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NEXTBOOK FEATURE: COLUMN: PAINTING THE TOWN



painting
the town
Robin Cembalest

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No Accounting for Taste**Testing the limits of irreverence at the Seder table and a German synagogue**

When Do We Eat?, the comedy about sex, drugs, and autism at a Seder that opened this week at theaters around the country, pretends to be transgressive. However, the most shocking thing about it has to be Neil Genzlinger's *New York Times* review, blasting its "Bad Taste" and "contempt for what some people hold sacred."

If over-the-top stereotypes served with a side of schmaltz are Bad Taste, I wonder what to call piping car exhaust into a former synagogue in Germany. That of course was the gist of the conceptual art piece that [made headlines around the world](#) last month and [was quickly ended](#) after members of the German Jewish community complained, even though the artist, Santiago Sierra, had explained that it was actually conceived as a protest against the "banalization of Holocaust remembrance."

Personally, I find this work less morally problematic than some of [Sierra's other pieces](#), which exploit poor people in order to comment on exploitation: He paid prostitutes \$50 to tattoo lines on their backs, for example. Still, had I been in Pulheim, I'm not sure I would have been inclined to enter a faux gas chamber with a gas mask on my face and my own personal German fireman at my side. But hundreds of people apparently were. For most, it was probably their first visit to a synagogue.

While Sierra's piece hardly approached the status of "Guernica," another artwork commenting on German atrocities [that has been in the news lately](#), it has served to revisit certain questions that only become more relevant as the Shoah recedes in time: Who can speak for the Holocaust? What are the limits of irreverence? When reality seems to be unspeakable, how may art open a dialogue and keep memory alive?

I copied these from Stephen C. Feinstein's introduction to *Absence/Presence: Critical Essays on the Artistic Memory of the Holocaust*. They come from a [statement](#) issued by New York's Jewish Museum during the controversy surrounding Norman Kleeblatt's 2002 show *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*. which was the target of protests by Abraham Foxman, Elie Wiesel, and members of the International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors.

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The protesters [tried to get it closed](#) before it even opened. *The New Yorker's* Peter Schjeldahl was among many who said the show was in "bad taste."

Applying the word "taste" to Holocaust art creates an interesting problem. Sometimes what seems to be good taste is in bad taste: like de-Judaizing and sentimentalizing the Anne Frank story for mass consumption, [as Cynthia Ozick famously argued](#), so that the focus was on the uplift and not the horror. In this respect I would argue that Sierra's piece is in fact tasteful, since it is completely appropriate for its venue: Isn't it in bad taste to make art in the spiritual home of a community of murdered Jews that *doesn't* refer to their fate? Is it possible or worthy to try and aestheticize a building that's full of ghosts?

By the way, I don't think the reaction would have been different had Sierra been Jewish. *Mirroring Evil's* critics [hated](#) a photomontage by Alan Schnechner, a British-born Jew who served in the Israeli army, showing himself inserted into a scene of inmates at Buchenwald, holding a Diet Coke. Something about that soda can really touched a nerve.

All of this reminded me of a story I commissioned for *ARTnews* in 1999 about the debate in the African-American community over the use of racist images like Sambos and minstrels in the work of artists such as Kara Walker, Michael Ray Charles, and Carrie Mae Weems, who were accused of betrayal and self-hatred. ("Can you imagine a Jewish artist doing satirical art about the Holocaust?" artist Betye Saar told our reporter, Pamela Newkirk.) While Walker's most lurid images of miscegenation and bestiality on the plantation did not make it into [her current show](#) at the Metropolitan, there is enough sadistic violence in the slave scenes on view to disturb the sensitive. Of course these include not only Walker's works but also pieces she has culled from the museum's collection and hung amidst her own. No, it's not as provocative as putting poison gas in a German synagogue. But it shares the aim of not trying to pretend that something disturbing isn't already there.


As for the limits of irreverence, they are getting harder to reach all the time. At the Scope art fair, I saw hundreds of people blithely walk past a painting by the late German artist Blalla Hallmman showing a naked Hitler, how shall we say, entering a pig from behind, in a complicated iconographic scenario that also includes an American flag, a dollar sign, and a cross. (It's now on view at the Chelsea Gallery [Thomas Erben](#).) No one raised an eyebrow. By now we've seen a lot of boorish Hitlers.

If you're going to look at Hitler caricatures, you might as well go for the real thing—the ones by the Polish émigré Arthur Szyk, a brilliant artist, illuminator, and [caricaturist](#) whose magazine covers jumped off newsstands during World War II but has been unjustly neglected. Fortunately, Szyk is the subject of a [small show](#) at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion; unfortunately, the show is composed of photo-murals that are adequate for didactic purposes but not for showcasing the art of a man who worked in the tradition of medieval manuscript-makers.

So even as we celebrate Passover, there is no way to get a good look at the [glorious Haggadah](#) he managed to get published in London in 1937. But even if you did, you wouldn't be able to see the original images. Szyk reluctantly acceded to his publisher's demand that he remove overtly anti-Nazi iconography like the swastikas on the Egyptians' armbands and the faces of Goebbels and Goering on the snakes (but his [Wicked Son](#) still wears German dress and a small moustache).

Szyk's Haggadah does, however, make an unexpected appearance somewhere else this month—in *When Do We Eat?* The Haggadah, which director Salvador

Litvak knew from his childhood, not only plays the Haggadah in the movie's Seder —it also inspired the art direction for the lavish tent where the meal is held in deference to the son who has become a *baal teshuvah*. "The idea was to have **no color** in the family's world before they entered the tent," Litvak said. "Then, when the Seder begins, it's a little like Dorothy leaving Kansas and entering Oz."

This, at least, is an example of very good taste indeed. 

Robin Cembalest is executive editor of ARTnews.

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