

Mann Art Gallery presents

Carol Wylie: *They Didn't Know We Were Seeds*

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Diane and
Roger Mann

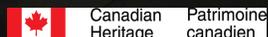


Image: *They Didn't Know We Were Seeds*, installation shot at the Mann Art Gallery

A WORD FROM CAROL WYLIE

In April of 2016 I attended the Saskatoon Holocaust Memorial service. As survivor Nate Leipziger spoke of his horrifying experiences in a Nazi death camp, and his ongoing efforts to educate and shed light on these atrocities, I was struck anew by the extent of abuse the human spirit can endure. The struggles and generational trauma of Indigenous peoples caused by the residential school experience seems to resonate with Jewish holocaust survivors. Indian Affairs Superintendent Duncan Campbell Scott, in 1910, called residential schools "The Final Solution," preceding Hitler's similar pronouncement regarding the "Jewish problem." Separating families, cutting hair, taking away names and assigning numbers were methods of dehumanizing and othering. Interestingly, both groups of survivors have connected around strategies of survival and healing. Holocaust survivor Robert Waisman, who meets with Indigenous survivors and talks about his experience at Buchenwald, speaks of "a sacred duty and responsibility" toward helping residential school survivors heal. He states, "we cannot, and we should not, compare sufferings. Each suffering is unique...I don't compare my sufferings or the holocaust to what happened in residential schools. We did it [survived] - so can you." Both Indigenous survivors and Jewish survivors speak of a solidarity forged from the shared need to find ways of healing personal and generational trauma in the wake of horrendous abuse and literal/cultural attempted genocide.

Holocaust survivors are elderly and dying. Indeed, one gentleman who was part of this project has since passed. There will soon be no first-hand accounts of this dark historical event. After hearing Nate speak, I felt I needed to somehow acknowledge these extraordinary people who endured and survived unbelievable mistreatment. I wanted to find a way to preserve the personal nature of these accounts. The motivation to include residential school survivors in the project came from my place as a settler in Saskatchewan, which is notorious regarding its history of residential schools. Making space to hear that history and those stories was part of my personal steps toward the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls for action. By expanding this project to include residential school survivors, I hoped the act of listening and bearing witness would deepen my understanding of the Indigenous experience and trauma right here, where I live.

I am a single-minded portrait artist, compulsive about portraiture as a genre. As such, it is the methodology through which I can offer the strongest statement. The painted portrait is a true meeting of two subjectivities, requiring a unique commitment and sustained effort, building intense familiarity and intimacy with the face of another. A well-done portrait has the potential to be a unique record of the sum of an individual's experience, offering the opportunity for a form of engagement with that person even in their absence. Through portraits of individual survivors, I hoped to create a silent dialogue between Jewish survivors and Indigenous survivors. Sketches, photographs, and interviews with very generous survivors who were willing to collaborate on this project resulted in a series of eighteen portraits. This number is significant in Hebrew tradition as representing the word "chai" which means "life." Those with whom I met spoke so honestly and poignantly that, in some cases, their words have been incorporated as text into the portraits themselves. The project title is inspired by the proverb: "They buried us...they didn't know we were seeds." My hope is that this work will give viewers a chance to encounter a survivor they may never meet. One personal story often has more resonance than statistical abstractions, no matter how appalling. As numbers of holocaust survivors dwindle, and in anticipation of the same eventual loss of first-hand accounts from residential school survivors, these portraits will remain as a legacy, echoes of individual strength and courage.

We all possess private consciousness and take for granted the separation of "me" and "you." Empathy involves understanding the pain and joy of others as being equal to our own, leveling us within the human experience. This project explores trauma, ongoing recovery, shared pain, and the indomitable human spirit, as well as an enduring hope that, through truly hearing one another's stories and accepting deep in our bones that we are connected, humanity will someday be characterized more by its compassion than its capacity for cruelty. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the Saskatchewan Foundation of the Arts for their generous support of this project.

Carol Wylie, 2020