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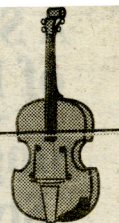
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At HMH - reacting to death and memory by placing a stone

By AARON HOWARD

When visiting a gravesite, there's a well-known Jewish custom of placing a small stone on a monument. The stone itself harks back to biblical days when monuments were heaps of stones. Placing a stone serves as a physical connection between the visitor and the deceased. The custom also signifies a connection with Jewish history, memory and community.

The act of placing these stones is a vital part of artist Alan Berliner's interactive video installation "Gathering Stones," which opens on Mar. 7 at Holocaust Museum Houston (HMH). The museum will hold an opening reception for the installation featuring an appearance by the noted filmmaker and media artist. "Gathering Stones" is the museum's first commissioned exhibition.

The video part of the installation consists of projections of old photographs. These photos come from survivor families who are fortunate to have pictures of their family members. Every photo you see is someone who has perished during the Holocaust. But unlike the usual photo album, each of Berliner's images runs for one minute and then begins a slow dissolve for another minute.

The dissolve, a film technique, is a transition between two shots, where one shot fades away and simultaneously another shot fades in. The intentional overlap between the first and second image can provide a smooth and effective change from one scene into another. Or, it can suggest a relational situation between the images.

By slowing down the dissolves, Berliner forces the viewer to pay as much attention to this transitory technique as to the original photographs. Often, the dissolves allow for magical things to happen. A single male face, for example, dissolves into three women sitting in chairs smoking cigarettes. A young boy with his arms folded melts into a middle-aged man with wire-rimmed glasses. Are these photos connected? Do they move forward or backward in time, or are they coming at us the way dreams do?

The photos are projected onto a bed of black pebbles on the gallery floor. This "canvas" gives the photos a texture as well as the visual appearance of the black pages of an old photo album.

At the entrance to "Gathering Stones" is a supply of small white stones. Visitors are encouraged to take one of these stones and add it to any one of the five images of the photo album. Over time, the white stones will create part of the installation as the photos are projected on the growing pile of stones. At the same time, the placing of the stones creates a monument or even a sacred space.

"The placing of these memorial stones is a tangible evidence of the number of people who participate by coming here," Berliner says. "In one dimension, the gesture of placing stones signals to others that you are paying your respects. It lifts memory to the level of ritual and a sharing of a communal event."

Visually, the heft of the stones alters the screen on which the changing images are projected. Ritually, the

stones activate a consciousness with the past as they are placed. The gravesite ritual originally served as a reminder of the family's presence. In the context of HMM, the gesture reminds us that even though we personally may not be family to the people in the images, we feel ourselves linked to them.

Actually, we are closer to people in this "photo album" than one might think. Approximately 50 local families donated the photos that appear in "Gathering Stones." This raises all sorts of other emotional and psychological responses to Berliner's installation. For some visitors, placing a stone will be a way to say Kaddish and share memories of these people.

This is the second incarnation of "Gathering Stones." The first exhibit was part of a group show, "To The Rescue: Eight Artists in an Archive," seen at the Contemporary Arts Museum (CAM) here a year-and-a-half ago. Eight artists were commissioned to visit the "Joint" archives in New York. The "Joint" or Joint Distribution Committee of American Funds for the Relief of Jewish War Sufferers possesses more than 50,000 photos of Jews who perished during the Holocaust. The artists were told to breathe in the photos and come out with a work.

Berliner created the first "Gathering Stones" as his response. "I came to see the Joint archive as a community album of the Jewish people," says Berliner. "These people could have been my relatives."

People at HMM asked Berliner if he would be open to reworking the installation to be Houston site specific by using photographs generated from the local survivor community. Berliner enthusiastically agreed.

"Family photographs should be a shared experience" says Berliner who

collects family photographs and photo albums that have been "orphaned" from their families. The artist often buys the albums at garage sales.

For Berliner, it is difficult to imagine how a family would sell a photo album to a perfect stranger. Wouldn't someone in the family want to connect with the photos?

Jewish family photo albums were orphaned by outside influences. By returning to these photos, Berliner intends again to share memories of these people. "The idea of my photo albums is ignite the language of memory, to activate connections with the past, the unknown," Berliner says. "I want to awaken sleeping thoughts, to explore the idea of empathy.

"These people are not my immediate family. But there, but for the grace of God, go I."

* * *

"Gathering Stones" will be on display in the Josef and Edith Minberg Gallery, Morgan Family Center through Aug. 5. HMM's commission of "Gathering Stones" is made possible by the support of Charlotte and Pete Berkowitz. The opening reception begins at 7 p.m., Mar. 7. The evening also welcomes the installation of "For Most of It I Have No Words: Genocide, Landscape, Memory," an exhibition of photographs by Simon Norfolk, showing in the Central Gallery.

The joint opening reception for both exhibitions is free and open to the public. For information, call 713/942-8000, ext. 100, or visit www.hmh.org, HMM's Web site.

Berliner's documentary film "Nobody's Business" will open the Jewish Worlds 8 Film Festival. This film will be shown at 7 p.m., Mar. 9, in the Brown Auditorium of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. □