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Digging deep

The art of Mindy Weisel is permeated with emotion and love, with influences from her family's remarkable story and her parents' Holocaust experiences

Into the deep

Artist Mindy Weisel's paintings, influenced by her parents' experiences during the Shoah, reveal layers of love and beauty

• By ARIEL DOMINIQUE HENDELMAN

Mindy Weisel talks to her paintings the way a mother might coax her timid child, urging them to come forth, emerge from the canvas and show themselves. The 70-year-old Weisel paints with her soul and explores her family's story – as well as the emotions that permeate it – with fearless devotion. The story is a remarkable one.

Born in Bergen-Belsen, Germany, in 1947, which at that time was a displaced persons' camp, Weisel was one of the first group of children born after the Holocaust. Her mother and father were cousins who both survived Auschwitz, found each other alive and got married. Her father is related to eminent writer Elie Weisel. The family remained in Bergen-Belsen for three years.

"My father tells stories of how they never held me because there were 2,000 survivors in the camp and I would go from lap to lap," Weisel recalls. "I think from an early age, I filled up with a lot of love and a lot of sadness. You can't be born into that kind of environment without that happening."

The family moved to the Lower East Side of Manhattan and then relocated to Boro Park, Brooklyn, after a few years, where Weisel's parents opened a bakery. When Weisel was 10, the family left New York for Los Angeles, due to her father's debilitating asthma. The following years were difficult ones for Weisel. In Boro Park her life was flourishing, but in LA in 1957, with scarcely any public transportation available, she became very lonely. Things changed when she befriended a small group of five other girls who were also Holocaust survivors' children. They remain close to this day.

Art first impacted her life when Weisel was 12. She found a suitcase full of Yiddish letters and poems. Among them was a weathered and beautiful drawing. She asked her father about it and he told her a story about one morning when he was in Bergen-Belsen and was so moved watching the sun come up that he had to draw. It was the only drawing he had ever done.

"I really felt that drawing," she says. "It was at that moment that I realized the power of art. He had a bakery his whole life, so the creative energy came through when he was decorating cakes and things like that. I'm sure that my creative energy comes from him."

Weisel pinpoints a moment, two years later, when her realization of art's strength manifested into personal destiny. An influential teacher, the likes of which, as she sees it, we all have at some point in our lives, told her that she had a real gift for painting. It was at that time that she knew she would dedicate her life to cultivating the craft. She attended George Washington University, where she graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree.

"When I was in university, I flunked all the classes where you had to be exact or measure," Weisel says. "But if I was told to feel the leaf, I would do the best leaf in the class."

She and her husband were married when she was 18, but being married young did not stop her from continuing to pursue her artistic passion. After college, she worked to put her husband through law school and took art classes at night. She was an unstoppable creative force.

One of her first serious exhibitions was in 1979. She had become obsessed with her father's number from the concentration camp. Weisel would call him and he would tell her stories about that time. She began writing the number over and over in her diary, where it became the baseline for a series of paintings.

"I kept diaries since I was 13," she shares. "I needed a place to put my emotions where I wasn't going to aggravate anybody. I couldn't cry in my house. How could I? I wasn't in Auschwitz, I had a bed and food. So I never cried. I think that's why I get the chills all the time and I always have to announce it because it surprises me. Most people tear up, but I don't have that reaction. So I was writing in my journal and asking questions. I wrote my father's number obsessively, at least a hundred works on paper over the course of that year."

From those, she chose the 36 strongest for a show at the Jewish Museum of New York, which was reviewed by *The New York Times*'s Grace Glueck. The show put Weisel on a new tier of contemporary painters.

"What that experience taught me was that I would succeed by saying what I wanted to say, not by trying to please others," she states. "I didn't care if anybody was going to like a black painting with the *Shema* in it. I had no choice. I realized that I needed to paint what I needed to paint and not worry whether it was in style. Then I would be okay."

Weisel's next big show was in 1981, called "Lily in Blue," after her mother, who loved the color blue. All of Weisel's work incorporates a shade of blue in it as an homage to her mother, who died in 1994. The exhibition was received by audiences as a series full of joy, but she points out that people get it wrong. They think that in her dark-hued work, she is depressed, and that brighter-colored paintings indicate happiness.

"[Noted American painter Mark] Rothko talked about this," Weisel says, "that his dark paintings were when he felt strong because he could deal with the darkness. The Holocaust work is when I was feeling very strong. In each piece, I found light. With 'Lily in Blue,' I actually felt full of sadness for my mother and the exhibition became an expression of my desire to make her happy. They're the most colorful paintings I ever did."

Her mother came to the exhibition and was extremely proud. She points out that her mother knew how expensive it was to be an artist. They used to meet on Canal Street in Manhattan at Pearl Paints and her mother would buy her supplies. She also sent Weisel her first few years of studio rent.

"My mother supported me and my work gave her a lot of *nachas*," she adds.

Her mother is a pervasive influence in her artwork and in her outlook on existence. Her mother's family was taken by the Nazis during their Passover Seder. She was the only survivor among her five sisters.

"Here I was, the only daughter, the woman in her life," Weisel reflects. "I don't know how I look, I still don't. But I can tell you how my mother looked. I can tell you if her eyebrow went up or down. I watched her face my whole life to make sure that I was giving her happiness. She cried often; she was damaged. Yet she was miraculously strong. She went through hell on earth.

It amazes me what people go through in life and how they remain faithful."

Her mother gave birth to a stillborn between her and her brother. Then, when the family was living in Brooklyn, there was a terrible fire in their home. A neighbor rolled Weisel's mother in blankets to save her life. Later, she battled cancer. Due to malnutrition in the camps, she lost all her teeth at a young age. All of these hardships contributed to Weisel's picture of resilience and beauty.

"In truth, a person can endure so much," she adds. "It's remarkable how they can keep going. I am so grateful that my mother lived long enough to see me being taken seriously as an artist."

Weisel is certainly a serious artist in the eyes of the contemporary art world. Her many accomplishments include an invitation from the German State Department to act as a cultural ambassador in 2009, an experience that she describes as amazing and, as the child of survivors, somewhat surreal. She was offered an exhibition in Berlin and ended up touring Germany for two and a half weeks, giving lectures. She spoke at universities, as well as diplomats' homes.

As fate arranged it, she met the curator of the Bergen-Belsen museum in Hamburg. She went to visit the museum the following day. It was her first trip back to Bergen-Belsen since she was three years old. The State Department also wanted her to speak at Dachau, where the mayor excitedly awaited her arrival. The talk was filmed for German television. Her trip to Germany was transcendent.

"No American artist, forget Jewish, was ever invited to the German foreign affairs office before that," Weisel says.

Her work has since been shown in countless exhibitions throughout the US and Europe, and is on permanent display at the Smithsonian Institute, the Israel Museum and Yad Vashem. Her current exhibition at Rosenbach Contemporary, "Meditations on Love," is a culmination of three years of work and a lifetime of experience. The exhibition is fairly unusual for Weisel, as the paintings are all on canvas.

"Earlier in my career, I was doing mostly works on paper," she recalls. "Every so often I would have canvases, but they are very difficult. Each one is like running a marathon. It's layers and layers. You think you're done and then the color doesn't dry well, or it's not what you had hoped. I'm not happy with the first 10 layers, I need to really live through it and if it survives the painting process, it's miraculous. I gave myself a goal a few years ago that I wanted to have an all-canvas body of work, which became this exhibition. The real miracle of all of this is that Uri [Rosenbach] showed up about a year and a half in."

Uri Rosenbach is the owner of Rosenbach Contemporary, the only private gallery in Jerusalem devoted to promoting contemporary Israeli artists. Weisel knew as soon as she and Rosenbach met that she had found a home for her work and a friend who shared her vision.

"Once I connected with Uri, there was a joy inside of me," she says. "I decided that this is where I wanted to be, he had no choice."

The Rosenbach Contemporary gallery is indeed a perfect setting to display Weisel's work, which exudes an energy and depth that both contrasts and complements the stark white walls surrounding it. Her process harks back to the days of her obsession with her father's number, and is visible in certain pieces, while in most not at all. She begins by writing words directly on the canvas, over and over, until there is no language left. The layers of letters form the foundation for the layers of paint that will cover them. There is something of an unburdening and unearthing happening in the exhaustive writing exercise. It is here that she frees herself of the constraints of words, symbols, time and space. The woman becomes painter becomes vessel.

"In the process of painting, I'm living through this very mysterious activity," she states. "I taught abstract painting for 10 years at the Corcoran College of Art and Design, so I must have known what to teach. Yet if someone asks me how I paint, I don't know. When you live through it, you get an answer in the process. Usually the title comes somewhere in the middle. Then you realize what you're dealing with: the *yetzer hara* [evil inclination] the beauty of things, whatever it may be. It comes out in the painting.

"Everything comes to me in the process. Unlike music, where there is a record, or choreography where the dance can be repeated, there is not one record of the process of painting, even if I took a hundred pictures. All you hope is that at the end, people will feel something because I have felt so much. I get to a point with the painting where I say, 'You have to live!'

"I was going to call the show something else, 'The Survival of Beauty,' but then I realized that what I'm really interested in is love, that's what survived."

Mindy Weisel's "Meditations on Love" will be on display at Rosenbach Contemporary in Jerusalem until May 2.
www.mindyweisel.com/
rosenbach.co.il/

'Like Layers of Ice,' 2017, oil on canvas.

'After the Rain,' 2017, oil on canvas.

'Of Silence,' 2016, oil on canvas.

'Shoes and Souls Along the Danube,' 2013-2017, oil on canvas.