came out of a concentration

¹³⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹³¹ Ibid., 26.

¹³² Ibid., 26.

¹³³ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 27-28.

camp.”¹³⁴ As the images get damaged or deteriorate they become something different, just as the people in the camps became something different as their bodies deteriorated and grew weaker.

It may seem insensitive to relate the notion of the abject to works on the subject of the Holocaust that, like Chaki’s, are a personal exploration. On the other hand one could argue that any work produced on the Holocaust is shrouded, intentionally or not, in Kristeva’s notion of the abject; that almost anything created as the result of the systematic murder of at least six million innocent people should *revolt*. Early on in *Powers of Horror* Kristeva makes a direct reference to the Holocaust:

In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children’s shoes, or something like that ... for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.¹³⁵

Kristeva speaks of concrete notions of the abject, real things that we see, smell, touch or hear that make us want to vomit. In the case of the Holocaust, one could argue, the abjection is a mental response: we feel revolted by the thought of what happened. For Kristeva, the external menace is the Nazi crimes, while the internal menace is the thoughts that people carry with them and the questions that prey on their minds with regard to the atrocities; for example, ‘*What could we have done?*’, ‘*How was this allowed to happen?*’, ‘*Why did the world stand by?*’, ‘*Why did I just stand by?*’. Our culture is flooded with images of the concentration and death camps, such as piles of bodies discarded by the Nazis and mass graves filled with emaciated prisoners, and as a result we are constantly facing reminders and the abject is always with us. According to Inga

¹³⁴ Jansma and Aronoff, 30.

¹³⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

Clendinnen, these images are “direct records of our failure and of our guilt.”¹³⁶ Many people knew what was occurring yet they continued to conspire in or ignore one of the largest atrocities in modern history.

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva extensively discusses the corpse: “The corpse ... that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death.”¹³⁷ In other words, it is evident when viewing a corpse that a defeat has taken place, that death has won over life. Kristeva’s reference to the corpse or cadaver is relevant to *Mi Makir* in that Chaki’s portraits can be seen as cadaver-like representations: each has an extremely long, thin neck and many have black holes in the place of eyes, prominent teeth and gaunt cheeks as if the flesh has begun wasting away as in death. In attempting to conjure up the faces of deceased relatives, Chaki was likely haunted by the familiar images from the concentration camps.

Chaki’s images remind us that when we die we will become skeletal and ghostly. But these bodies also contain an element of beauty as the images speak to the spectator about sorrow and compassion. Chaki explains: “Some faces I painted as if they were Jesus. When an artist paints Jesus, he paints him thin and very meek and you feel almost like falling in love with him and his suffering and a lot of my faces are painted like that.” Although the images at first appear frightening, upon closer inspection they contain gentleness. While some recede into darkness (Figure 19, p. 85), others project outward and seem to be almost smiling (Figure 20, p. 86), pleading with us to remember who they once were. Although the individuals represented in *Mi Makir* died as a result of the extreme situation created by Nazi Germany, they have also taken on other meanings.

¹³⁶ Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 173.

¹³⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

Chaki explains that the portraits are about the universality of suffering and the faces represent everyone in the world who is missing or has died because of atrocities.¹³⁸ The corpse “is death infecting life. Abject. It is something from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object,” says Kristeva.¹³⁹ Finally, we all must die. Every human being will one day become a corpse, the ultimate abjection. However, Chaki’s corpse-like spectres, can be regarded as ultra-abject as they represent people who were selected to die in the Nazi quest for racial purity. “Any crime ... is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so.”¹⁴⁰

Kristeva’s discussion of abjection or the abject is not limited to corpses and in relation to *Mi Makir*, we must consider the abject in terms of anti-Semitism and the Jewish experience. In chapter nine of *Powers of Horror*, entitled “Ours to Jew or Die,” Kristeva explores the theme of the Jew-as-abject through the writings of French author Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894-1961) and systematically demonstrates his virulent anti-Semitism through excerpts from several of his texts.¹⁴¹ For example, in *L’Ecole des cadavres* Céline writes: “Who is the true friend of the people? Fascism is. Who has done the most for the working man ... Hitler has.” Céline, who fervently believed that a worldwide Jewish conspiracy had brought about World War II, was concerned by what he saw as the biological decline of his own race and the insidious rise of Modernism. After the war however, Céline attacked Hitler and the Nazis not for what they had done (he still maintained his anti-Semitic views) but rather for who they were. In a letter published in

¹³⁸ Chaki, interview with the author.

¹³⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Kristeva discusses four pamphlets by Céline: *Mea Culpa*, 1936, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, 1937, *L’Ecole des cadavres*, 1938, *Les Beaux Draps*, 1941.

L'Herne on April 16, 1947 he writes: "Backing Hitler there was nothing, or almost nothing, I mean from the spiritual point of view, a horde of petty bourgeois, greedy swine rushing in for the spoils." Kristeva writes: "That, as Céline saw it, is what made the Nazis unfit for Nazism."¹⁴²

Kristeva explains that within the Célinian discourse the Jew has the particular function of being an object "of hatred and desire, of threat and aggressivity, of envy and abomination." This is the object around which Céline centres all his political *ideals*.¹⁴³ According to Kristeva's psychoanalytic analysis, for the anti-Semite (Céline) the Jew is "an object of the Father, a piece of waste, his wife as it were, an abjection."¹⁴⁴ She explains that anti-Semites see the Jew as both *Jouissance* (wife/pleasure) and Law (Father), which in combination becomes a threatening object. "He [the Jew] is nothing but decay, decaying."¹⁴⁵ In order to be protected from this threatening object, "anti-Semitic fantasy relegates that object to the place of the ab-ject."¹⁴⁶ This is how, for Céline and anti-Semites in general, the Jew becomes abjection.

Hitler's plan to annihilate the Jews stemmed from this view that the Jew is abject. Kristeva explains: "I who identify with him [the Jew], who desire to share with him a brotherly, mortal embrace ... find myself reduced to the same abjection."¹⁴⁷ Therefore, for Kristeva, the wish to remove the Jewish people from the face of the planet is an attempt by anti-Semites to avoid becoming abject. One further insight into Chaki's *Mi Makir* can be gleaned from Kristeva's discussion of Céline. She states: "No ideological

¹⁴² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 175.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* citing Céline, *Les Beaux Draps* (1941), 113.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

interpretation can be based on [Céline's] revelation: what principle, what party, what side, what class comes out unscathed?"¹⁴⁸ The answer is, of course, none. Everyone is hurt by the destruction caused by war and the perception that the Jewish people are abject.

Although up to this point the portraits in *Mi Makir* have been discussed as being abject, Chaki's placing of the numbers on the tops of the images enhances our perception of them. These numbers are universally recognized as representing individual Holocaust victims. They reinforce the theme of death due to the fact that they were assigned to individuals who didn't survive the war and many Holocaust memorials use these numbers as the basis for remembering. For example, the iconography of *The New England Holocaust Memorial*, dedicated in October 1995 in Boston, relies heavily on numbers. Etched onto the sides of the towering glass chimneys are row upon row of them, each one representing a victim.¹⁴⁹ Also, in daily life one can see living individuals with a number tattooed on their arm, albeit less and less frequently. This tattoo not only marks that person as a survivor of the Holocaust, but sets them apart from others; they have something in their past that the number represents. Everyone knows the numbers for what they are.

One cannot ignore the negative connotations of using the numbers as a form of memorial. They helped the Nazis succeed in transforming Jews, Gypsies, Poles, homosexuals and the handicapped, among others, from subjects into objects. This, of course, is a necessary step in the cycle of abjection. Objects are abject, subjects are not. By categorizing and numbering these individuals the Nazis were able to dehumanize

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 154.

¹⁴⁹ John Maihos (28 January 2000) "New England Holocaust Memorial – A Chilling Visit," Retrieved 1 April 2000, from <http://boston.about.com>.

them (and view them as objects) prior to murdering them. Giving faces to these numbers, as Chaki does, however ghastly these faces may be, rehumanizes them. They once again become subjects unable to be abjected.

Simon Glass' 1997 exhibition *Y----H!* is a memorial to those who died in the Nazi reign of terror as well as a condemnation of God for not intervening to prevent the Holocaust. Included in the exhibition is a series of photographs entitled *Merciful and Gracious* that directly addresses this issue (Figures 21 & 22, pp. 87 & 88). The photographs were taken by the Nazis of prisoners at Auschwitz and were discovered by Glass at the Archive of the Polish State Museum. He later inscribed a Hebrew letter on each one in bright gold lettering. Together the letters spell the words *rachum v' chanun*, Merciful and Gracious. According to Jewish teachings, Merciful and Gracious are two of the thirteen attributes of God. But Glass appears to be asking a question rather than making a statement. How "merciful and gracious" is a God who lets people suffer in such a fashion? In *The Spirit of Renewal: Finding Faith After the Holocaust* by Edward Feld, the author attempts to answer this question in his discussion of a story reported by Martin Buber about the Hasidic master Rebbe Menahem Mendel of Kotzk. In this story the Kotzker Rebbe concludes: "God dwells wherever man lets him in."¹⁵⁰ Feld argues that Jewish people must stop waiting for divine intervention and learn to let holiness in. The God of Biblical times, who parted the Red Sea and brought plagues down onto the Egyptians is no longer a reality. Rather God exists within us if we allow Him.

Y----H! also includes two other works, *Golem I* (Figure 23, p. 89) and *Golem II* (Figure 24, p. 90), each an out-of-focus silver print tinted a deep shade of blue. Stamped

¹⁵⁰ Edward Feld, *The Spirit of Jewish Renewal: Finding Faith After the Holocaust* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 141.

on the foreheads of the two unknown children is the word *emet*, which means truth in Hebrew. Glass explains: “I chose children because I picture children as being a symbol of hope and positivity and looking towards the future.”¹⁵¹ A golem is a creature from Jewish folklore that was made out of clay and brought to life to protect the Jews. But a golem can be unmanageable and unpredictable, so the word *emet* was inscribed on its forehead as a way of stopping it. To enact the power of *emet* the letter *aleph* (*e*) had to be removed, leaving the word *met*, or death. A well-known and often discussed golem legend comes from sixteenth century Prague. According to the legend, when Rabbi Löw created a golem to protect the city’s Jews, he was forced “to ‘unmake’ him because he had grown afraid of the creature he had created, for the *Golem*, waxing drunk with the immense power he was wielding, menaced the entire Jewish community.”¹⁵² Viewers familiar with this folktale would have understood that Glass was playing with these two words. The truth (true reality) of these children’s lives was death. For Glass, these symbols of hope were silenced, or stopped, by death, just as the golem was.

Included in the catalogue for *Mi Makir* is an essay by Herbert Aronoff entitled *Lightening the Dark by Darkening the Light*. His descriptions of Chaki’s corpse-like faces help illuminate the similarities between Chaki and Glass’ work. Aronoff describes the images as “unstoppable, like the fabled *Golem*, they invade [Chaki’s] space and demand their birthright, dictating the terms of their own existence: to live to witness what is lost through abuse and what can be born from it.”¹⁵³ Another similarity is that both Chaki and Glass use faces inscribed with powerful symbols (words and numbers) to

¹⁵¹ Cindy Waxer, “Photo images, Hebrew text joined in compelling exhibit,” *Canadian Jewish News*, 27 February 1997.

¹⁵² Nathan Ausubel, “The Golem,” *The Book of Jewish Knowledge*, The First Electronic Jewish Bookshelf (Scanrom Publishers, 1994).

¹⁵³ Jansma and Aronoff, 38.

articulate what has been lost in the Holocaust. Just as Glass' *Golem* images show us that the truth of the children's lives was death, Chaki accepts "the unavoidable truth that these were lives abruptly ended, without the hope of summation."¹⁵⁴

In the above discussion an attempt has been made to relate Chaki's work in *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing*, which presents us with corpses, to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, which holds that corpses are the ultimate abjection. Chaki also shows us death, which Kristeva explains is constantly being thrust aside by individuals in an effort to avoid becoming the ultimate abjection (a corpse). But it would be a disservice to look at *Mi Makir* as purely an illustration of Kristeva's theory. Rather it should be acknowledged that Chaki has painted a memorial to those who have been lost.

Although Yehouda Chaki was only a young child throughout the war he claims to remember much from his years in hiding. *Mi Makir* is an expression of those memories. For decades the artist remained silent while inside his studio the Holocaust and his works consumed him. Year after year he produced faces, of his family and of strangers, who gaze out at the viewer and remind us that their lives were cut short through no fault of their own. Unlike Glass' works, which specifically address the Holocaust, Chaki's production does not simply reference the past. The Holocaust was the event that brought the notion of genocide into popular discourse, but for Chaki, *Mi Makir* is also about remembering those who have perished in recent times in atrocities that were prompted by hatred.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 41.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The principal objective of this thesis is to analyse works of art dealing with the Holocaust by three Canadian Jewish artists in relation to the contemporary philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Hannah Arendt and Julia Kristeva, respectively. These artists were selected because their lives were inextricably linked to the Holocaust: Iskowitz as a Holocaust survivor, Applebaum a child of parents who are Holocaust survivors, and Chaki who is a survivor and went into hiding with his parents and brother for the duration of the war. This thesis demonstrates how some texts by the three philosophers provide a philosophically based interpretive framework in which to consider the artists' works. The premise is that art has both an aesthetic and ethical dimension. As such, the aesthetic experience of art by the viewer may also constitute a sympathetic reflection on ethical issues. More specifically, the intention here is to suggest the diversity of contemporary philosophical writings that can relate to the Holocaust, as well as the different mediums and methods in which Canadian artists have chosen to explore this subject.

While Iskowitz's works are seen as paralleling the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, they can also be contemplated in light of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. This is most evident when one considers Iskowitz's statements about why, when trapped in dire circumstances, he risked his life to continue making art. He explains: "In the camp painting was a necessity for survival."¹⁵⁵ But we know this to be untrue. In fact, he risked survival by continuing to produce art, an activity for which he would have been killed or severely beaten had he been caught. Nonetheless, Iskowitz's words carry truth, as can be seen in his art as well as in Kristeva's concept of abjection.

¹⁵⁵ Lerner, 9.

Kristeva explains that art is “catharsis par excellence” and a “means of *purifying* the abject.”¹⁵⁶ The scenes that Iskowitz witnessed and later painted, such as the ruthless murder of a child (*Action*, Figure 1), and the men being selected before being led away to die (*Buchenwald*, Figure 3; *Selection Auschwitz*, Figure 4) would certainly have elicited the feeling of revulsion and “brutish suffering” that Kristeva claims one feels when plagued by the abject.¹⁵⁷ Yet by continuing to document what he saw around him Iskowitz, was able to purify the abject. While drawing did not necessarily lessen the horror of what was happening, it was the means by which Iskowitz, if only for a few moments, released some of the emotions he was repressing (catharsis).

Kristeva states: “discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confronts that ... deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject.”¹⁵⁸ After the war Iskowitz continued to produce works that recalled his experiences in the concentration camps, despite the abject nature of his memories. In light of the cited statement by Kristeva, one might say that in carrying on this work after leaving the camps Iskowitz was ensuring that the discourse continued; that there would always be an awareness of the events of the Holocaust.

Isaac Applebaum’s *Man Makes Himself* is explored as an exemplification of Hannah Arendt’s thoughts as revealed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. However *Man Makes Himself* also illustrates some of the concepts of Levinas’ ethical philosophy. In his essay “Politics After!” originally published in 1979, Levinas states: “Anti-Semitism is not simply the hostility felt by a majority towards a minority, nor only xenophobia, nor any ordinary racism ... It

¹⁵⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

is a repugnance felt for the unknown within the psyche of the Other, for the mystery of its interiority.”¹⁵⁹ This passage seems to address some of the issues that Applebaum illucidates in *Man Makes Himself*. In particular, Applebaum’s use of the Keegstra affair, illustrates Levinas’ point that it is the unknown within the Other that brings about racism. Throughout his life Keegstra had had almost no interaction in his life with Jewish people, yet a good deal of his life was spent convincing others that Jewish people were duplicitous, scheming and repugnant. Although Levinas states that much of his thought is “dominated by ... the memory of the Nazi horror,”¹⁶⁰ he goes onto to explain that the Holocaust is only one of the many horrors that plague the history of the twentieth century: “a century which in thirty years has known two world wars, totalitarianisms of the left and right, Hiroshima, the gulags, the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia.”¹⁶¹ With the inclusion of the portraits of the Chinese men and women, *Man Makes Himself* reminds us of the totality of human suffering, not just that of the Jewish people.

The relevance of Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy to Yehouda Chaki’s *Mi Makir* is a third example. Although Arendt seems more concerned with discussing the perpetrators of the crimes rather than the victims who are Chaki’s concern, it is still possible to draw parallels between her writings and his works. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt spends a great deal of time discussing concentration camps. She views concentration camps as an integral part of the totalitarian state because this is where the regime can exercise total domination. She further explains that totalitarian

¹⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Politics After!” *The Levinas Reader*, ed., Sean Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 279-80.

¹⁶⁰ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 291.

¹⁶¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-a-l’autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1993), 114. This passage was given in translation in Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 143.

movements are focused on implementing a “*population policy* that consists of regular elimination of surplus people.”¹⁶² What Chaki presents to the viewer are these so-called *surplus* people, men women and children who were eliminated by the Nazi regime because they were considered superfluous.

Arendt also explains: “There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death.”¹⁶³ Having never experienced the camps himself Chaki’s only frame of reference were the stories he had heard and his imagination. He explains that after moving to Montreal: “I started some drawings, mostly of those who died in the concentration camps.”¹⁶⁴ Unable to fully comprehend the concentration camp experience Chaki chose to execute imaginative renderings of the people who had perished. In the end what he produced were numerous drawings of people who had not survived. We know who they are by the numbers in the top right-hand corners of the images, yet we can only imagine what they once looked like or what they experienced.

According to Michael Berenbaum in his text *The World Must Know: the history of the Holocaust as told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*: “the central theme of the Holocaust is not regeneration and rebirth, goodness or resistance, liberation or justice, but death and destruction, dehumanization and devastation, and, above all, loss.”¹⁶⁵ He says this despite the fact that people were saved through acts of kindness or that some found moments of inspiration in the terror, for Berenbaum, the Holocaust is

¹⁶² Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 437.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 444.

¹⁶⁴ Jansma and Aronoff, 23.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The Story of the Holocaust as told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 220.

ultimately the story of the needless death of six million Jews, as well as millions of other innocent people.

Finally, it should be noted that while constant re-examination of history is necessary we should not turn a blind eye to the present. When one looks at the Holocaust representations of Gershon Iskowitz, Isaac Applebaum and Yehouda Chaki one should not only see the past, but should also meditate on the present, and be concerned for the future. Their works should call the viewer to ethical action. As the artists well know, we all play a part in ensuring that we never forget.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Gershon Iskowitz. *Action* (1941).



Figure 2. Gershon Iskowitz. *Condemned* (1945).

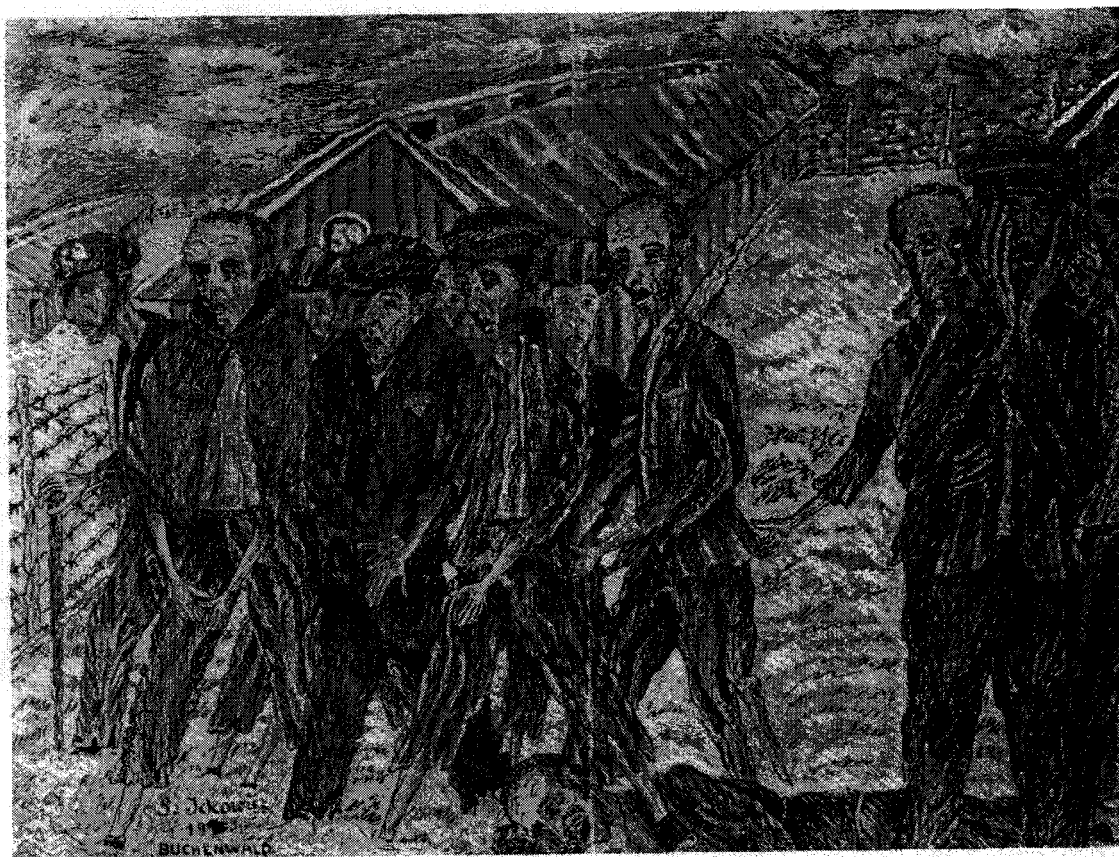


Figure 3. Gershon Iskowitz. *Buchenwald* (1944-45).



Figure 4. Gershon Iskowitz. *Selection Auschwitz* (1947).



Figure 5. Gershon Iskowitz. *Torah* (1951).

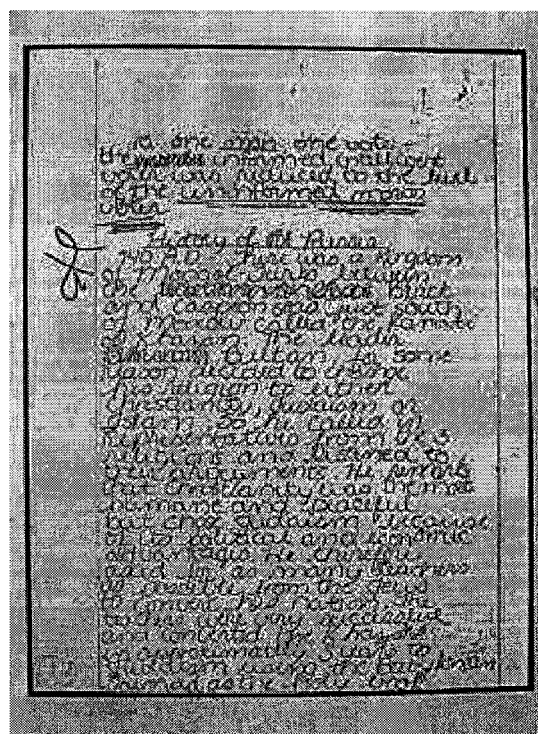


Figure 6. Isaac Applebaum. "Page from Jim Keegstra Notebook." *Man Makes Himself* (1985).



Figure 7. Isaac Applebaum. “Keegstra Poster.” *Man Makes Himself* (1985).



Figure 8. Isaac Applebaum. "Detail from installation." *Man Makes Himself* (1985).

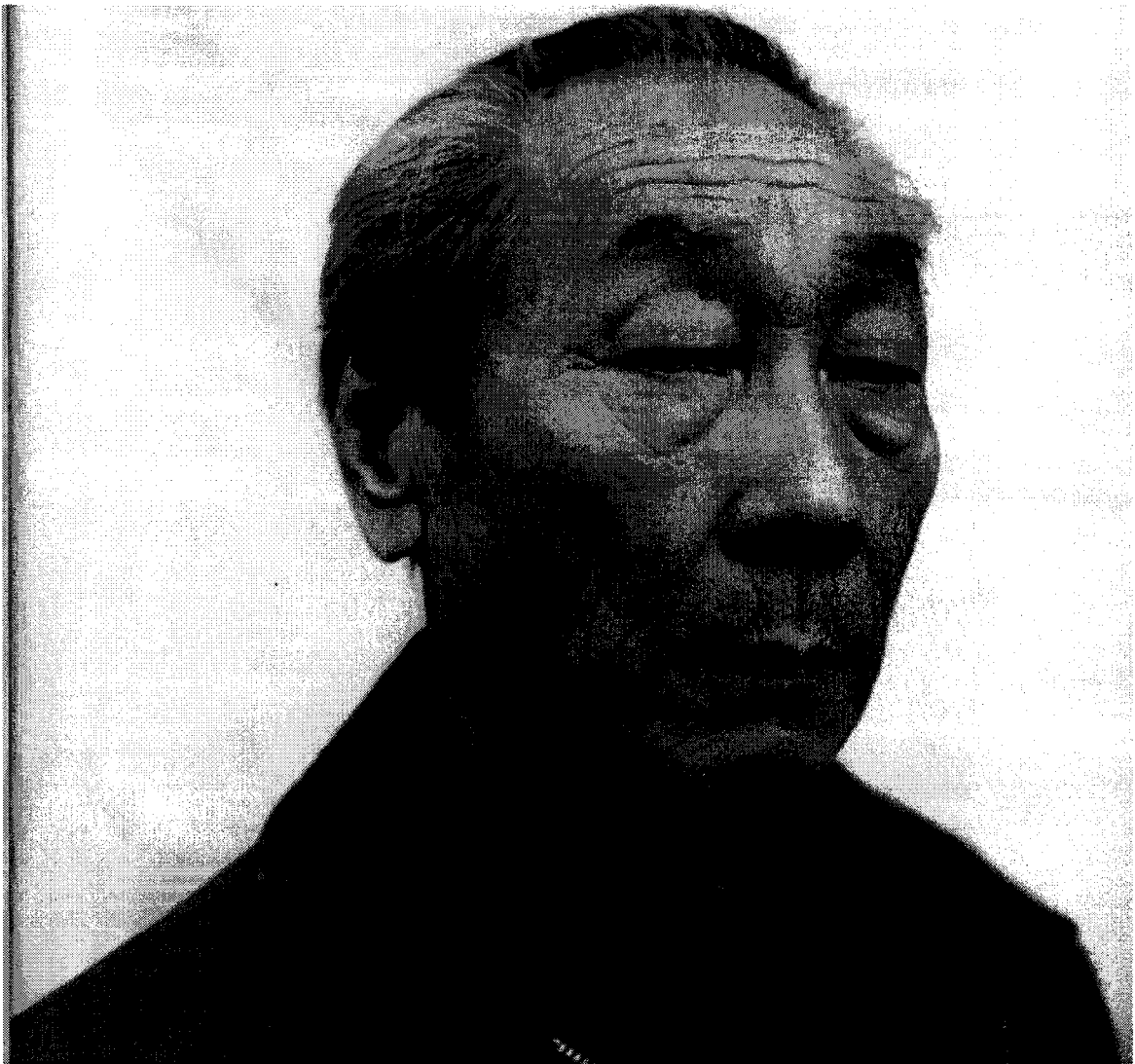


Figure 9. Isaac Applebaum. "Detail from installation." *Man Makes Himself* (1985).



Figure 10. Isaac Applebaum. “Detail from installation.” *Man Makes Himself* (1985).

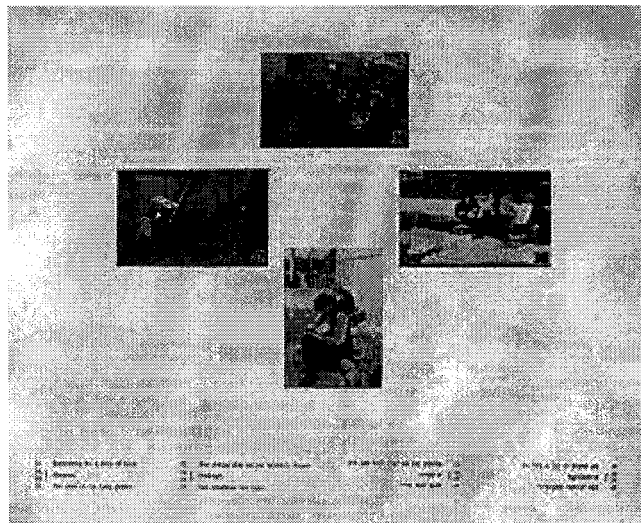


Figure 11. Isaac Applebaum. "Page from Holocaust scrapbook." *Man Makes Himself* (1985).



Figure 12. Isaac Applebaum. "Detail from Holocaust scrapbook." *Man Makes Himself* (1985).



Figure 13. Isaac Applebaum. "Detail from Holocaust scrapbook." *Man Makes Himself* (1985).

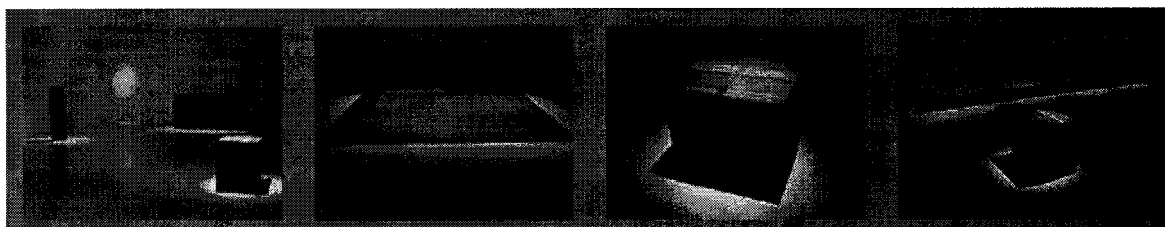


Figure 14. Alfredo Jaar. "Four views of the installation." *Real Pictures* (1994).

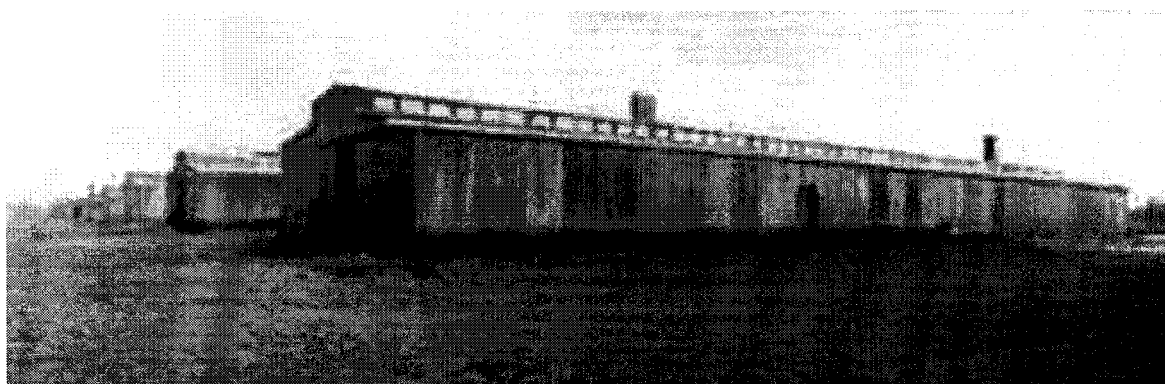


Figure 15. Jack Burman. *“Remain Silent”*: *Auschwitz-Birkenau* (1994-1997).



Figure 16. Jack Burman. *“Remain Silent”*: *Auschwitz-Birkenau* (1994-1997).



Figure 17. Anonymous. *Facing Death: Portraits from Cambodia's Killing Fields* (1998).

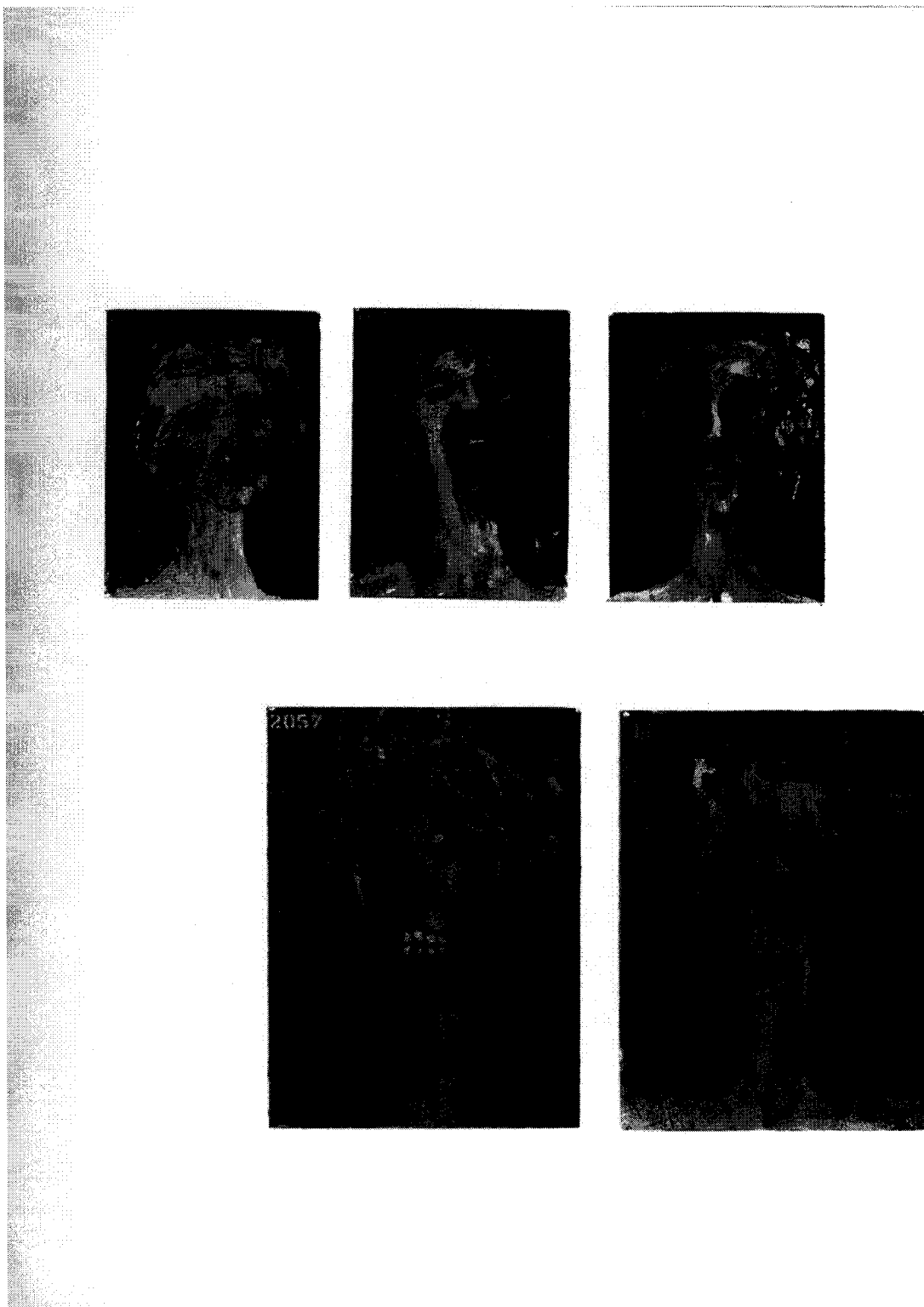


Figure 18. Yehouda Chaki. “Detail from the installation.” *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing* (1999).

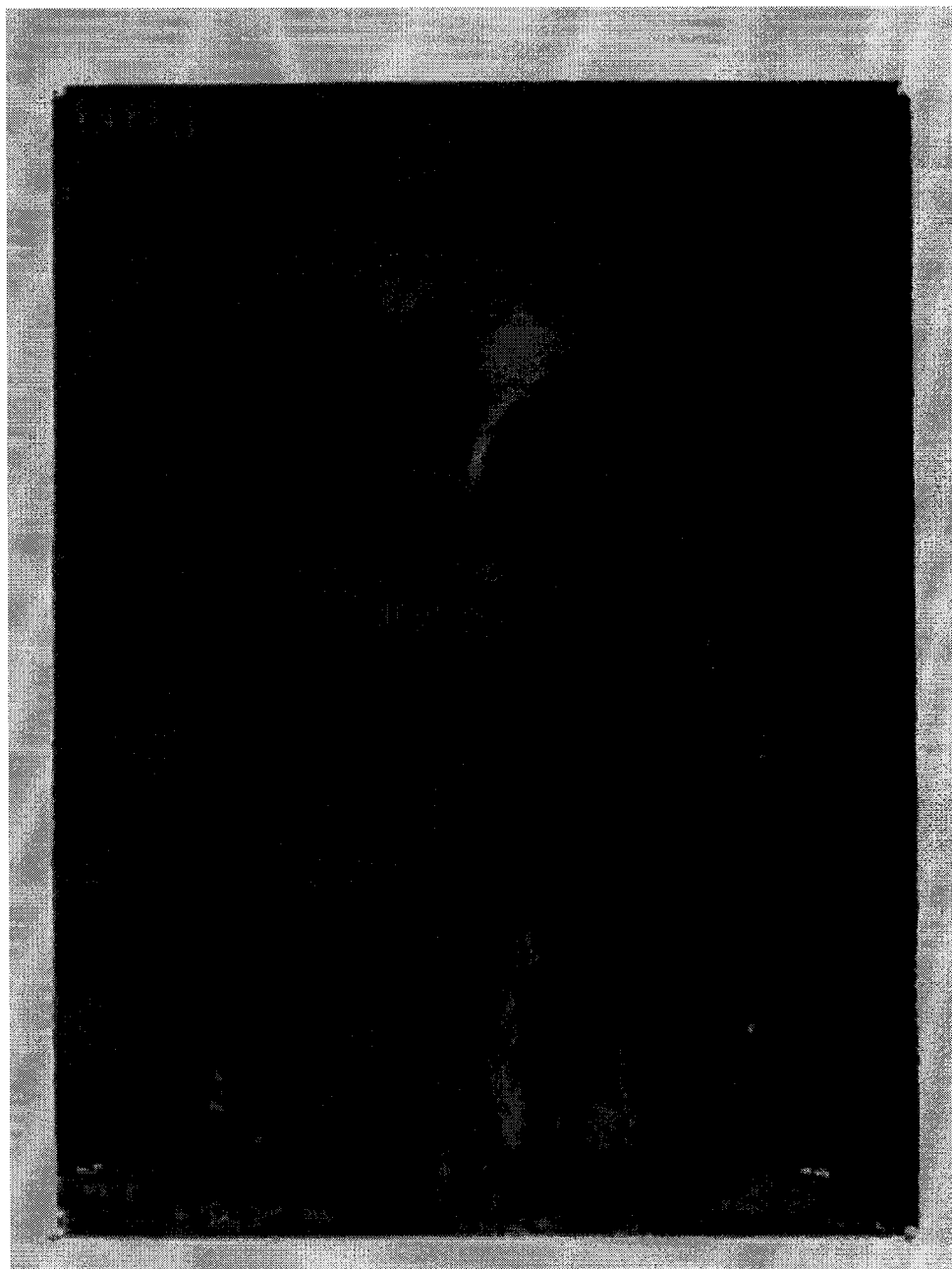


Figure 19. Yehouda Chaki. “Detail from the installation.” *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing* (1999).

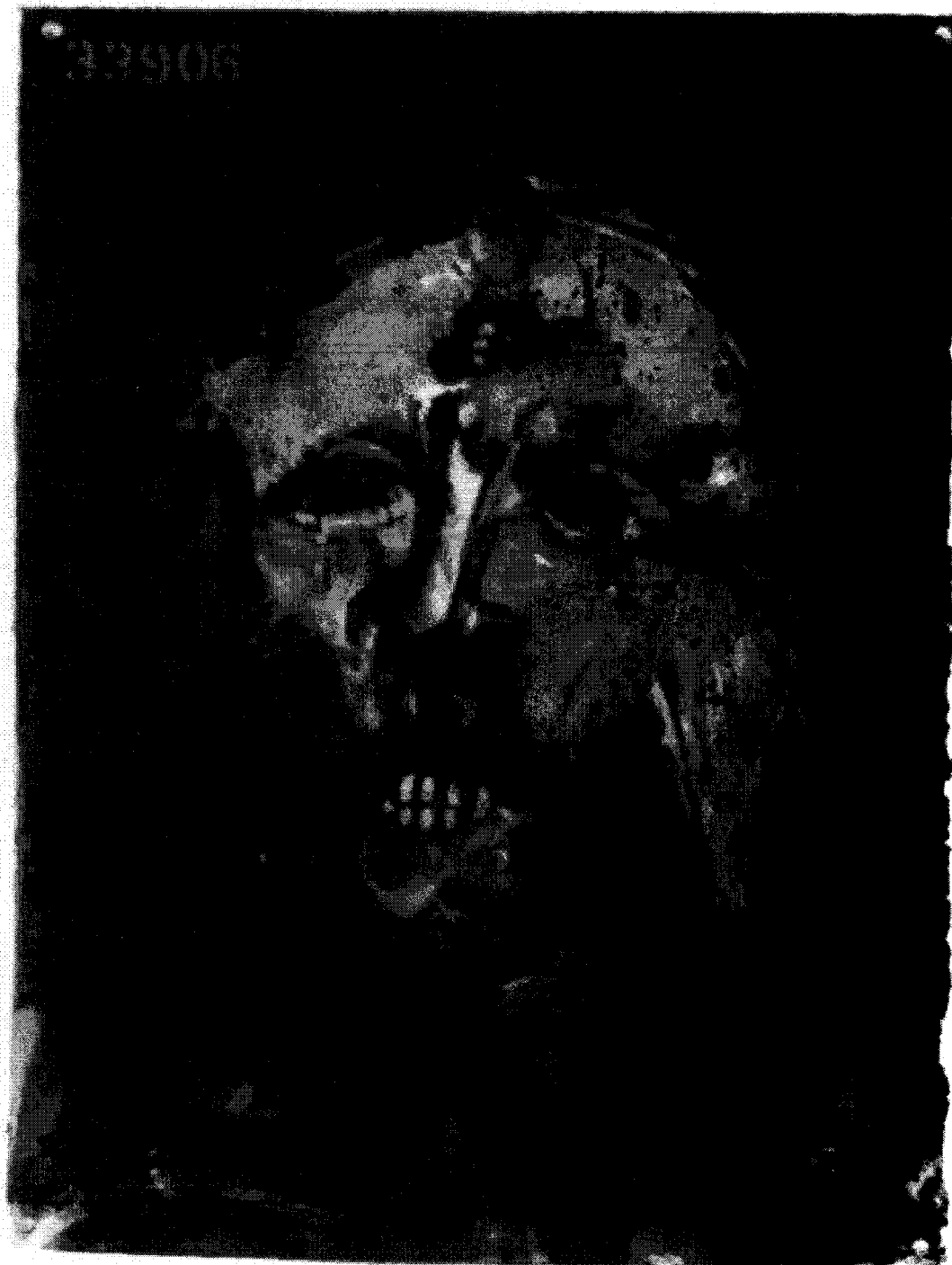


Figure 20. Yehouda Chaki. "Detail from the installation." *Mi Makir: A Search for the Missing* (1999).

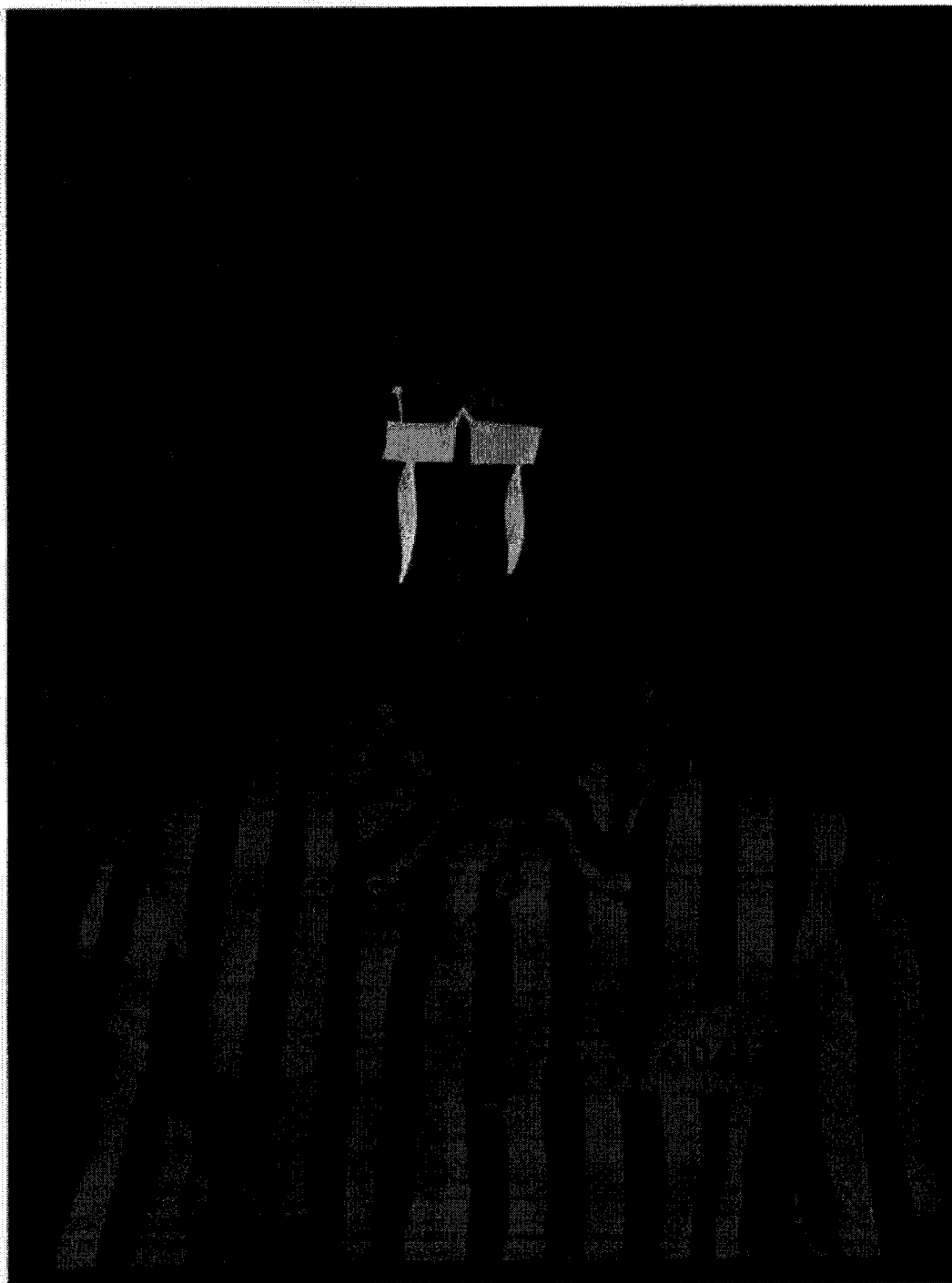


Figure 21. Simon Glass. "Merciful and Gracious." (1995) *Y---H!* (1997).

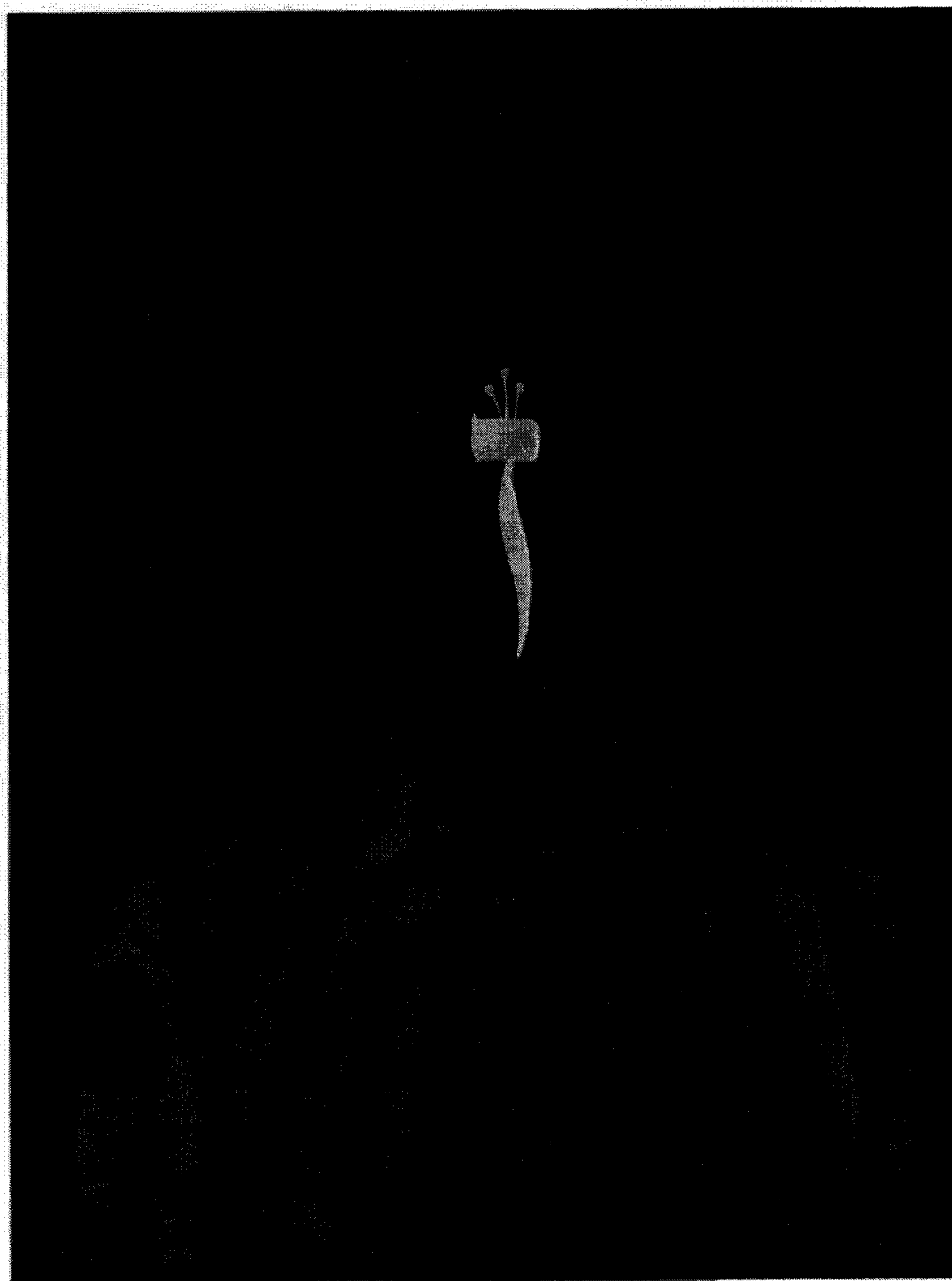


Figure 22. Simon Glass. "Merciful and Gracious." (1995) *Y---H!* (1997).

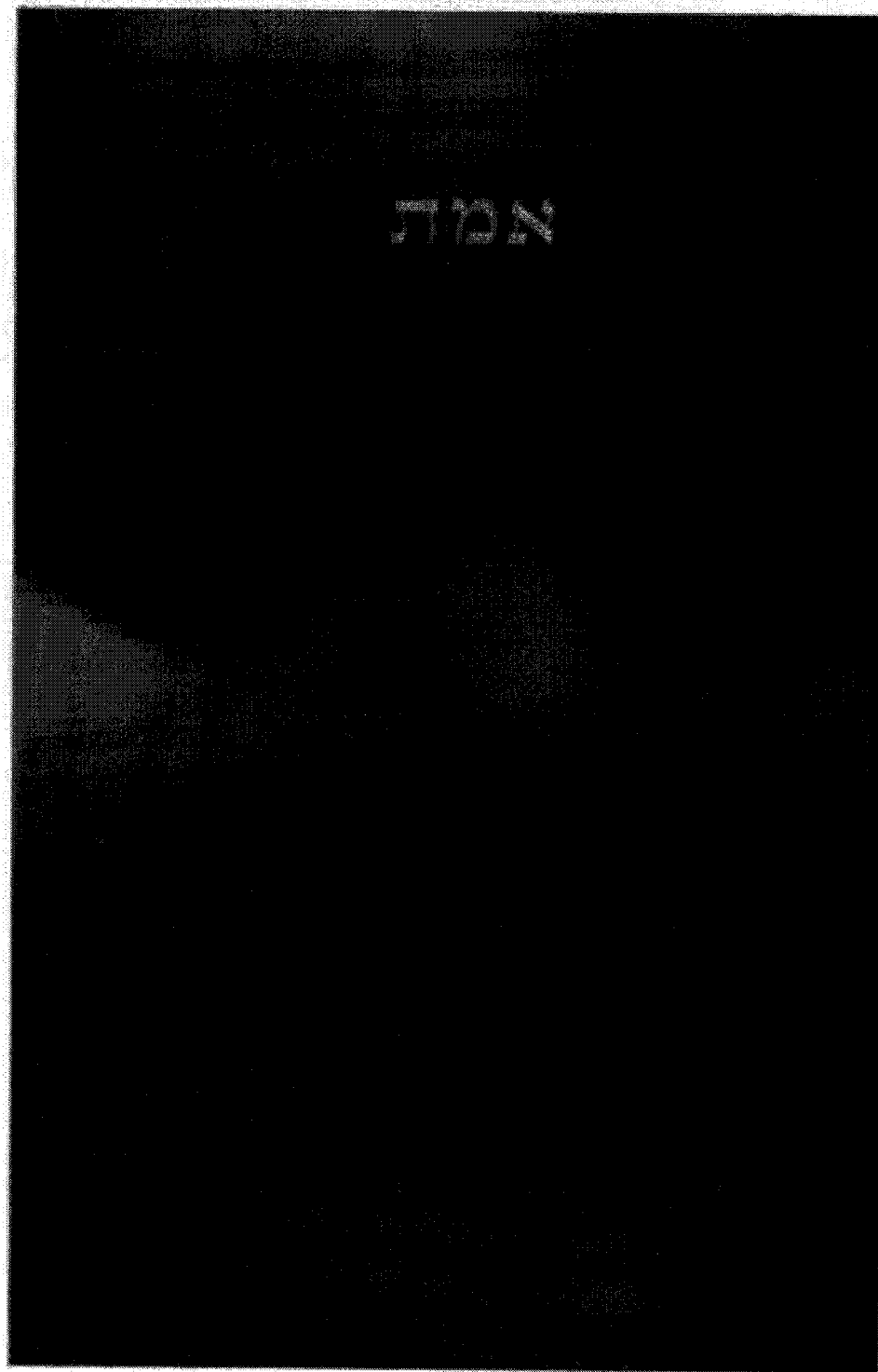


Figure 23. Simon Glass. "Golem I." (1995) *Y---H!* (1997).

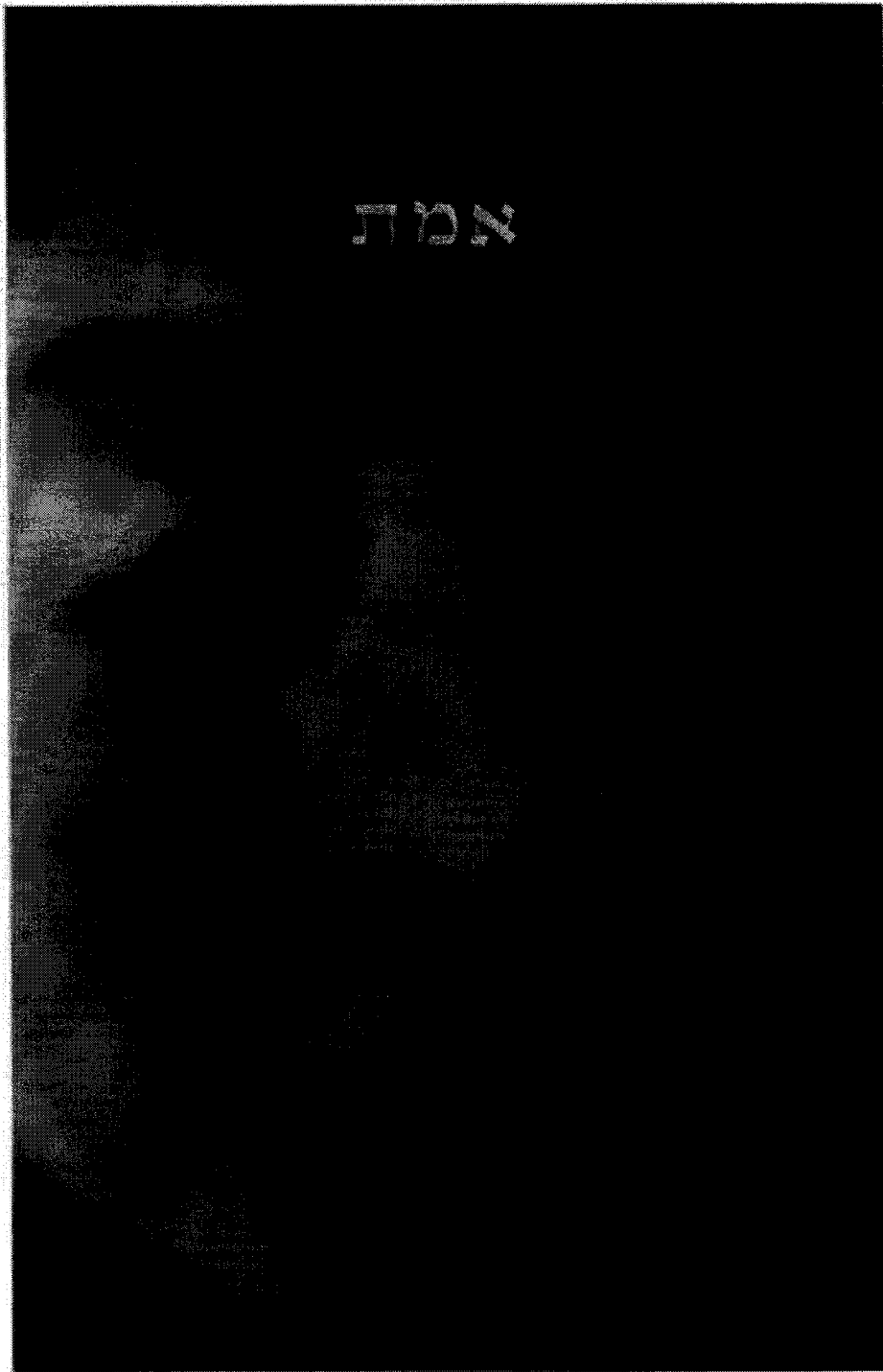


Figure 24. Simon Glass. “Golem II.” (1995) *Y---H!* (1997).

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