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# 'We have a responsibility to hold on to dark memories'

Artist Ori Gersht's Imperial War Museum exhibition uses rich imagery to explore themes of the Second World War

By **Julia Weiner**, February 16, 2012  
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Ori Gersht's images of cherry trees planted in contaminated soil in Hiroshima.

This promises to be a busy year for Israeli-born, London-based artist Ori Gersht. In August, there will be a major survey exhibition of his work at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and in the autumn, his work will be included in a group exhibition at the National Gallery.

But to start the year off, there is the small matter of an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum - his largest solo show to date in a British museum. It might strike people as an unusual venue for contemporary art but as curator Sara Bevin explains, "We were drawn to Ori's work because he uses rich, beautiful imagery to explore how we relate to complex and often dark subject matter, particularly war and conflict." The two films and series of photographs selected have references to the Second World War, a period with which Gersht is fascinated.

He explains: "I see the events that took place between 1939 and 1945 as so significant that they have shaped our lives ever since. They completely changed the world we live in today making it a lot more pluralistic. They raised the bar in relation to our moral standard as human beings. Time is passing and slowly these memories are transforming into myth. I feel that I have some responsibility to hold on to them."

One film explores the story of a Holocaust survivor. "It has to do with a childhood memory that I had," Gersht recalls. When I was young and I was wandering the streets of Tel Aviv, I used to see many people with numbers tattooed on their arms and it was very much integral to the demographic landscape. I still visit Israel frequently and I became aware that all these people are just fading away and disappearing.

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Israeli-born Gersht who now lives in London

"I started to search for people who had numbers tattooed on their arms. I wanted to preserve this moment that soon will disappear forever."

He found 85 year old Yehudit Arnon who had been a prisoner at Auschwitz. "In the winter of 1944, a German officer asked her to dance for him. She refused so they punished her by leaving her standing in the snow for a long time. She made this promise to herself that if she survived she would dedicate her life to dance. She turned her life into a triumph and formed a successful dance company. There was something about her personal story, but also her inner strength and physical fragility that made me respond strongly."

The film shows the elderly Arnon dancing for the last time by rocking in her chair and moving from darkness to light. Gersht says: "I saw it was some kind of tension between the disappearing and re-emerging, between something that is fading away but always returning. It is a meditation about the resistance to letting everything go but also the ephemerality of life. It summarises many of the thoughts in my work, the dialectics between something that is tangible and solid and something that has already gone."

The second film, *Evaders*, explores the mountainous path of the Lister Route, used by many to escape Nazi-occupied France. One who followed this path was Jewish writer Walter Benjamin who made it across the border to Portbou in Spain but was then told he would be returned to France. He committed suicide rather than fall into Nazi hands.

Gersht explains his interest in Benjamin. "He is very interesting for many artists because his writing had tremendous impact on postmodern thinking and contemporary practice. His writings are for me profound in my development as a photographer."

But he also feels a close cultural affinity with Benjamin, who did not leave Europe until it was too late. "I was attracted to Europe for similar reasons to Benjamin. Culturally, my roots are here. I often think that being Israeli is the abnormality in my family tree. For so many generations, my ancestors lived in Europe and only my parents and myself were born in Israel. I perceived the Israel of my childhood as a sort of European colony, all the cultural inputs that I was fed had to do with European literature, art history, music." Indeed, this affinity with Europe is the reason he now lives in London. "I feel that Israel is changing and slowly integrating into the region. It is part of the Middle East and I don't see myself as part of the Middle East."

"In *Evaders*, although it was filmed in the Pyrenees, I wanted to make an association to German romanticism. In doing this there is an element of displacement and it suggests the cultural force that the figure in the film is trying to struggle against and that those forces keep on pulling him in."

However, Gersht emphasises that the film is not a re-enactment of a historical event. "The connection to Benjamin is that we were mapping and filming the same route. But the figure in my film is not pretending to be Benjamin. He is just trying to survive and walk through this journey in these extreme circumstances. There is one significant difference which for me epitomises the film. When Benjamin made the journey, he reached the border and could not cross and this border decided between life and death. In 2009, there was no border as such. All the checkpoints were deserted. So our journey was an absurdity because there was nothing to cross."

The exhibition concludes with a series of photographs of cherry blossoms taken in Japan. In these, he explores the symbolism of these trees and particularly, their link to kamikaze pilots whose deaths in their prime were compared to the fall of the flowers. Some of the trees he photographed are planted in contaminated soil in Hiroshima, other older examples resemble the mushroom cloud from a nuclear bomb. Says: Gersht: "The old symbolism of the cherry blossom is to do with the cycle of life, with death and rebirth, but during the war it was more

to do with death."

*Ori Gersht: This Storm Is What We Call Progress is at the Imperial War Museum until April 29; [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)*

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**Last updated: 11:57am, February 16 2012**

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