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Gender, Trauma, and Disability: Gallery Reflection
April 2022

Gallery Response #3

Objects, like family photographs, have the power to preserve and honor memory, while also holding potential for opening past wounds; Suzannah Biernoff touches upon the potential of archival images to be unethically used in art in her article, *Medical Archives and Digital Culture: From WWI to BioShock* (2011). Although the context of creation regarding *BioShock* and Norman Klenicki's art are very different, the use of photography as inspiration for one's art, and the experience of generational trauma, provoked my thinking. What ethical considerations emerge and shift within the relationship between artistic creator and memory objects when the artist is personally tied to those memory objects? I am intrigued by the ways that survivors of war and genocide, and their children, are impacted by memory practices like photography and painting, and specifically how artists living with generational trauma use memory objects in their creative works.

When working in artistic mediums that contend with generational trauma, it is important to consider the ethics of inspiration. Biernoff addresses the significance of inspiration in her critique of *BioShock* creators' use of medical archives for their creative work. She highlights that "the problem with *BioShock* is [the monstrotization of the injured] based on identifiable individuals, who – if they were alive – would be entitled to sue for defamation or slander" (329). Although the patients whose photographs were used as inspiration for the *BioShock* video game are no longer living and their photographs have entered the public domain "[these former patients] live on in the memories of their children and grandchildren" (329). Biernoff's focus on the ethics of inspiration can be applied when it relates not only to how a memory object is used,

but by whom that memory object is used. Ethical considerations of memory objects shift when those objects are stewarded by descendants of war and genocide survivors like Norman Klenicki.

Norman Klenicki's painting, *Even When Life is Good, it's Always There*, grapples with the ways the Holocaust continues to haunt his and his family's lives. He uses and artistically interprets the memory objects that are his family photographs in a way that focuses on his lived experience with generational trauma. The painting depicts celebratory family photographs on top of barbed-wire—the relationship between these objects seems to be in constant flux. The photographs are pressed against the barbed-wire, as though they are both being pushed into the wire by a constant wind, and caught by the barbed-wire, unable to land elsewhere. This strikes me as a representation of the always-present energy of memory that is passed through generations of survivors. The photographs are objects that reflect Norman's family surviving the Holocaust, but the photographs also speak to the family lost to the Holocaust. When I look at this piece, it brings up questions like: Who would be here if their lives were not taken during the Holocaust? Who would Norman's parents be if not for the war and trauma of the Holocaust? Who would Norman be?

Looking at these images within an image necessitates introspection as a form of mirroring to fully grasp what Norman's painting is doing. Norman captures the sense of inescapability that occurs from generational trauma, and the negotiations that take place while trying to "move forward" (or with the wind) in life, while getting caught in memories, guilt, and uncertainty of how to participate in joy when so many others cannot. I think this piece emphasizes the reality that, even when things seem good on the surface, there is so much we cannot know occurring within a person impacted by war and genocide—this does not mean that joy is not possible, but it exposes the complications that often accompany the joy of those who

have survived a trauma like the Holocaust, including their descendants.

Creating art can be spiritual, provocative, personal, and so many more meaningful embodiments and experiences for any person who participates in creative work; it can also be a useful way to process pain and suffering that can't be quantified, categorized, or "easily" assessed. The ethics of inspiration are not less complicated when the artist grappling with generational trauma draws inspiration from or makes use of their personal archives. Rather, those complications carry unique considerations and felt responsibilities for the artist. These responsibilities exist beyond the boundaries of their lived history—Norman Klenicki, as a steward of the memory objects that are his photographs, is also a steward of his ancestors' memories. Norman and his works can be seen as his ancestors' legacy, as well as his own. In "Even When Life is Good, it's Always There," Klenicki calls attention to this multi-layered positionality. By painting the photographs of his ancestors and living relatives who survived the Holocaust, Klenicki double-memorializes the power and meaningfulness within his memory objects, while also honoring his own experiences with generational trauma.