

## ***NMAJH presents Bruce Gendelman's 'Sifting Through Ashes'***

### **When memory fails, art survives**

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The photographs are deceptively serene. A low stone building in a field of dry brown grass, a clearing in a forest marked by a low curb, a window with an endless view. These bucolic pictures were made in 2015 by Bruce Gendelman in what remains of the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. His photographs and paintings are now on view in *Sifting Through Ashes* at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH).



*Bruce Gendelman's "Portal," 2015. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History)*

Gendelman, a Florida-based photographer and painter, traveled to southern Poland and Ukraine to see the place where his relatives met their fate in the Holocaust. Later, he put his emotional meditations about the experience on canvas.

Time has transformed Auschwitz-Birkenau into something that might have been painted by Andrew Wyeth. But from 1940 to 1945, 1.3 million people, most Jewish, were deported here,

and 1.1 million died in ways so shocking and inhumane, that 70 years have done nothing to erase the horror from the mind, if not the landscape. But because these events are rapidly moving to the precipice of living memory, today's quiet scenes might not always engender the revulsion they should.

## Objective photographs

Gendelman is determined not to let that happen. His paintings are infused with emotions that cannot be denied. He grew up with stories of the Holocaust; his father served in World War II was a prisoner of war, and his mother's family having originated Austria-Hungary, what is now Ukraine.

Had Gendelman's maternal grandfather at 17 not defied his father and immigrated to Palestine from the small town of Bolechow, he might have suffered the fate of 1,000 of Bolechow's 4,000 Jews. In 1941, they were rounded up, tortured, shot, and buried in a mass grave. "Taniawa Forest Massacre Site" (2015) depicts the forest clearing where victims are buried.

Gendelman's photographs depend on viewer understanding. In "Mountains of Dishware" (2015), dishes and pots are stacked, a chipped and colorful monument to deportees who packed them believing they were leaving for a future in which they'd need such things. The belongings were soon confiscated, hope shattered.

In "Portal" (2015), he places us low to the ground. Focal lines converge on a black hole, an archway through which trains delivered prisoners. Without context, it might be the entrance to a stable or a farm building. Instead, it was a passage to hell.

## Visceral paintings

In the paintings, Gendelman plunges us into a churning sea of fear, confusion, and despair which convulse the canvas in thick, choppy, black waves. Without titles, or historical knowledge of any kind, it is still obvious something terrible is referenced in "Birkenau Deathscape 1, 2, and 3," ("View From the Far Wire," "Road to Hell," and "Sacrificial Burning," all from 2016) impressionistic works that trace a prisoner's path.



*Gendelman's "Sacrificial Deathscape 3, Sacrificial Burning," 2016. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History)*

In another series, "Birkenau Barracks Memorial" (2015), four huge canvasses depict chimneys, the only remnants of Auschwitz-Birkenau's prisoner quarters. Gendelman applied paint with a trowel, the same tool inmates used in constructing the brick towers. Though more representational than the "Deathscapes," the images vibrate with emotion.

## Resolution

Having used both media to best advantage, showing what the eye and heart see, Gendelman then offers two photographs that give us an opportunity to ponder what transpired in this place.

From the second floor of a women's domicile, "Barrack Vista" (2015) looks out through a window divided into quarters by mullions. A low ceiling cuts off the view of the window, transforming the wood mullions into a crucifix. In "Silent Witness to History" (2015) a pair of trees dwarf the camp, which appears as just a rough edge across the landscape. Perhaps those trees were here then, a viewer might muse, thriving -- like so many survivors and their descendants -- despite what they witnessed.

## Remembrance

Gendelman wants viewers to understand that something else survived the Holocaust, too. The hatred that burned so bright, turning souls to ashes, smolders still, ready to flare when conditions conspire. If that would happen, who can say which of us might be among the persecutors or persecuted?

"Birkenau Bunks Diorama" (2016) drives the point home. The viewer stands between two rows of rough wooden bunks which open like a maw. Stuffed into the bunks are more than 50 occupants in varying stages of distress, lives ebbing. Gendelman has given each prisoner his face.

In an [interview](#), Gendelman explained, "The extermination of six million of my fellow Jews, by men in power in a civilized society, a society not unlike ours today, is unspeakable in its depravity. I feel compelled to convey to the best of my ability, to anyone who will listen, complicated multiple threads that brought this about...to teach young people how to critically understand the influences around them."

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### ARTICLE OVERVIEW

In the National Museum of American Jewish History's 'Sifting Through Ashes,' Bruce Gendelman's paintings and photographs revisit the Holocaust as it begins to fade from living memory. Pam Forsythe reviews.

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### WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

*Sifting Through Ashes*. Paintings and photographs by Bruce Gendelman. Through January 7, 2018 at the National Museum of American Jewish History, 101 S. Independence Mall East, Fifth and Market Streets, Philadelphia. (215) 923-3811 or [nmajh.org](http://nmajh.org).