

Review by Mary Lanier

MY INNER SOLE
an installation by
Zuzka Kurtz
 presented by
 SlaughterhouseSpace

We are the shoes, we are the last witnesses.
We are shoes from grandchildren and grandfathers.
From Prague, Paris, and Amsterdam.
And because we are only made of fabric and leather
And not of blood and flesh
Each one of us avoided the hellfire.
 --Moses Szhulstein, Yiddish poet

No words can ever fully capture the horrible reality of genocide, that most despicable of human perversions. Nor can theater, film, dance, painting, sculpture, photography, or any artistic medium ever succeed completely in expressing the unimaginable barbarity of those man-made hellfires whose incomprehensible goal has been to eliminate entire races from the face of the earth.

Perhaps one reason there can be no clear account of such unspeakably horrendous events – just as there can never be a rational explanation for an irrational act – is that every victim of every holocaust can offer only his or her personal version of what happened to them. Yet, the dark veil of secrecy that often descends to help people forget such nightmares has also been penetrated at times with vivid images by artists, writers, and first-hand observers like Zuzka's mother Litzi – a Holocaust survivor – who have been especially keen and articulate witnesses. Their accounts have allowed them to tell the world outside and as well as to commiserate with fellow sufferers whose memories are of course painted with the brush of their own experience and interpretation.

In Litzi's pre-war Europe, beauty and elegance in furnishings, jewelry, clothing, and other treasured belongings were very much a part of life for many in her circle who would soon be stripped of everything. After the war, her sharp memories of exquisite things became mingled with her vivid recollections of anguish and pain, and both were passed down to Zuzka, just as dowry textiles are transferred from mother to daughter. Litzi's stories were recounted to Zuzka's throughout her childhood in Soviet-dominated Czechoslovakia. As if by osmosis, Litzi's recollections became Zukas memories, and through that process Zuzka became a witness.

Zuzka's natural creativity, training in art, and exceptional love of the tactile brought her a brilliant international career in art-as-fashion. Most recently, she has turned her talent as an artist to investigating the meaning of what she knows, what she has heard, and maybe, knowingly or unknowingly, who she is.

The pilgrimage to her self-discovery (her "inner sole") began by gathering shoes from her friends. Might she have been thinking of the 43,000 pairs of shoes left behind in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945? Whatever the initial impulse, once she started to amass the footwear, she realized it could be a catalyst for giving shape to some of her most deep-seated memories and that it was the right medium to permit her to walk into – and then out of – the scene she was creating. The figures that manifested themselves along the way are a combination of ancestors, friends, and relatives, both living and dead. Their skeletal character powerfully conveys their essential, unadorned humanity. And they are clothed, shod, and accessorized in such a way that their personalities come startlingly to life. Zuzka dressed and re-dressed them, arranged and re-arranged them in a frenzy of activity that she has described as an altered state of mind. She says they "took her over" and explains, almost apologetically, that she did not really know what she was doing or why. Although reticent about the details of her process and her thinking, she has seemed to be as surprised as we are by the force of the energy they exude in their silent presence.

Marcel Duchamp, whose spirit permeates the site of this exhibition, is well known for the enigmatic quality of his work. Although he produced relatively few finished pieces, his statements about art and artists were groundbreaking and highly influential. While Zuzka's life path did not put her in direct contact with Duchamp or his followers, a number of intriguing parallels can be found in "My Inner Sole" and Duchamp's *magnum opus*, "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even" (1915-23). Without analyzing either work in detail, it is fascinating to note that two key elements appear in both: the *bride* and the *witnesses*. Coincidence? Possibly. But the central roles played by brides and witnesses in both pieces offer important clues to the understanding of each work. I was curious about Zuzka's original intentions when she set out on her quest with so many shoes, and while I have mused at and marveled over the results, I still wonder if she really envisioned the final outcome – the verdict if you will -- or whether her journey with this piece has ended with more questions than answers. In either case, this extraordinary installation gives us much to ponder and reminds me of Duchamp's famous 1954 statement about art, artist, and spectator:

“To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing. If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.” He concludes: *“All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”*

Several witnesses in this piece are Zuzka herself. Among them are the skeleton who points to its eyes --the *Bleeding Heart*, who is sympathetic but can't act -- and *The Witness*, who can give a first-hand account. If Zuzka is the witness/artist and we are the spectator/audience, then in order to appreciate and understand “My Inner Sole” we must walk into the work and regard ourselves as fellow travelers, each with his or her own point of view and each with his or her own verdict. But we must all wear the shoes.

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