

White Parachute- CATALOGUE ESSAY (May 13 2013)

BY DR JULIE COTTER FOR WHITE PARACHUTE EXHIBITION by Lisa Swards

There is a moment in Edmund de Waal's *The Hare With Amber Eyes* that is pivotal to his eventual attraction to the strangeness of his inheritance of 264 netsuke. He decides to place one in his pocket for a day. Thus, throughout the day he secretly rolls the thing from one finger to the next and as a result is seduced into discovering the origin of the collection. He sources through the netsuke a story of his family that encompasses the extravagance of a past century as much as it exposes the horrors of war.

Things provide clues to memories and become a part of our identity as we search for connections. When Melbourne artist Lisa Swards began to investigate a childhood photograph of her Belurussian mother taken during her internment in a northern German camp during WW2, it was the silky white ribbons tied in her mother's hair that attracted. Silky white ribbons in the midst of a dark grey camp. They shone symbolically of hope and a girl's dreams. Swards plays with those dreams in her latest body of work exploring the origins of those ribbons.

For five years Swards' mother remained in that displaced persons camp. As each day passed time gradually stripped away the dream of any opportunity to enjoy the play of a free and inviolate childhood. The resonance of this story with the plight of global refugees does not go unnoticed, particularly in relation to the incarceration of children.

The white ribbons in Swards' mother's hair were the result of an abandoned parachute that was retrieved by the women and children in the camp to make new dresses, underwear and, of course, the ribbons. In keeping with her contemporary reconstruction, Swards sourced a similar white parachute that had been used in WW2. She not only incorporates the resplendent object into her photographs, paintings and printmaking but also exhibits the parachute beside the resultant works providing the opportunity to reflect upon that moment of discovery.

Through Sward's reconstruction she creates a postmemory of the space of that parachute falling into the lives of those in the camp. Swards, like most children of camp survivors, is engaged in a process that is not yet complete and may never find resolution. The silence of the falling white parachute is akin to the silence of her mother in relation to the events of those years.

Swards imbues her work with a poetic stillness that suggests notions of reflection and passiveness. In *What Have We Lost*, Swards' daughter (who stands in for her Belurussian grandmother) gazes through the trees upon the sheer blissful whiteness of the silky folds. The gap between past and present is bridged through an imaginary play with the emotions evoked through memory.

While the grandmother/daughter play the role of observer in the majority of Swards' works, it is the forest that provides the singularly German framework for the manifestations of that time seventy years ago. "Landscapes are culture

before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.”<sup>1</sup> So states Simon Schama as the premise of his foray into an understanding of the intellectual framework with which we regard landscape. Schama excavates, through his meticulous research, the militant nationalism associated with the deep, dark German forests.

Sewards, in order to invoke that German forest in her work and, in an appropriate subversion of the actual historical setting, photographs the forest near her property at Shoreham. It is here that her children now run, play and hide. There was no need to photograph the original forest for the artist is creating an image of that distant silent memory through contemporary associations. These Shoreham/German trees are blackened by the printer’s ink and now form foreboding silhouettes against the billowing parachute and its promise of another life in *Landscape From Memory*. Yet the trees turn a disturbing red in *Untitled (Circa 1945)* as the touchingly small child clutches the hand of the man beside her. Could that be her father who had defied the Russian Communist party, an act that had set in chain this series of events?

Sewards incorporates her love for her small child and the trees adjacent to her property to inform her one remnant from her mother’s childhood; the photograph from the camp. With the addition of the WW2 parachute, she brings within our realm a reflection that is suggestive of hope rather than trauma during a time that we configure not to completely comprehend.

Dr Julie Cotter, 2013