

DAMNATIO MEMORIAE

(or) Creating Memory

By Ernesto Menéndez-Conde and Daniel Solecki

IN HIS ESSAY “A Lesson From the Past (How I Survived the Nazi Occupation)”—published in this issue—John Perreault claims that contemporary America’s undocumented immigrant workers are at risk of becoming like the Jews in the early days of Nazi Germany. The analogy is disturbing. Perrault’s essay criticizes the opportunist social engagement of artists during the Nazi occupation of France and suggests that artists, then and now, ought to have a moral commitment to the society in which they live and work. In pondering the relationship between the Nazi era and the present day, we stumble over a feared and repressed term: fascism. Are we on the cusp of a crisis in democratic values? As we face economic downturn, are civil rights in jeopardy? Is fascism, or its similar manifestations, definitively buried? Do we have good reason to be concerned about the revival of extreme right-wing chauvinism and xenophobia? *Damnatio Memoriae (or) Creating Memory* the current exhibition at the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, addresses this set of uncomfortable issues. According to the show’s press release, in the ancient Roman world “damnatio memoriae” (condemned memory) referred to the institutionalized erasure of a traitor’s public records after he had dishonored the state. The show’s title suggests that parts of the condemned past could return, creating a new reading of history because the memory of past events may not be closed but rather dangerously hidden.

At the entrance, as a preamble to the rest of the show, is the video *Pensiero Unico* (The One and Only Thought), a 2003 performance piece by Cesare Pietroiusti. From a window covered with latticework—suggesting a prison





Cesare Pietroiusti

Pensiero Unico, 2003

Single-channel DVD projection with sound

Duration: 5' 40" loop

Copyright: the artist

Courtesy: Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York



goldiechiari

Genealogy of Damnatio Memoriae, Stay Behind, 2011

Hand-carved Ficus Benjamina, plastic container and saucer, soil

Approx. height: 96 inches (243.8 cm); Installation dimensions variable

Copyright: the artists

Courtesy: Greenberg Van Doren Gallery.

cell—the artist sings the anthem of the Fascist National Party over and over again in a clear, passionless, voice. At first, people outside seem not to pay attention. However, as he keeps singing, curious pedestrians start arriving, first looking on in silence but soon adding their own voices. In a dramatic ending, in the dark, the artist stops singing, and we hear only the unified chorus of an enthusiastic crowd of young men. Pietroiusti's performance is a warning about the latent memories that may wake up and spread, only if a leader arrives, embodying the figure of a nationalist hero.



goldiechiari
Genealogy of Damnatio Memoriae, Stay Behind, (detail)

goldiechiari, a collaborative artistic project by Rome-based conceptualists Sara Goldschmied and Eleonora Chiari, also explores the survival of the historical past. Their work, like the video piece in the first room, directly engages Italy's 20th century political history. Instead of tackling fascism, goldiechiari instead focuses their work on Italian politics in the postwar period, especially the violent conflicts between the communists and the resurgent neo-fascists that peaked during 1970's. Their conceptual piece in this show, *Genealogy of Damnatio Memoriae, Stay Behind*, graces the middle of the gallery floor. It is a young Ficus tree (an ornamental species native to Southeast Asia) planted atop of cone of soil. The sapling's bark is carved all over with names and dates, like a tree nostalgically adorned with the names of lovers. These, however, are marks of a very different kind of romance—the codenames of the various CIA collaborations with the Italian secret service during the Cold War. goldiechiari uses the tree, a universal symbol of memory and genealogy, to evoke the remembrance of uncomfortable past. The artists suggest that we must, like the tree bark itself, accept these scars and grow on.

goldiechiari has another piece—a set of four photographs arranged in a row. Each picture is of a close-hooded figure clothed in a different color fabric. The hooded figures, in this case a reference to Masonic societies active during the Cold War, could be also be matched with politics and fear-mongering—inquisitors, executioners, Klansmen, masked policemen. While goldiechiari does indeed engage Italian history, it certainly doesn't do so with the piercing wit of the Cesare Pietroiusti piece. We don't get the same sense that historical memory is vigorously (and horribly) alive. The tree carvings suggest a slow fading of memory while the Pietroiusti suggests not an inkling of memory having been forgotten.

The show is further complicated by the work of sculptor and performance artist Sissi. Her works here are brightly colored, hand-crocheted net and rope structures that surround small tondo canvases. Auxiliary twine and netting



connect several small frame-and-rope structures into single artworks. Her sculpture and performance usually go together. In her previous exhibitions, including one shown in video at the Brooklyn Museum's Center for Feminist Art in 2007, the artist uses her virtuosic crocheting skills to literally sew herself into a net of her own weaving. Here there is none of that. In our opinion, Sissi's inclusion in the show is peculiar because, unlike some of the other artists represented here, her work seems to concern itself more with personal than collective memory or politics. Instead, there are hints that her work is related to a more personal understanding of memory. The canvases, painted with Frankenthaler-esque washes of natural color, resemble picture frames whose sepia-toned images of family members have long faded away. The net-structures themselves appear to be a reference to the memory of the female condition (this connection is made more explicit given Sissi's performance work) in which the woman artist feels trapped in a net of her own creation.

Artist Giacinto Occhionero seems to oscillate between the evoking personal and politically traumatic memory. He renders drawings and paintings with an existential character. His work includes self-portraits, bodies that may evoke torture, charged sexual images, allusions to death, and desolate landscapes. A sense of incompleteness pre-

vails in all the pieces, as if recovering or creating memory was a painful process, or a violent act.

Damnatio Memoriae is a dissonant show. Several medias—including video, painting, photography, and installation—are displayed here in a strangely chaotic manner. It seems as if curator Kristen Lorello was purposely playing with disharmonies and incongruence. This lack of unity becomes quite striking as soon as viewers enter the gallery's main exhibition space. The arrangement of the pieces, as well as the curatorial choices of the artworks, may mimic the way forbidden, feared, or condemned memories return in the form of fragments or flashes of aggressiveness or ugliness. The systematic character of these remembrances is hard to grasp. This apparent lack of coherence blurs the conception of the whole show, as if the curator were dealing with too many unconnected issues at the same time, going from historical and collective memory to personal memory, while bringing up samples from only five artists. The possible links between historical and personal memories are ultimately hard to perceive.

Sissi
Autoritratto con specchio, 2010
Fabric, wood, mirror, belting
77 x 39 x 15 inches (195,6 x 99,1 x 38,1 cm)
Copyright: the artist
Courtesy: Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

