

Robin Kandel at Sherry Frumkin Gallery

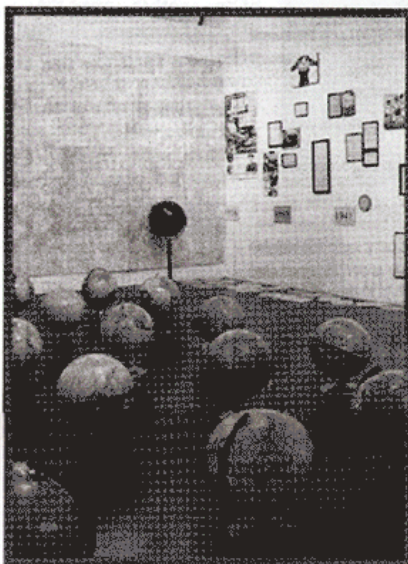
The subject of an artist's work is influenced by a myriad of factors. Social, sexual, racial or historical issues can motivate an artist to investigate certain topics. While formal and aesthetic concerns dictate the style and the look of the work, what an artist makes work about comes from someplace deep within. The Bay Area-based artist Robin Kandel had been making works for years, but when she learned revealing details of her family's history it prompted her to use it as the basis for her work.

Kandel's father never spoke of his past. Her knowledge of his war experiences were pieced together from what she overheard and what she surmised. She knew he came from the Ukraine, that some of his family died in World War II, and that he and her mother were cousins who met when her father's family emigrated to Detroit after the war. In 2001, Kandel came into some audiotapes her father had recorded in 1983 recounting his experiences during the war. The tapes answered many questions about her father's past, but Kandel wanted more. She wanted to truly *understand* what he had gone through. So, she decided to simulate and integrate some of his experiences into her art. Her recent installation at Sherry Frumkin Gallery incorporated her mother and father's histories into mixed-media works that reflect aspects of their past in relation to the artist's present. As a result, the works reveal as much about Kandel as they do her parents.

The exhibition began with a hand-scrawled backward text that relates her father's story. Lines of penciled text span the large sheet of paper from edge to edge rendering it almost impossible to read. Isolated sentences are underlined, and connect to black-and-white photographs pinned to the side of the paper. Because it served as the introduction to the exhibition, it set the tone: This is a story of fragments. It's an illustrated

story, yet the images are also fragments—fleeting moments and cherished memories.

Kandel uses her father's story to map



Robin Kandel, installation view, 2007, at Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica.

out his, her mother's and her own history through sculptures, paintings and videos. The largest work in the installation, *Benjamin and Julius*, illustrates a time in which framed texts, printed posters, paintings, actual globes and a scattering of pages extend across the floor and two walls. Beginning in 1936 with a poster for the Purple Gang, gangsters who were associated with her mother's family, the timeline ends in 1961, the year Kandel was born. Images, maps, globes and pieces of paper recounting her father's story as it connects and intersects her mother's and her own, dotted the walls and the floor of the gallery. Dense and didactic as well as visual, the work is less about the individual elements than about the whole they create. To counterbalance the textiness of this piece, Kandel juxtaposed it with a painted/sculptural work, *Ocean, Ocean*, which presents a field of blue in relation to twenty globes positioned in a grid on the floor. The references to travel and displacement are illustrated in the twenty globes—all different visualizations of the world—many with strange colors for the oceans, and several oriented quite unnaturally.

While Kandel is facile in many mediums, her video works stand out. Two short loops, both subtle and poignant explorations, fuse her parents' history with an insider's view of the history of video art. These pieces, *Stack* and *Dress Up*, are personal as well as universal. Here, references to the early works of Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra are overlaid with Kandel's father's story. In *Stack*, the act of stacking—her father dug and stacked peat in labor camps—is

repeated with everyday objects including shoes, teapots, coats, bread and bricks. In each stacking performance we see her hand enter the frame putting one object on top of another until the awkward pile reaches the top of the frame. In *Dress Up*, she puts on and takes off the clothing of the characters in her parents' story—a young girl, a young boy, a gangster (with gun) and a Nazi soldier. In addition to watching her take these items off during an infinite looping sequence, Kandel also sites all of the clothes worn in the video in a pile on the floor in front of the wall-mounted monitor. *Dress Up* suggests the childhood game of putting on costumes and trying to be our mother, our father and other important people in our lives.

All memories are fragments and while we try to make sense of both our past and the collective past (history), we do so through the filter that is us. Kandel's different methods and presentations are attempts to make sense of information given, information missing, and of her own identity.

—Jody Zellen

Robin Kandel closed in August at Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica.

Jody Zellen is a freelance writer based in Santa Monica.