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ARTSCENE

Art Apartment Exhibit Takes Viewers on Concentration Camp Journey

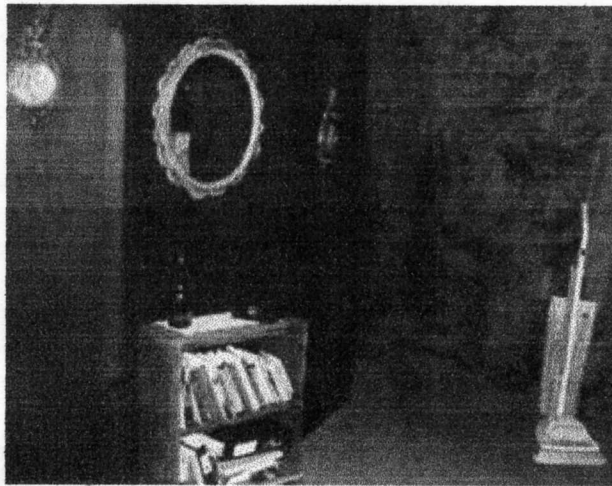


By Alison Corlett

Unmistakably, one of the finest installations I have seen in years opens to the public Sunday at The Art Apartment in East Lansing. Local artist Susan Hensel has created a two-room world not to be missed titled "Kristallnacht: The Bystanders."

Reflecting on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, identified as the "beginning" of the Holocaust in Germany, Susan has formulated an environment that screams "pay attention!"

She says, "Kristallnacht was a prominent, visible, historical event that can remind us of all the hidden, unseen, historical and contemporary excuses and abuses that we as humans seem so willing to create." She adds that this particular subject is a concern to her because, "we humans have always created tribes of 'us' and 'them'... of 'our own kind' and 'enemy'." To step inside this exhibit is to confront these issues head-on.



With one foot through the front door the viewer is transported back to a 1940s or '50s living room. A Women's Home Companion magazine occupies the seat of a wingback chair; a vintage lamp rests atop an aged end table. Catching a glimpse of my own reflection in an antique mirror I am reminded of my presence in the room. Directly below the mirror a small bookcase houses a collection of themed reading: "Convoy to Auschwitz," "Against Forgetting," "Auschwitz and After." The room is dimly lit and peaceful. A simple and uncomplicated life is lived in this room.

Before I could walk into the next space, I had to stop to examine the wall treatment. Word after word is etched out on stained cloth stretching floor to ceiling. At first it appeared to be random German words scribed in countless rows of black marker. Not until I spoke with Hensel did I become fully aware that each word was a name of a concentration camp. The thousands of names boggled my mind. It seemed a completely impossible fact to realize. Just the time it took Hensel and her assistant, Scott Wilson, to write every name was immeasurable. The artistic effect of the draped muslin, splashed and soiled, adds to the antique feel of the room but also closes in the walls. A sense of what's to come hangs over me as I lead my way toward the next entrance.



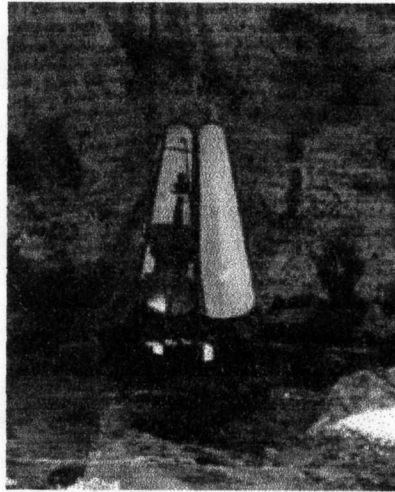
Around the corner is an entirely different experience. Small vignettes spread throughout the space explore various subjects. Along one wall stands an altar built of cast hands, blackened as if dead and buried, reaching up toward a German Bible. Stained with years, it is open to hand-written messages like, "Humans have wrought. If not the Gods must be crazy." I noticed a pen dangling from the lectern and wondered if this display is intended for interaction. When I asked Hensel about it she said that she placed the pen there hoping people would have the courage to come and respond.

At the base of the altar are more cast hands, this time in white, pointing inward like arrows. Above are two low-lit bulbs splattered with black paint. The detail and preparation is evident in every inch of the installation.

A burlap bag, piled high and over-flowing with black coals, sits below a Christ figure glowing from inside an alcove. I cannot see the coals without feeling the symbolism. Directly across the room piles of salt radiate below an angelic paper face lit from the inside out. Hensel placed these elements, coal and salt, to balance one another highlighting purity and destruction.

Stacks of wax, resembling bars of gold, are more questioning. Hensel said she finds wax evocative. The scent relates to honey on the altar. Her son thought it was Nazi Gold. Whatever the meaning, Hensel described it is an intuitive decision. Another such decision was a violin resting in its case perched on a coil of hand-dyed red rope. The rope itself doesn't hold any meaning but was a "convenient

design element" said Hensel.



A beautifully designed scissor display was a definite favorite. Collections of scissors perfectly arranged to dangle from the ceiling with blades exposed cascade to the floor where more are lumped in a pile. This installation is not only reminiscent of the all the possessions hoarded and piled by the Nazis but it is also a physically threatening display.

To round off the exhibit Hensel edited her own sound that fills the air with rattling, breaking glass ovetop a high pitched, eerie instrumental with haunting female voices. Matching perfectly with my surroundings, the music left me anxious for peace and serenity.

I am sure that each viewer will take away a unique experience from this installation. "It's a lot of work," Wilson said. "It adds to the impressiveness - the names and places." Hensel said she has worked with these themes for years, "I've just never done any this huge."

The show opens noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. It can also be seen by appointment; call 930-1052. The Art Apartment is located at 210 Abbott Rd. Suite 12 in downtown East Lansing.

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