

A Conversation with William Schaff

Ashes: Art Inspired by the Holocaust
*was a gallery showing of William
Schaff's work at The United States
Air Force Academy March 5-24 2000.*

While at the Academy, Mr. Schaff consented to the following interview.

WLA: What drew you to Holocaust memory as a subject?

Schaff: A combination of things. I had a knowledge of the Holocaust growing up, due to my father being a military historian concentrating on WWII. Even then, though, it was nothing more than a “subject” to me. More important to me was being sure that I caught the television shows that night. In my teen years, the circle of kids I spent time with would at times cross circles with skinheads (I spent time with a lot of punks and kids who would generally be considered outsiders). I remember one time, driving with one of these skinheads, debating whether or not the Holocaust had actually happened. Even then, though, I was not approaching the event from a passionate standpoint—I was simply surprised that someone would debate its actuality when I had read and heard so much evidence that it had occurred.

I am sure that one of the reasons why I responded to the Holocaust, before learning what happened to the Armenians, say, or the Cambodians, is because of how well documented the Holocaust is in America. Living in Baltimore, Maryland had much to do with it too, I feel. How I felt in that angry city made what I was reading all the more potent, and it affected me more. That was the time I began to create the body of work we’re talking about here.

WLA: Who are your artistic influences?

Schaff: I have many, but rather than list names some people would know and some wouldn't, let me say Expressionists—those who use their art not just to document or create aesthetically pleasing compositions, but to express their feelings towards the world around them, and about themselves in that world.

WLA: Over what time period was this body of work created?

Schaff: Between 1992 to 1997, with a very few pieces done during the beginning of 1998.

WLA: What do you mean when you say that your work is *not* an attempt to depict the Holocaust?

Schaff: It is important for me to have people understand this. Having not even been alive during the time of the Holocaust, I didn't feel that I could depict it. My work is, instead, an attempt to suggest how it is I feel towards what I have read and learned about the Holocaust. I've spent years studying and researching the Third Reich and what this regime did to those it victimized, and who, if they survived, have been so incredibly affected by it. I can only draw what I believe I understand. Although I don't know how to phrase all that I feel, I do feel it important to try and visualize it so as to create a form of discourse with others.

WLA: During this time of composition, were there phases in which your models, colors, techniques altered?

Schaff: I tended to get more graphic and violent as I went along, constantly trying to find poses, colors, and techniques that worked within the realm I was using to describe these indescribable feelings.

WLA: Very few of your figures are clothed—why is that?

Schaff: Again, several reasons (there are really very few times that there is ever one reason for anything in this work). First off, I did not want to use recognizable backgrounds or scenery in the drawings, so I was limiting all my efforts to expressing my thoughts through the figure, feeling this to be all I needed. I started with the basic, human figure. At our most basic, this is what we are, without possessions. I deeply believe that life is beautiful in all its possibilities and capabilities. So it seemed important to show *that* beauty being destroyed.

Also, I recognize the level of discomfort people have with viewing the human figure, nude, in this way—naked, really. I wanted that. I want the viewer to feel uncomfortable, they *should* feel uncomfortable. There was no way I could have gotten the overall effect I was searching for with clothed figures. To strip the figures of their clothes strips them of a dignity we all recognize, and even when the viewer doesn't recognize that is what's happening, you can see that they feel that humiliation in their not wanting to look at it. So many people seem to want to give these people back their clothes. When I used clothing in any of the images, it was generally to heighten that feeling of humiliation. Considering what is happening to these people, they struggle to keep the clothes on they have, or are forced to expose themselves further. In showing the body, we see the beauty of the living, and all the potential it has, minus social identifiers we are used to. In showing the body destroyed we are forced to see what is lost, or being lost, and what is forever changed. I wanted to show that once such violence is imposed, we cannot do much to alter it.

I remember a friend of mine who had been abducted and raped. When she was finally able to escape her captor, she fled the car and chased down a police car, running down a main street with nothing but her t-shirt and shoes on. On top of everything she had just gone through, she was forced to expose herself in yet another way as she ran for help.

WLA: Would you talk about the disfigured or blotted out mouths on many of your figures?

Schaff: I'm suggesting the removal of speech, which is often how I felt approaching my work. What *could* I say? Studying the Holocaust and working to suggest my feelings was extremely frustrating and sad, and those responses were represented by the mouths of the figures. I would think of those who were not able to speak. I would think about the survivors; how could they explain what they have been through? And their children—how could they describe what they have learned about their parents, and what they have been through because of it? I would think about myself again—how could I explain my feelings? And then I would think of those who will follow—how will they explain their experiences and speak usefully about them? There is a strong feeling of the difficulty, even inability, to speak about anything important that's been robbed from us.

WLA: Most people's ingrained image of a Holocaust victim is an emaciated person—why did you choose to depict healthier looking bodies?

Schaff: I wanted to stay away from the images we *are* used to, because to most people my age such images mean very little, as sad as that is to say. Photographs of concentration camp prisoners—or even the piles of dead bodies—it's too easy for my generation to see these images, flinch and then move on. So I wanted to try and make the violation and violence I felt more palpable. By starting with the model, someone that looked like you and me, and then showing the violence—an uncontrolled crush of paint or violent pen marks—I felt such an approach would create more impact than if I drew an image of, say, a Nazi soldier shooting someone. Movies and media have done much to take the power out of such an expected image.

I often ask viewers how they would depict the horrors they have learned about the Holocaust? Not the event, which I believe all can agree may be beyond our ability to describe, but how to “feel” about the event. How do you describe something you recognize is not describable? How does you show violation? Photography can be very gripping, but can also lose its effect over time, as it has, I believe, with my generation—such as is perhaps the case with images of piles of dead bodies or groups of thin people behind barbed wire. I do not know many people who do not have these images burned into their heads. I have sought a more graphic way to represent my reaction to the memory of the Holocaust. A way that I hope will stay in a viewer's mind long after the commonly known photographs have left it.

WLA: You don't call yourself a “painter”—why?

Schaff: What makes the images work as well as they do, for me, is the line, and the line is *drawn*. Once finished, I will use paint to accent the line, and that which the line is describing.

WLA: Please talk about the words and diagrams that you superimpose on your figures.

Schaff: They are historical references. They are often in my mind as I am doing the pieces. While for the most part I try to stay away from having too many swastikas, or camp names, there are times I use them to keep the viewer in focus, as it were.

WLA: You mentioned that Baltimore—the city where you studied art—is a particularly angry city. Have the places you’ve lived in informed your art?

Schaff: Baltimore certainly did. I came from the Northeast, where contemporary forms of racism and segregation still strongly exist. I arrived in Baltimore feeling confident about myself and my beliefs. Baltimore is 70% black. That 70% is for the most part living in poverty and is extremely angry. After five years of living in the city, after multiple violent crimes happening to my friends, after constant confrontation and tension, I would find myself doing things I would never have imagined myself to do. Crossing streets because the guy coming the other way “looked” the wrong way. It was at times such as these that I realized I probably wouldn’t be crossing the street had that person been white. It was extremely depressing and I was starting to notice things about myself that I didn’t like. I no longer could simply say, “I am not a racist,” but instead found myself having to struggle to be sure of that. Such reactions made all that I was learning about the Holocaust hit me all the more. The rapes, the killings that were happening, literally around me—the constant fear I felt walking the streets, the threat of violence—I can only imagine that they made what I was learning affect me more than if I had been learning about the Holocaust in some isolated, secluded comfort. My own feelings of fear and hatred were constantly surfacing, and my own prejudices slapped me in the face when I read of others acting or thinking no more fairly, kindly, or rationally than I.

WLA: Do you feel the palpable violence of your art lends itself to either involuntary or willful misinterpretation by some of your audience?

Schaff: Yes, I do. I have experienced this. I have been called everything from a neo-Nazi to a latent rapist.

WLA: There is a recurring image of the stitched-closed or split-open torsos of both the male and female figures—what does this image suggest?

Schaff: It suggests violence committed on the body—something that had been inside the person is gone, taken from them, and they are left hastily stitched back together, with no care for them, or left with the gaping wound.

WLA: You say that many of the works are, in a sense, self-portraits—how so?

Schaff: Well, they are *all* me. Male *and* female. As I have said, I am trying to show how *I* felt in learning and knowing what I now know, and I used each figure to do that. The figures also lend themselves to suggesting events and violence that took place during the Holocaust. Both violated and violator.

WLA: How do you answer people who accuse you of symbolically engaging in the violence you depict?

Schaff: Well, I would say that I want viewers to feel attacked. I want them to feel violated and as haunted by such atrocities as I am. The fact that I am making this point through art and a gallery puts things in a different light. I am not physically attacking anyone, nor do I want to hurt them in a physical sense. People enter galleries expecting to be affected emotionally, in some way or another, but still be “safe,” as it were. Viewers will take with them only what *they* allow. I am utilizing that unique aspect of the gallery.

WLA: How has the Jewish community responded to your work?

Schaff: The same way the rest of the community has. There has been very positive feedback, as well as very negative. Varying reactions may have to do with how well I communicate to anyone that this work is not about The Event, but the memory that still exists, in my time and space as well as everyone else’s. My experience has been limited mostly to Jewish Community Centers. Several have invited me to show them the work, having heard of it and wanting to consider it for their own galleries. In one case, it was flatly rejected, with the feeling that it was inappropriate. In another case, it was agreed that it would be perfect to show—but that is the nature of strong art.

WLA: Is it possible to make a living as a working artist?—especially an artist who deals with such a tough subject as genocide?

Schaff: It is if you’re willing to hold down other jobs at the same time and not count on your art to support you. At this point in my career (for it is a career) I do not have the certain recognition and credentials to get the venues needed to afford a continuous living from what I create.

WLA: Are you through with Holocaust Memory as a subject?—if so, what are you working on?

Schaff: I'm not through with it, in the sense that it is not something I can put down, not even if I wanted to. One of the points I am trying to stress is that I will forever see life through a lens colored by these events I know happened. Due to that, things I do, ways I behave, they will always reflect that. The work I am doing these days varies. I am trying to look at things that happen both in my surrounding area, within the country, and outside of the country. Acts of intolerance and hatred—how people perceive each other.

WLA: Was a gallery showing at the United States Air Force Academy different from showings elsewhere?

Schaff: Yes, and it was great. A lot of people that otherwise might not have gone to such an exhibit came through. Getting to talk with them was wonderful as well. Usually such things only happen at the opening, and seldom would they be set up in the same manner as it was at the Academy.

WLA: What interested you most in your conversations with Air Force Academy cadets?

Schaff: An openness to the answers I gave. Here were kids not much younger than I am, going into a profession not known for encouraging individual thought, especially not ones that challenge the taking of life and how life is viewed, and yet they listened. Those who responded did so with courtesy and thought, something that can be found lacking in other settings that might be considered more traditional.