

The past is never dead

At Rutgers, artist probes Jews and history



The image of a prewar Torah scholar was part of Shimon Attie's 1991 exhibition in the former Jewish Quarter of Berlin.

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In his video, performance art, and photography, Shimon Attie reminds viewers of the way history imposes on the present — and demands that they confront the past.

Whether depicting the devastating effect of the Holocaust on Berlin's Jewish community or the human side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Los Angeles-born artist turns to his craft to transmit images of loss and shared dreams.

"The common theme is displacement," said Attie during "Art and Memory: Moving Images," a March 6 program sponsored by Rutgers University's Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life and the Mason Gross School of the Arts.

In addition to presenting the annual Abram Matlofsky Memorial Program at the Douglass Campus Center in New Brunswick, during his campus stay, Attie also worked with Mason Gross graduate students, critiquing projects and speaking at a photography seminar.

He also addressed students of a graduate seminar on cultural memory, Jewish studies, and history taught by Bildner director Yael Zerubavel.

In the March 6 talk, Attie showed images of his projects around the world. As a young artist in the early 1990s, just after the reunification of Berlin, he lived in what had been communist East Berlin. The rundown neighborhood had once been the thriving Jewish Quarter.

In an effort to recreate the lost lives and culture, in 1991 he projected photographs of pre-World War II Jewish bookstores, shops, and synagogues onto the buildings that stand there now.

“The response of the people who lived in those buildings was not uninteresting,” he said. “One man came running out of one of the homes, yelling, ‘My father bought this house fair and square from Mr. Jacobs in 1938.’”

When the artist inquired if he knew what happened to Mr. Jacobs and his family, the man replied, “Of course. He was a multi-millionaire who moved to New York.”

While some of the Berliners thought Attie’s intention was to “lay claim” to their property, he said, the reaction to his artwork was largely positive, especially among young people.

Several years later, after returning to New York, he created a similar project, “Between Dreams and History,” in which he projected onto buildings on the Lower East Side images of songs, prose, and memories of the immigrant groups who had lived in the neighborhood — as if, he said, “a ghost was writing on thin air” in Mandarin, Spanish, or Yiddish.

In a recent production, Attie “reimagined” the seemingly unsolvable Middle East conflict. In his 11-minute video “Metro.PAL.IS,” Israelis and Palestinians in New York — including falafel sellers, transit workers, hipsters, and a “Palestinian Jersey girl” — read from a hybrid of Israel’s 1948 Declaration of Independence and a Palestinian Declaration of Independence written in Algeria in 1988.

Attie said he was “astonished” to discover the similarities in wording and aspirations expressed.

“I live in New York City, where there are 150,000 Israelis and 100,000 Palestinians who have this shared secondary hybrid identity of being a New Yorker and sharing the same oxygen,” he said. The work, which originally appeared at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., is now going on a museum tour.

Attie said he wasn’t trying to create a “Kumbaya piece” but rather was aiming to reflect “the shared humanity of the conflict.”

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