

Tracing Oblivion



Yael Atzmony's Sobibor Project

OCTOBER 2013 WAS THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE uprising of prisoners of the Sobibor death camp in Poland, the only uprising in the Nazi death camps that succeeded. Dov Freiberg, the father of Israeli ceramics artist Yael Atzmony, was one of the few survivors. The camp was razed to the ground by the SS with the intention to leave no trace. In 1945, Atzmony's father drew from memory a map of the camp layout. Some 30 maps of the camp, each different and executed by other survivors, SS officials and Russian soldiers, including Freiberg's map, lay unnoticed in a Polish archive and have only lately come to light. In the course of his life, Freiberg wrote five books on the subject. His daughter, Atzmony, was deeply marked by her father's war experiences. Triggered by the resurfacing of the maps, Atzmony resolved to confront and make sense of the elusive facts and to honour the victims' experiences through use of her

artistic medium. This would lead her to a Sisyphean process of investigation. She chose her father's drawing of the map as the axis around which her investigation would turn.

"I decided to work on memories that are not my own. How I could accomplish this, I didn't know." For this purpose Atzmony took out time from her own studio work and her busy teaching schedule at the Bezalel Art Academy in Jerusalem to take up a four-month residency to the European Keramik Work Centre in Den Bosch, Holland. There, she immersed herself into a long and profound research on several levels: the emotional confrontation with the trauma of this happening; the artistic translation of this rather diffuse need to approach the subject through the map of the Sobibor camp ground; and a search for the technical solutions for her ambitious artistic vision. Atzmony wanted to push herself to the limit of the possible in the way her father had confronted his own impossible situation. She wanted to "... give voice to that which has lost its body and the ability to speak". It is a tall order to find an accurately intimate and still artistically

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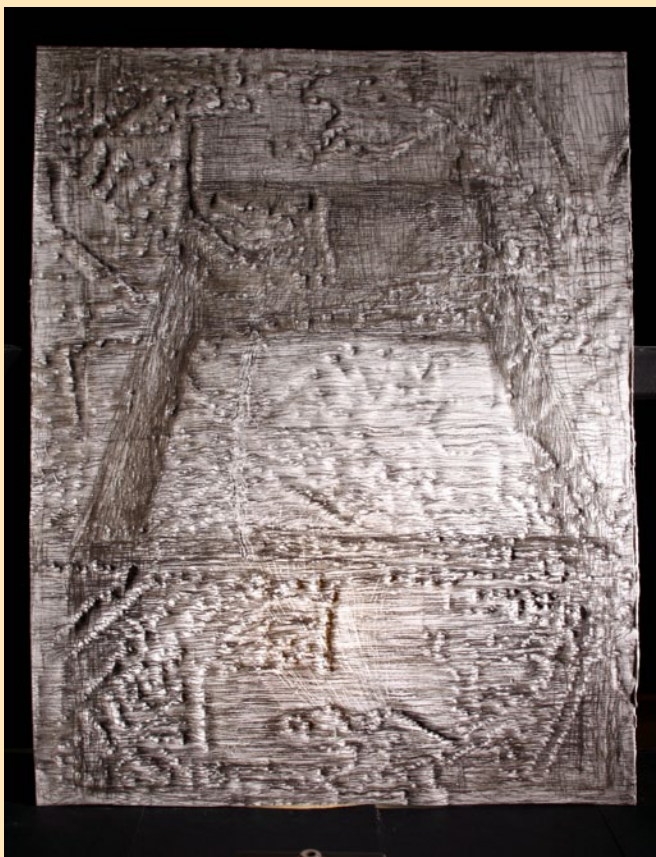


persuasive conceptual translation of such an elusive subject but Atzmony managed to carry it off in a most intriguing, exciting and convincing way.

Atzmony decided that this project had to be executed, paradoxically, in the most vulnerable and brittle of ceramic materials, porcelain. The fragility of porcelain is a metaphor as in "... the impossibility of the work in clay as a translation of the impossibility to understand what happened in Sobibor". The final work is an installation composed of four different elements, each one expressing a different aspect and meditation on Sobibor: the maps, which appear in two forms (large paper-thin porcelain tablet diptychs and 1.60 metre long rolled up porcelain maps made from these same thin slabs) different renditions of the head of a St Bernard used by the Nazis to terrorise the inmates; a display of small mouse-figurines, copied from those which were produced by prisoners for the Allach factory and intended for the Nazi elite; and a video projected onto one of the big porcelain tablets. Each one of these elements approaches the Sobibor subject from a different associative angle.

I shall focus on the maps project which demanded the most agonising and innovative of the technical confrontations Atzmony set for herself. The goal was to find a way to produce 1 mm plates of porcelain which would become the 80 cm/60 cm large tablets for the different diptych maps versions, as well as for the 1.60 metre-long rolled-up maps. Long and tedious experimentation with 3-D technology resulted in creating casts from plaster and from rubber, using the milling technique and building air moulds for making the cast slabs. Atzmony built a rectangular contraption that allowed her to cast the tablets and developed a way to lift them out and work with their positive and the negative sides – a complex process demanding great attention through every step.

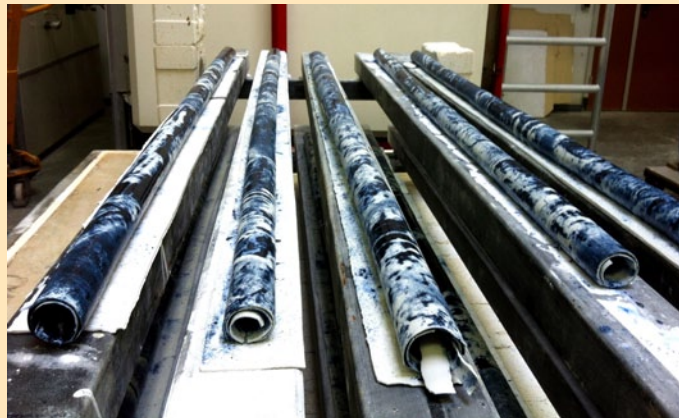
All the subsequent manipulations that Atzmony performs on the slabs are a kind of dialogue with her father's map and her aerial photos of the camp, a theme with myriad variations. One example is by 3-D incising topographic points which would have a positive and negative on either side of the slab, a sort of Braille rendering of the outline of Sobibor camp. Sometimes she just scribbles with ceramic pencils on top of the map-slab, a meditative intuitive doodling



process. Atzmony also uses the technique of print on both sides of the slabs used in the rolled-up map series. On one set of tablets she spreads chalk powder which is then left on to be fired- as she explains, an association with the chalk the SS poured over the bodies in the mass graves for disinfection. Other maps are abstractly painted with glazes, some with grave colours, but some with seductively beautiful and vibrant colours to raise the question of *Beauty of Evil*.

Atzmony made a conscious decision to fire the works in a gas kiln. The association here does not need to be underlined. Every step of the process has significance and, for her, technique equals concept.

Because the slab is so thin, the work invites



viewing from both sides. On the obverse, there is Atzmony's intentional manipulation of the surface, while on the reverse, a ghost-like mirror image appears for our contemplation. The attention to the two-sidedness, the positive and negative, the overt versus the covert, is an important thread running through the work. Atzmony says, "The work should make you look not only out at the work and the overt statement, but it should make you look towards yourself." The elusiveness of contrasting positive and negative sides is a reflection of the elusiveness of the project as a whole – the recapturing of a second-hand memory.

It is interesting how Atzmony chose to execute the maps in two formats: the tablet series, displayed as diptychs, thus borrowing from religious church art history and elevating them into the spiritual realm; and the long rolled-up maps which cannot be unravelled and read and thus carry their eternal frightening secret buried in them.

In the exhibition *Tracing Oblivion*, held at the Periscope Gallery in Tel-Aviv in October 2013, Atzmony presented the first part of her project, which she intends to expand into a vaster one in a future museum exhibition. Atzmony exhibited, among other works in the installation, a series of diptych tablets stored upright, one leaning on the next in an improvised stand. One could not see the individual

picture, one was not allowed to browse through them (again the information stayed enigmatic and hidden) as in the rolled-up maps. In that way Atzmony chose not to reveal every part of the products of her search on which she had worked so hard, a somewhat self-effacing gesture. Although each tablet has been carefully executed and is an artwork in itself, the way that Atzmony has stored them for exhibition makes them inaccessible and thus changes their meaning: the process of making them is as important for her as the artistic objects themselves. There is one tablet that hangs freely from the ceiling and, onto it, a video is projected that shows a woman and her reverse mirror image in a boat that passes in a canal through different cave-like spaces, but always emerges into light: the bottom image looks into the past, while the upper woman faces the future. This was an important element in the exhibition: it is a statement that expresses the strength and positive energy her father had and that she as a person has inherited. Life goes on after Sobibor and art is one expression of it for Atzmony.

This impressive project is this artist's way of confronting a terrible, primal presence in her family history. Through an obsessive repetition of a representation of her father's trauma and heroism, Yael Atzmony has transformed private anguish and struggle into a monumental contemplation on the fragility and strength of humanity.

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