

TODAY'S
MASTERS

LIVING HISTORY

DAVID KASSAN'S PORTRAITS OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

When Elsa Ross posed for her portrait, she had to remember not to smile. In 2015, she arrived at the Albuquerque studio of the painter David Kassan (b. 1977), wearing the simple black outfit he had requested and clutching a black-and-white photograph that showed her as a little girl with her parents, at their apartment on Panska Street in Warsaw.

Now living in Houston, the innately elegant and poised Ross insists that she was not adept at posing — unsure of where to place her hands or how to hold her cherished photograph outward so that viewers could see what it depicts. “It was my decision to hold that photograph close to my heart,” she says. She had come to Kassan’s studio so that he could take photographs of Ross that he would later reference while painting her life-size portrait. “I tend to smile for photos,” notes Ross, “but I had to stop myself from doing that this time. I had to remember that this wasn’t that kind of photograph.”

Of that other photograph, taken around 1938, she muses, “It’s a miracle that I have a photograph of my parents, of course. If I didn’t have it, I wouldn’t know what they looked like, since I was separated from them at a very young age.” Nor would she know what they looked like together, for their time as a family was brief.

Ross is one of the subjects of Kassan’s forthcoming solo show at the University of Southern California’s Fisher Museum of Art in Los Angeles, *Facing Survival: David Kassan*, which



(ABOVE) *Ella Hands*, 2017, Col-Erase pencil on paper, 8 x 10 in., collection of the artist ■ (RIGHT) *Elsa Ross, Hidden Child*, 2016, oil on mirror, 30 x 20 in., private collection

*Ed Mosberg, 2019, oil on mirror panel,
30 x 22 in., collection of the artist*





Bearing Witness: Eleven Survivors of Auschwitz, 2019, oil on mirror panel, 96 x 216 in., collection of the artist

features 13 stand-alone oil portraits of Holocaust survivors, as well as the many preparatory drawings he made for them. Also included in the exhibition (on view September 18–December 7) is Kassan’s group portrait of 11 survivors of Auschwitz, a monumental work titled *Bearing Witness* (in reference to a line by the late Elie Wiesel: “For the dead and the living, we must bear witness”). That painting is so large (8 x 18 feet) that it is composed of five seamlessly aligned acrylic mirror panels, a material that Kassan describes as providing “more depth and luminosity” than wood.

“I know what a diptych is and what a triptych is, but what do you call a painting that has more than three panels?” Kassan asks rhetorically from his New Mexico studio. (He also maintains a studio in Brooklyn.)

“It’s called a polyptych.” As that expansive work came together, Selma Holo, who directs the Fisher, mentioned to Kassan that it had certainly assumed the scale – if not the lasting import – of Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*. “I don’t necessarily believe that myself,” Kassan insists, “but it was an awesome moment as a painter to hear your name mentioned in league with Rembrandt’s.”

TESTIMONY IN PAINT

Holo explains that this exhibition is a joint presentation with the USC Shoah Foundation, which has created *Dimensions in Testimony*, an in-gallery interactive feature that allows visitors to ask questions of some of the portrait sitters, as if they are right there giving firsthand accounts



of their experiences. “I first learned of David’s work from John Nava [b. 1947], one of the very finest realist painters of our time,” says Holo, who has previously mounted a show of Nava’s works and commissioned him to make a tapestry. Kassan, meanwhile, describes Nava as “a mentor.” So taken has Nava been with Kassan’s work that he showed Holo some of the completed portraits of survivors.

“John kept telling me there was this colleague that he greatly admired,” says Holo, “that the young Kassan was a phenomenon. When I saw David’s work, frankly, I went nuts. He is really something.” She, in turn, introduced him to Stephen Smith, executive director of the USC Shoah Foundation, which helped engender grants for Kassan to travel and paint, as well as residencies, all of which resulted in this show’s contents.

When asked what she hopes *Facing Survival* will accomplish, Holo replies that it will certainly make Kassan’s name and talents even better known. “In a more existential way, though, these works are about testimony,” Holo says with deliberate emphasis. “Stephen [at the Shoah Foundation] believes in personal testimony, testimony, testimony, as the way to concretize the memories of people who went through the Holocaust, and other genocides like those in Rwanda and Armenia and elsewhere. David, by virtue of his sentient skills, has created art akin to testimony. People who can’t or haven’t listened to or read or watched the testimony of Holocaust survivors will pay attention to these paintings.”

As Smith writes in the exhibition’s catalogue, “David Kassan joins a long history of artists responding to the Holocaust and its survivors.

(TOP) Visitors interact with the *Dimensions in Testimony* display at the Swedish History Museum's *Speaking Memories* exhibition earlier this year; photo: Erik Lernerstål

■ (BOTTOM) *Louise and Lazar Farkas*, 2017, oil on mirror panel, 46 x 42 in., private collection



But Kassan paints from an entirely different perspective to the artists who lived through and even painted during the Holocaust. None of his subjects were meant to survive. And yet all of them did, and lived to old age.” In line with Smith’s embrace of testimony as record, he adds that these portraits “tell a story with no words.”

Holo also states what has become an increasingly discomfiting truth: that the Holocaust is not known at all by many young people and that there is a disconcertingly large number of people who deny its very existence as historical fact. “Just six years after the Rwandan genocide,” Holo points out, “I discovered there were people denying it ever happened. I believe in the art that David is making, but I’m also a museum person and I recognize his ability to engage viewers with the testimony of his subjects.”

Kassan, who is represented by Gallery Henoeh (New York City) and Maxwell Alexander Gallery (Los Angeles), and whose eerily realistic portraits have been exhibited at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery in London, and the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, began the *Facing Survival* project in late 2014. Though he identifies as “ethnically Jewish,” Kassan says that he is not religious. “My grandfather escaped ethnic cleansing when he fled the pogroms then occurring in what was Romania, later settling in the United States,” he explains, “but I never got to hear his stories firsthand.” Through word of mouth, Kassan began to meet Holocaust survivors, both in and around New York, where he was living and working, and later in Albuquerque, where he lives almost full-time with his fiancée, the talented painter Shana Levenson. He has heard what he estimates to be at least 40 firsthand stories. “Some of the survivors talk about anger, others about forgiveness. As a painter who paints humans, I really have heard the full spectrum of pain.”

Serendipity has often played a role in who Kassan paints. For years, Levenson had shopped at an upscale clothing boutique in Albuquerque, owned by Elsa Ross. One evening at the local Whole Foods, the two women ran into each other. They got to talking about Levenson’s work as a painter, and about her fiancée, David, who was embarking on a project to paint portraits of survivors of the Holocaust. “This was a profound coincidence,” recalls Ross. “When I heard that, I said to Shana, ‘I am a survivor of the Holocaust.’ David called me soon thereafter and the three of us met. I got to know him — and admire him. I remember David once telling me that he considered himself clumsy. I thought, how could anyone who paints so incredibly, with such detail, be clumsy? That couldn’t be possible!”

But, like some of the other people depicted in Kassan’s show, Ross was disconcerted by the finished portrait. “I recognized it as an



honor, from the beginning, that someone would want to paint me,” she observes, “but I thought, what a pity, the portrait is not going to be something I’ll like.” When asked why she thought that before it was even completed, Ross says, with poignancy, “Because I’m old. I knew I wouldn’t look beautiful.” After six weeks of working on the painting, Kassan finally showed it to Ross. “I don’t know if David even knows this,



Renee Firestone - Born April 19, 1924 in Velehrad, Czechoslovakia was only 21 when she was liberated by the Soviet Army on May 27th 1945. She went only 2018. Became a Fashion Designer in Los Angeles, met her at the Museum of Art Tel Aviv in January 2017 in LA. Drawn in Brooklyn

Study for *Bearing Witness* — Renee Firestone, 2018, charcoal on toned paper, 10 x 8 in., collection of the artist; of the inscription at the bottom, Kassan says, “I like to write a little bit about each subject that I draw or paint, just to get to know them a little better, to provide more context for myself.”

but when I saw it, I could see that the portrait was extremely well done, but probably my first instinct was that I was I looked sad. A true orphan. It was — I can’t think of the exact word — ‘raw.’”

INTERVIEWER AND ARTIST

That rawness is indicative of Kassan’s uncanny ability to capture the essence of his subjects. “You have to be inspired by what these people overcame,” Kassan insists, “but I wanted to show that they have lived amazing, full lives since. I was after the humanity that defines them now, as opposed to what was done to them then. They had no control over their lives during the Holocaust, but they have since. I’ve met real estate developers, high-powered lawyers, tailors who make suits for presidents, and owners of art galleries” (as with Ross, who owned a prints shop for many years).

To attain that sense of character and identity just through oil paints applied to panel, Kassan interviewed each of his subjects, in



Raya Kovensky: *Survivor of the Shoah*, 2018, oil on panel, 40 x 27 1/2 in., available from Gallery Henoch, New York City

person. “I am not a good interviewer,” he claims, “so I just let these people talk. If I sensed their stories were starting to become too heavy for them to recount, I would ask them to tell me about their families now. The atrocities of the Holocaust are well recorded, but not so much the lives the survivors have led since.” One of the men in the monumental group portrait, Joshua Kaufman, explains in *Dimensions in Testimony* that his “bank account” are his grandchildren, whom he points to in a photograph. As Kaufman says, “To give up is the easiest way. To die is the easiest. But to be alive, to fight for your life ... that is a goal I set.” Holo adds, “This show offers new testimony. David is not a recorder of historical reality. He’s reclaiming history and these people as part of history.”

Although Kassan is regarded as one of the premier realist painters of our time, he embraces abstraction, too, particularly in his backgrounds. Citing Robert Rauschenberg, Franz Kline, and Clyfford Still as artists he admires, he refers to them as abstract expressionists working in a realist way — in that they remained true to their abstraction. “Just as I am a formalistic painter, so, too, do I love formalistic abstraction, which is what the abstract expressionists did.” As for embracing abstraction himself, Kassan adds, “I want the backgrounds of my paintings to be so richly textured, in an abstract way, that were the figures to walk away from the canvas, their backgrounds would still hold up.”

When he was considering the backdrop for the 11 Auschwitz survivors in the large painting, Kassan ruled out such clichés as barbed wire.



John Adler, 2017, oil on mirror panel,
30 x 40 in., private collection

“The figures are explicit,” he emphasizes, “so I wanted the background to be implicit.” And just as Kassan wanted the figures to have an actual connection to one another now, beyond their being in the same room, he chose a subtle detail from the camp to highlight their past link. Upon visiting Auschwitz himself, Kassan was particularly struck by the pile of suitcases people had brought there, their family names handwritten on the luggage. “I lifted those names as design elements for the background of the painting,” he says, “along with an abstraction of an aerial view of Auschwitz that I saw.”

As for the finished portrait of Ross, it belies her self-assessment. Yes, she may appear sad. Reflective, serious, haunted, heartbroken, heartaching, too. But that photo she holds is all she has of her parents. Confined to the infamous Warsaw Ghetto, she was smuggled out one day by Polish laborers who hid her in their truck. They delivered her to a Catholic orphanage. Ross had become one of the so-called “hidden children,” those Jewish boys and girls hidden from the Nazis — be it in orphanages or haylofts or safe homes in England. At the war’s end, her only surviving aunt appeared suddenly to claim her. Ross recalls that when she first saw this stranger, she thought it was her mother who had come back for her. The aunt told her who she was and that the girl would never see her mother again; Ross confesses that the blunt truth of that statement haunts her to this day. In the portrait, Ross appears regal and self-possessed, a beautiful survivor.

Ross regrets her own inability to talk to groups about her personal experiences. The Holocaust Museum Houston, for instance, has invited her to speak there, but, she says, “I don’t think I’m a good candidate. I have the tendency to cry. But I do think if I saw the people as a gathered audience, I might be able to do it. I want to see David Kassan’s show in Los Angeles, very much, because I feel that I’ve talked little about the

Holocaust.” What Ross seems not to realize is that by being visible both in person and in Kassan’s portrait, she conveys that part of history to others, proving how a human can survive and thrive. Her presence is a constant act of doing.

Kassan’s monumental *Bearing Witness* will be positioned on a plinth in the middle of the exhibition. Because its figures are life-size, viewers will confront them in an almost mirror-like manner, perhaps suggesting that any one of us could become a victim of such horrors. But these are people who survived, many of whom visit L.A.’s Museum of Tolerance regularly to speak about their experiences that occurred those many — yet not so many — years ago. “Having the group portrait in the middle of the gallery,” says Kassan, “will give it — and the figures — presence. It’s almost as if they’re here with you, in the same space you’re occupying.” ●

Information: For more on the exhibition, visit fisher.usc.edu/davidkassan. Learn more about *Dimensions in Testimony* and the USC Shoah Foundation at sfi.usc.edu/dit. Watch a five-minute video about Kassan’s project at vimeo.com/283263907. This project is also accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue available from the Fisher Museum of Art.

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