David Kassan: Bearing Witness

BY KRISTY STRICKLIN


Facing Survival | David Kassan, an exhibition of David Kassan's work opened in September at the USC Fisher Museum of Art in Los Angeles. The centerpiece of the show is Bearing Witness an immense, multi-figural painting of 11 Holocaust survivors of Auschwitz. The finished work took two years to complete and comprises five panels together measuring 12 feet long and 8 feet high. This show marks the culmination of years of work and research for Kassan, meeting with survivors, listening to their stories, getting to know them and using that insight to create intimate portraits in paint. Kassan's paintings do much more than capture a likeness; they serve as testimony to the horrifying cruelty that each individual endured and as evidence of how, against all adversity, they survived.

Director of USC Fisher Museum, Selma Holo, says, "Facing Survival is above all, an attempt to defy generalization about the horror of the Holocaust, to venture beyond the incomprehensible and ungraspable number of murdered—6 million—and to powerfully feel, through individual portraiture, the reality of each single soul and the miracle of his or her continued existence." Along with Kassan's works, the exhibition features USC Shoah Foundation's Dimensions in Testimony, an interactive display where visitors can ask questions of several of the survivors from the paintings and hear their prerecorded responses.

Reflecting on Bearing Witness, early on, Kassan knew that he wanted to create a work that was "so large that it can't be ignored." In 2017, he traveled with filmmaker Chloe Lee from New York City to Los Angeles to meet with 11 survivors of Auschwitz and hear about their experiences. He explains, "The number of survivors from the war has dwindled to the low hundreds of thousands, and that number shrinks daily. I want to write these survivors' biographies in paint, creating time capsules for future generations." Over the years, Kassan and Lee have met with and interviewed many survivors and have compiled a wealth of footage and interviews, which they hope to edit into a documentary on the project.

At the heart of Kassan's paintings is a message about resistance to hatred and a call to greater empathy. And it's a message that the world, quite desperately, needs to hear. "The stories of Holocaust survivors, their suffering and the lives they have carved out for themselves, deserve to be told. They remind all societies to counter not just anti-Semitism, but all forms of intolerance. This intimate face of the Holocaust teaches us how to protect, promote and defend human rights in today's world," says Kassan. This incredible body of work establishes Kassan's place in a long tradition of artists who have used painting to shine a light on issues essential to our survival as humans and as compassionate citizens of this world.

The exhibition is on view until December 7 and is accompanied by a catalog with a complete list of works and contributing essays.