

„I AM FOLLOWING MY OWN PATH“

DEBORAH PETROZ-ABELES is proud of her Judaism and her African origins

Stones mean so much to me. I grew up in Southern Rhodesia, today Zimbabwe. Near my home town Bulawayo, is the Matobo National Park with its fantastic rock formations, created from over thousands of years of erosion. I was very influenced by them as a child, as well as by the Great Zimbabwe ruins. I believe stones have healing qualities – I collect them, wear them and am interested in their inherent energy. The Hebrew word for stone is „Even“. It contains the word for father (Av) and the word for son (Ben). Thus each stone represents the union between father and son, and the continuity from generation to generation. I feel this very strongly. I always say that I was born „ancient“, with thousands of years of history: Jewish, African and that of mankind. Stones connect us with history.

My „Stolzesteine (Stones-of-Pride)“ are an alternative to the Stolpersteine (stumbling stones)

A further aspect of stones regards graves. When we visit the dead in Jewish cemeteries, we do not bring flowers. Instead, we put a stone on the tombstone. There are several theories as to the origin of this tradition. Formerly, in the desert, heavy stones may have prevented animals from getting to the corpse. And in those lands there were no flowers - which is contrary from today, when a new stumbling stone is laid. For the occasion, there is always a pretty bouquet, maybe candles, placed next to the brand new, shiny metal plaque. Instead of metal plaques, they could have used real stone, and not place them in the pavement but rather at eye level. I ask myself, what would the National Socialists (Nazis) think if they could see these stumbling stones?

In my opinion, this project has materialised their greatest wish. They would say: „Look, all these murdered Jews!“ It is not my wish to criticise another artist, I am also an artist, rather than an activist! However, I must follow my own path. It is also the way I came to art.

Family

I come from a medical family and in Israel I studied Occupational Therapy. When my first husband was sent to work in Paris, I accompanied him, and later I moved to Switzerland with two children, a dog and a suitcase, whilst he returned to Israel.

My present (second) husband noticed my gift: he saw it in my scribblings. I had my first exhibition in 1986, and it all followed from there. I believe it was a huge advantage to begin my art later in life as I could take along my own personal history and other people. By that time I had already experienced the Six Day's War, the Yom Kippur War, my parents' divorce as well as my own. Taking risks is part of my personality. I would like to know the best way that art could create a homage to murdered Jews.

Department Store

In the year 2000, I discovered a purple covered book in one of Berlin's second hand book stores. Its title was "*Department Store Album N. Israel: Hygiene Throughout the Ages*". It aroused my curiosity as my mother was born in 1912 and the name Israel revealed a link to a Jewish theme. My German then was very poor. A friend translated what the volume was about. She told me „Nathan Israel“ was the name of a department store. I went to the place where the department store should have been, directly opposite the Red Town Hall, and found: nothing. Once it had been Berlin's oldest, and for a long while the biggest department store. Instead I discovered another antiquarian book shop which had another volume from the series. The books fascinated me. One could see how much effort someone had taken to produce them. I tried to find out more: who was the family Israel? Why did they publish these volumes? Through my research in Berlin, London and New York I discovered more albums. In the 1900 Album is an article describing what the family were doing for their personnel – from social benefits to leisure activities, and I thought: this has to be made known! Someone must do something to commemorate the family. And I began to make collages and paintings. The result was the series *A Tribute to Kaufhaus N. Israel 1815-1939*, which I presented at my gallery in Berlin in 2004, (Galerie Bremer) and a year later at the Jewish Museum Westphalia.

Wilfrid Israel, the last owner before the Aryanisation of the department store, left Berlin for England in 1939. He rescued thousands of Jewish children through the Kindertransport. Many people think he should have received more recognition and of course they are right. On the other hand I

think he, himself, did not need it, and in a certain way, his energy and light lives on. I absorb this energy from the past into my work, like a medium, bringing it forth for today so that it may be used for tomorrow. My aim is to create something unique for a person, bringing their life into the art work.

Identity

The stumbling blocks on the other hand, remember murdered Jews. The criticism I have towards this project is connected, above all, to my Jewish identity. In the 1980's, when I first visited Berlin, there were no stumbling blocks. Suddenly all these names on metal turned up on the pavements. But those people had lived in the buildings. I feel the voices and souls of my people and my grandparents who shared the fate of so many in those concentration camps. It hurts me. I love Berlin. I wanted to come and live here, but must watch out where I put my feet, especially at night. I see people walking over the stumbling blocks, riding bicycles over them, birds droppings dirty them – this is very painful for me, belonging to the second generation of Holocaust survivors.

Another problem I discovered whilst reading a reference to the stumbling blocks, in the English version of Wikipedia. An early proverb, when one stumbled over a stone, was to say „Here a Jew is buried“. This troubles me. I believe the inventor of the project did not think it through to the end. For me it is not enough to take only the last moment of a whole life before the person's murder, as a symbol.

There are wonderful memorial projects where one can go to without having someone's life under your feet. A moving example in my opinion is the Levetzowstrasse Memorial. For me it has a soul – I have to go and sit there just to be and to feel.

The Concept

I looked up the word „Stolpersteine“ in a dictionary and the next word underneath it, was „stolz“ (proud) – it was an inspiration. During my research on the N. Israel firm, I learned they were proud that their firm stood right in the center of the town. I am proud too – to be a Jew, a woman, and from Africa. And so I developed the Stones-of-Pride as an alternative project to the stumbling stones.

„I feel the voices and souls of my people“: DESSA artist (66) in Berlin“

In my paintings and collages, at least one stone is embedded in the paint: it influences the whole composition. For each art work I took a long time to reflect upon where the stone should be placed.

I would like to be able to ask those murdered people what would they want: should I come to a place to be able to concentrate and reflect? Or should I stumble over you? Unfortunately we cannot ask them.

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Photo Uwe Steinert
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Newspaper : Jüdisches Allgemeine
<http://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/search>

Exhibition :

DESSA : Kaufhaus N. Israel 1815-1939 : An Artist Researches History

Mitte Museum, Berlin, until March 30, 2016.

<http://mitemuseum.de/deutsch/ausstellung/sonderausstellung/dessa---kaufhaus-n-israel/dessa---kaufhaus-n-israel.html>

Book

DESSA - Stolzesteine : Stones-of-Pride

Hentrich & Hentrich, Berlin
<http://www.hentrichhentrich.de/author-deborah-sharon-abeles-dessa.html>

Galerie Petra Lange, Berlin

<http://www.galerielange.de/kuenstler/dessa>

Artist's website

<http://dessa-art.com>