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Stone, Earth and Photography

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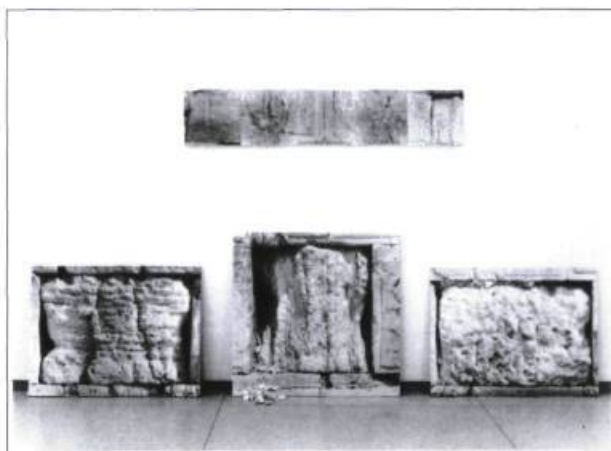
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Isaac Applebaum, *Cruelty of Stone = Western Wall-Jerusalem*, 1990.
Silver prints and paper; 14 x 6 po

**Isaac Applebaum, photographic installation,
Saidye Bronfman Gallery
May 8th to 29th 1990 —**

The concept of identity as defined within the categories of race, history, culture and sexuality are explored in the photographic installations of Isaac Applebaum. Traditionally the photograph has acted as documentary evidence, fulfilled a narrative function or been displayed as portrait. These aspects of the medium are confounded by Applebaum's investigation into their ideological nature, where the construction of meaning is based on racial and sexual stereotypes.

Applebaum's installations include both sculptural elements such as stone and earth, and photography. Several of the artist's intimate sculptural works are personal and religious in nature. Other sculptures are physical representations of photographed objects. Photography and sculpture both complement and oppose one another in Applebaum's installations. The artist's inclusion of sculpture represents a skepticism with regard to photography's capability to depict reality. On the other hand, the documentary nature of many of the photographs indicates an acceptance of photography to represent and affirm the world.

Applebaum's Jewish heritage, which includes his family's experience of the Holocaust, is recognizable as the origin of much of his imagery. At the same time the work is enigmatic because of its intensely personal nature. Applebaum depicts the conflicts of the individual whose culture acts as both a ground and a restriction to his personal expression. This position of the artist is extended to the viewer, who is presented with a series of photographs whose ultimate intent is indeterminate: a

narration is alluded to but unresolved by both the artist's choice of imagery.... the "foreign" cultures that are its subject matter. Underlying the anxiety surrounding the photograph's use as state-ideological tool is the ever-present possibility of racial violence.

In three of the installations, portraits of individuals can be divided into specific cultural groups. In *Man Makes Himself*, photographs of ten persons are displayed on one wall. There are no particulars given of their lives, their origins or their community. The result is that these people can easily be lumped under a generic term, in this case Chinese. In the installation "Move", another group of photographs shows a mixture of races. Formally, art allows an equal treatment of these people; the photographs are taken roughly from the same angle, they are of the same quality, etc. But in reality equality among races is uncommon as consolidations of position and power by one race take place at the expense of another. The portrait photograph gives little evidence of such tensions. Nonetheless, Applebaum alludes to the suffering inherent in these conflicts in the rest of the installation. Two photographs of trees are propped up against the wall. On the floor in front of each are two objects made of rolled-up black clothing over whose ends have been stretched portrait photographs. The twists of cloth have a double meaning: they are both discarded articles and personal effects. Placed beneath the lush growth of the trees these objects appear as abbreviations of lives. The torn edges of the photographs, and the blackness of the cloth are representative of violence and death.

In another installation, *Un*, Applebaum uses animal skins as a ground for the photographic image. Hanging on the wall are three skins on which are photoengraved silhouette images of Hasidic Jews.

superficial representation of the individual: little of the interior life of the person can be inferred. Applebaum has further reduced any appreciation of individual characteristics in these skin portraits by displaying them as silhouettes. The subject matter is identifiable because of certain essential qualities of Hasidic dress. In that sense the artist's intention is similar to that of the portraits in *Man Makes Himself*. However, the skins also introduce a sensual aspect to the work and an element of mortality. Included in this installation are three sculptural pieces that are concerned with generation and sexuality. One work comprises of several small leather boxes containing coiled pieces of papers on which prayers are written. The boxes belonged to both the artist and his father and are used in Hebrew worship. Another sculpture, triangular in shape and topped with a dark brown layer of earth, is wedged into a corner of the wall. Above and to one side is a timber in which is nested a wax phallus.

In this latter work, the phallus is similar in structure to a worm, a concept supported by the darkly painted wood in which it rests. The worm-phallus's penetration of the wood is an interior vision regarding the vulnerability of the self. The boundaries of identity are related to the integrity of the body and the skin that encases it. Both penetration and procreation are associated with the death of the individual and the dissolution or fragmentation of identity.

This theme of boundaries is continued in Applebaum's most recent installation, the *Cruelty of Stone*. In one section of the work, two skins displaying the same photo of a young woman walking are hung on the wall. In front of them are two stones that have been dyed an earth red colour, and on the corner of one, twists of masking tape have been placed. One skin is torn, i.e., it has been acted upon violently. The recurring aspect of torsion, in this case the twists of tape, is expressive of despair and distress, and is reminiscent of the knotted clothing in the installation *Move*. The doubling of the image and stone is related to the anxiety of identity mentioned above. With the circulation of the photograph, the image is torn away from its real counterpart, the individual's uniqueness, and placed in unknown contexts. The image becomes an object that can be reproduced: it is depersonalized and seen by others who cannot relate it to its original context.

The artist's cautionary stance toward his medium continues in the same installation in both *Messages at the Western Wall*, and a wall piece. *Messages* displays five photographs of a wall in whose joints prayers have been inserted. Propped up on the floor are three more photographs showing the same wall with prayers, and in front of the middle one the artist has scattered real pieces of paper containing prayers. This echoing of the imagistic prayers to their real counterpart indicates that the image is not sufficient to contain or express the desire of both the artist and those who



Isaac Applebaum, *Cruelty of Stone : Searched Wall*, 1990.
Photo-etching-hemp-smoke

come to wall. The hidden, personal expression of desire continues in the artist's wall piece. Twine has been stretched between rows of nails to construct a scrim. It has then been burned with the result that streaks of smoke mark the wall above the piece. Behind the scrim are three photographs of a tree, all of which have been turned on their sides.

The scrim acts as a veil and prevents recognition of the image. Further difficulties of identification are caused by the unusual arrangement of the photographs. The fragility of the twine prevents the viewer from pulling it away from the wall to see what lies underneath. The spectator is teased with the desire to look at and understand the photographs. The piece maintains a gap between what is known and unknown, i.e., what is possessed and what cannot be possessed. The concept of veiling alludes to an idealist tradition where the essential form, the noumenon, exists beneath the imperfections, or veils of phenomena. Change occurs upon the materials of the veil, but the interior image remains intact. The veil is expressive of desire, and takes precedence over the photographs hidden underneath, as the desire expressed through the prayers in *Messages* resulted in their actual presence in the gallery. However, Applebaum seems to be proposing two ideas at once. The photographs are protected by the veil: thus the work has, at its core, a permanent and essential quality. But, because the photographs are difficult to make out, i.e. enigmatic, they themselves are veils to meaning. Any understanding of their essential significance is uncertain.

These ideas can be extended to the people whose portraits appear on the walls: their essential character as human beings must be protected. The danger lies in treating people as objects, as photographs can be treated, sorted, manipulated and categorized. The photograph can also be understood as a superficial representation of a person. What lies beneath the veiling of identity is difficult to discern: doubts always remain. It is here, because of the unknown aspects of the person, that fear and violence can be expressed.

Andrea Kunard