

MOUTHFUL OF SILENCE

BY

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Chairperson

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that this is the approved Version of the following thesis:

MOUTHFUL OF SILENCE

Committee:

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Chairperson

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As in the past, emigration continues to be a wide spread phenomenon. Individuals, families and populations move across continents, often risking their lives in search of work, security, or to avoid persecution. For many, exile often becomes the only chance to survive. The experience is often traumatic, dividing families and destroying people's cultural identity. In the Mouthful Of Silence I examine the causes and the effects of emigration, as well as ideas of home and cultural belonging through the lens of my family's history and personal experience. Specifically, I am interested in the 20th century history of the Soviet Jewish Diaspora and the residual psychological affects that the continuous ethnic repressions and the Holocaust had on the generations of the Russian Jews who survived these events.

As an immigrant artist who was born to a Jewish family in the Soviet Union, and who now lives and works in the United States, several cultures have woven themselves into the fabric of my identity. The foundation of my 'sense of self' comes from my family. My grandparents on both sides were born in the small Jewish settlements (shtetls) in the western Ukraine. Evacuated during the Second World War, my grandparents were unable to return to their devastated towns. Traumatized by losing their parents and many siblings in the Holocaust, they resettled and tried to start a new life in an unfamiliar, often hostile environment in the post-war USSR. As a result, both of my parents grew up in the homogeneous culture of the Soviet ideology. Unable to understand the older generation's Yiddish, and without much context for the fragments of traditions that still remained, I became further removed from the culture of my grandparents. In 1995, following the example of many

Soviet Jews, my family emigrated to the United States to escape the potential of ethnic repression and the crumbling post-Soviet economy.

I remember a sense of caution which was always evident in the interaction of my family with our non-Jewish neighbors. It was learnt from a history of distrust, persecution, and at times, violence. I observe my parents, who now live in a middle-class suburb of Cleveland, continuing to be careful about displaying their Jewish identity to their neighbors... just in case. The fear of being ‘outed’ and persecuted is still present in the minds of many Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union, and it is passed down from generation to generation. Since immigrating, I too have felt the weight of choice: to assimilate, or to hold on to the culture in which I grew up. Torn between competing identities, I have felt my inner world divided in two. While desperately wanting to belong, at times I still feel alienated from the American culture.

In recent years, as part of my studio research, I have begun to trace my steps back, reexamining the idea of the Russian culture that I call my own. I discovered that most of the memories that sustained my concept of ‘home’ were not rooted in my experience of Russia in itself, but rather my experience of ‘Russia as a Stranger’—a Jew. The realization of being doubly alienated led me to investigate the history of my family as well as the history of the Soviet Jewish Diaspora. I researched historical writings pertaining to centuries of Jewish exile and nomadic existence.

What I have come to believe is that the word ‘homeland’ implies belonging to a specific geographical place. Yet for many first-generation immigrants, the idea

of ‘homeland’ loses its grounding—‘land’, and becomes just ‘home’. Uprooted, people no longer have a land where they can return. Assimilation tends to follow, but the trauma of a lost home often remains. The idea of homelessness that can be traced throughout the history of the Jewish culture resonates with my own experience of a lost home.

The work in my show Mouthful Of Silence, explores the notion of an ‘inner home’, one that is carried within and is sustained by memory. The choices of materials, subject matter and process are driven by my desire to discuss the connections between memory and one’s cultural identity. For example, ash made from books is used as a material throughout the exhibition, serving as a visual reminder of the exterminated culture. The visual treatment of the figures in the work references the ‘erasing’ of individuals from the public memory, similar to what I discovered to be documented in David King’s book *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin’s Russia*.

Mouthful Of Silence is comprised of ten works, including eight drawings, two paintings and an installation. The two-dimensional pieces were deliberately hung and numbered from right to left. This choice alludes to both going backward in time, and to the way all Jewish languages are read, connecting the experience of viewing the work to the ideas in the exhibition. The decision to omit the use of glassed frames in the presentation of the drawings was made to highlight the materiality of their surfaces. The somber mood of the work is intensified by the dimness of the light in the gallery space. Each piece in the show is strategically lit to reinforce their

dream-like quality, in order to reference the distant memories out of which the images evolved. Color is either completely absent or appears de-saturated and barely perceptible. The lack of color is important for several reasons. While doing the research for Mouthful Of Silence, most of the images I encountered were black and white photographs. When considered conceptually, the absence of color speaks further to the notion of not knowing the full story—something I was confronted with again and again during my investigations. Additionally, the monochromatic approach served to visually unite the work into a single entity and helped to transmit the ideas from one piece to the other.

Several elements, such as the root-form, the house shape and the human face/body are used repeatedly throughout my artwork. The repeating imagery serves as a metaphorical thread, tying the separate pieces to the main themes within the show: questions of belonging, ideas of home and the fragility of identity. The root structure can be seen in “The Soldier” (Image 20), “The Roots” (Image 17), “The Erased” (Image 7) and “The Container” (Image 10). In these works, the form serves as a metaphor of one’s connection to the history and the tangled nature of cause and effect. The depiction of the roots can also be understood as a system of transference that allows the past to feed the present and vice versa. The house shape appears in “The Roots”, “The Inescapable” (Image 3) and “The Cemetery” (Image 21). The simplification of the house form is intentional—to allow for a broad universal reading. Portraits and figures, though referencing specific people, are intended to have universal significance also. A scratched-out, altered image of a single person acts as

a metaphor for the millions of those whose identities comprised a cultural whole—a culture that has been disfigured and erased, along with its people. In addition to photographs from my family’s collection, the work in the exhibition references found as well as historical images. David King’s book *The Commissar Vanishes* served as a resource of images for “The Erased”. By using three photographs from the book as examples, “The Erased” sets the stage for the other pieces in the exhibition. This triptych, the largest two-dimensional work in the show, emanates fear and violence, contaminating the work around it. The smaller, more intimate drawings in the exhibition are seen as if through the filter of “The Erased”. By entering the exhibition space, the viewer is immediately confronted by the dominant darkness of the piece’s presence and the inability of escape from the gaze of the people depicted.

In the installation of this exhibition, “The Soldier” is placed directly opposite the triptych. It is a depiction of a single uniformed figure facing “The Erased” in a confrontational stand-off. The implied connection between the two works is meant to evoke the power of groups of people over the fate of a single person, as is often seen through the course of time and history. The image of the soldier is partly obscured and the peeling surface of the panel makes it seem as if suspended in time. The small area of a gold-covered root-like form alludes to the preciousness of that which survived the violence of the past—to be passed to the next generation.

The gold dust on the surface of “The Container” plays a similar role to the gold of “The Soldier”. Here, the gold appears to be pulverized and scattered among the black pages of a book, which is partially constructed of actual burnt book pages.

“The Container” explores the idea of a book as a repository of knowledge and cultural memory, while referencing numerous burnings of Jewish books throughout history. The piece makes a parallel between the book burnings and the mass killings of the Jews. “The Container” speaks about the aftereffects of such acts, when all that is left are the indecipherable remains. Burnt books pages serve as evidence of the act, while the gold dust alludes to the fragments of the culture that survived in a scattered and altered state.

The “Young Pioneer” (Image 13) speaks about the inaccessibility of the past and the fragility of memory. Executed in graphite on paper, the image is covered in speckles of salt. The crystals of salt, caked to the surface of the drawing, reflect the light in an unpredictable way depending on the angle of view. The face of a young man gazing directly at the viewer appears as if made out of fog, ready to disintegrate at any moment. The salt acts as a visual barrier between the image and the viewer, alluding to the layers of time between the experience and the memory. As a material, salt is layered with metaphorical and symbolic meaning. In the context of the “Young Pioneer” it acts to preserve the memory and alludes to the bitter nature of it.

The transcendence of materials is further explored in the central work of the exhibition—an installation titled “The Inescapable”. The installation consists of a life-sized dining table covered with ash made from books, a house form and a tree branch covered in salt (positioned on the tabletop over the ash). A burnt book rests on a wooden chair next to the table. This piece is caught in the crossbeam of gazes from the people depicted in “The Erased”, “The Soldier” and the “Young Pioneer”. The

solidity of the “The Inescapable” positions it in the reality of the present, rather than the illusionary space of memory. The wooden table and the chair are covered in graphite and burnished. The application of graphite not only visually ties the piece to the rest of the work in the show, but also accentuates the implied history of the wooden surfaces. The pile of book ashes on top of the table reinforces the idea of the obliterated cultural memory. The salt-covered tree appears to be growing out of the ashes. Its sawed-off branches allude to loss, and reference the forms of monuments from old Jewish cemeteries. The chair with the book next to the table projects a feeling of a human presence and its own intrinsic purpose. The installation is intended to be experienced as an altarpiece: a place of contemplation and reverie. “The Inescapable” points out the paradox of the ideas presented in the exhibition: the émigré’s inability to escape the memory and the trauma of the past and the need for an eventual reconciliation.

Mouthful Of Silence highlights the significance of memory as an important part of one’s cultural identity. Specifically, during emigration when one’s identity can be destabilized by the trauma of the experience, memory serves as a reminder of cultural belonging. My own morphing emigrant identity led me to investigate my family’s history and that of the Soviet Jewish Diaspora. In the process of my studio research, I became conscious of the fact that the trauma of the Holocaust and the Soviet ideology of Jewish cultural eradication effected generations of Soviet Jews, including those born after these events. Mass murders, forced assimilations and the fear of repressions led many Soviet Jews to hide their culture and language.

Consequently, the internalized cultural identity was passed to the next generation in a fractured, edited state. This process of continuous cultural alienation is not specific to the Soviet Jews. In the past several decades numerous conflicts and ideological wars have driven millions into exile. Many from Eastern Europe, The Middle East, Africa and South America have been fleeing political or ethnic persecution in their homeland. The trauma of displacement can last for generations, contributing to the sense of dislocation and isolation. Mouthful Of Silence attempts to put a human face on the invisible agony of a lost home, and the emigrant's struggle between the inability to forget and the pain of remembering.

## Images

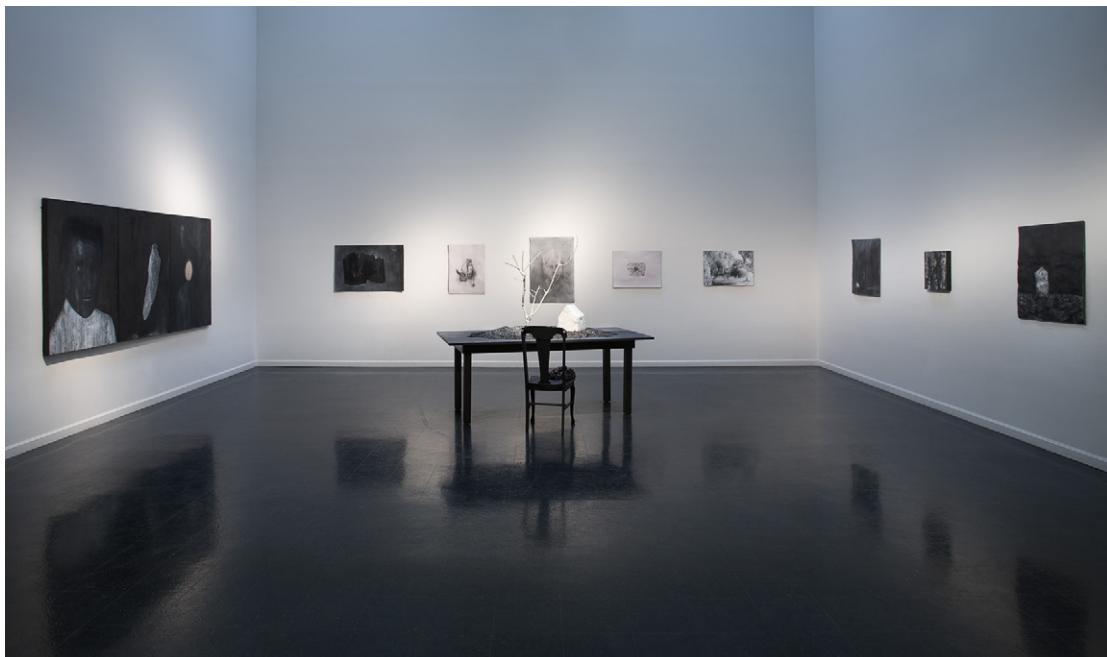


Image 1: Exhibition View



Image 2: Exhibition View



Image 3: “The Inescapable“ – wood, salt, ash, graphite, found chair, burnt book, burlap, shellac



Image 4: “The Inescapable“ (detail)



Image 5: “The Inescapable“ (detail)



Image 6: “The Inescapable“ (detail)



Image 7: "The Erased" – graphite, gesso, acrylic, ash, salt, shellac, saliva, linen, thread on canvas



Image 8: "The Erased" (detail)



Image 9: "The Erased" (detail)



Image 10: "The Container" – graphite, burnt book pages, acrylic, salt, gold leaf on paper

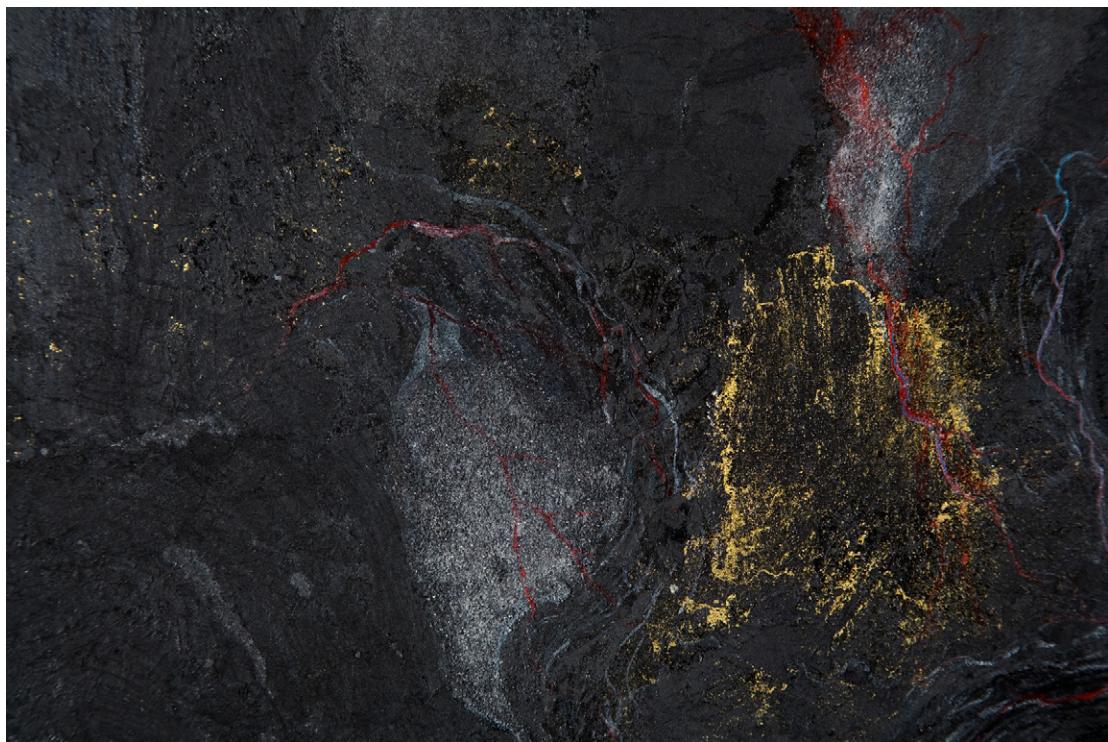


Image 11: "The Container" (detail)



Image 12: "After The War" – graphite, acrylic on paper



Image 13: "Young Pioneer" – graphite, salt on paper



Image 14: “Young Pioneer“ (detail)



Image 15: "The Possessions" – graphite, gold leaf, gesso on paper



Image 16: "The Possessions" (detail)



Image 17: "The Roots" – graphite, acrylic, plaster, gold leaf on paper



Image 18: "The Roots" (detail)



Image 19: "The Russian Still Life" – graphite, salt, silverpoint on paper



Image 20: "The Soldier" – acrylic, graphite, gesso, plaster, gold leaf on panel



Image 21: "The Cemetery" – graphite, acrylic on panel