THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Ceija Stojka: *What Should I be Afraid of?*

By Rebecca Schiffman

Ceija Stojka, *Meine Mama Sidi war noch so jung... (My mother Sidi was still so young...)*, 2001. Acrylic on cardboard, 19 2/3 x 27 1/2 inches. Courtesy Galerie Christophe Gaillard, Paris and Austrian Cultural Forum. © Ceija Stojka. Photo: Rebecca Fanuele.

"What should I be afraid of?" asks Ceija Stojka. "Auschwitz is my overcoat, Bergen-Belsen my dress, and Ravensbrück my undershirt." Stojka, a survivor of the *Porajmos*, the Romani Holocaust, is remembered in a beautifully haunting exhibition at the Austrian Cultural Forum New York. This collection of artworks, videos, books, and ephemera underscores Stojka's profound message against hate and intolerance of all kinds while urging us to never forget her and the millions of Jews, Sinti-Roma peoples, and Slavs and their struggles.

The exhibition is centered around Stojka's *memory pictures*, a series of over 1,000 works of art that chronicle her experiences from early childhood to the liberation of the camps. Stojka began the series in the 1980s and continued feverishly until her death in 2013. The ninety *memory pictures* on view are displayed seemingly in no particular order, melding one memory of an idyllic scene of her childhood in the countryside to another of the terrors of starvation and SS soldiers in the camps. Spread across four floors, there is no start or end to the show; rather, visitors experience Stojka's stream of consciousness in whatever order they choose.

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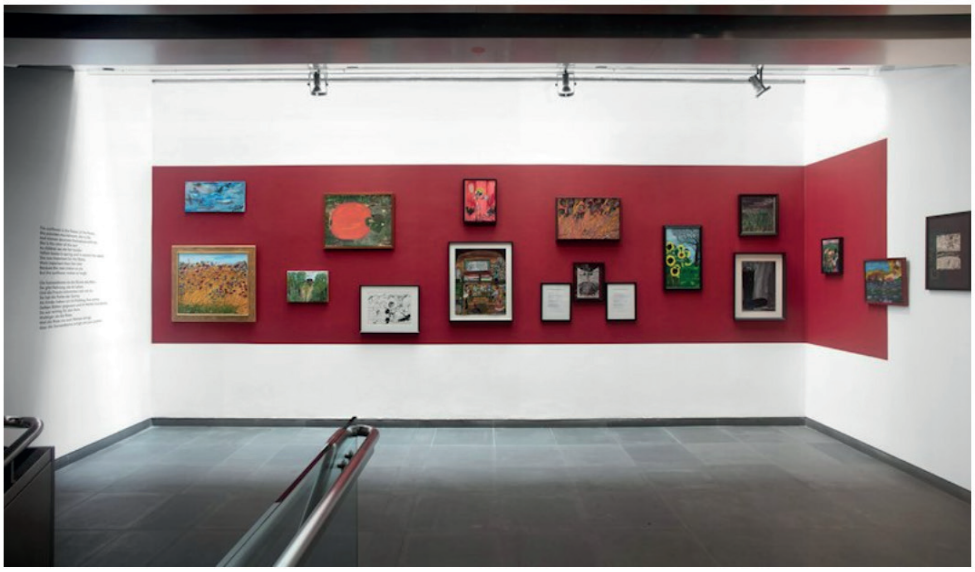

Installation view: *Ceija Stojka: What Should I be Afraid of?*, Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, 2023. Courtesy Austrian Cultural Forum. Photo: Kevin Noble.

Ceija Stojka was born in 1933 in a small village in Austria and grew up immersed in the nomadic Roman Catholic Lovara Romani group, traveling around the country as horse traders. These early years—small beacons of light spread between the more grave memories—are remembered by Stojka throughout the exhibition. In one canvas, a field of poppies is represented by thick dabs of red, orange, and black paint. In another, a group of caravans converge in a field. Women and children gather, men tend to the livestock, and a central figure in the foreground walks toward the scene, bringing a pail of water and sunflowers with her. Sunflowers, as stated in a poem by Stojka, are the flowers of the Roma: "She provides nourishment, she is life." The frame, like many others on view, is also painted in the same shades and speckled with greens, rusty reds, and golden yellows.

In 1935, Hitler added a decree to the Nuremberg Laws that classified Romani people (or Roma) as "enemies of the race-based state." Unable to travel any longer, the family settled in Vienna in 1939, transforming their wagon into a house. In a work on the north wall of the bottom floor gallery, the wagon-turned-house is in the center of a luscious, Jonas Wood-esque forest. Stojka's family, a chicken, horse, and dog gather around the wagon. This, too, represents a happier time for Stojka, recognizable through her child-like painting techniques. As a self-taught artist, Stojka shows an almost psychological regression in these works, capturing the experiences of being in the lush, floral Austrian countryside from a child's point of view. The rhapsodic works, evocative of childhood joy, are perhaps even more foreboding than the ones that depict the camps because we know what comes next, but the young Ceija did not.

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Photograph of Ceija Stojka, 1995. Courtesy Austrian Cultural Forum. © Ceija Stojka. Photo: Christa Schnepf.

When Stojka was just seven years old, her father was sent to Dachau and was ultimately murdered in the T4 euthanasia program. Two years later in 1943, Ceija, her mother, and her five siblings were deported to Section B-II-e of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp where the so-called "Gypsies" were held. Until 1945, Ceija, her mother, and her sisters were transported from camp to camp–Auschwitz to the women's camp Ravensbrück, and then to Bergen-Belsen until April 15, 1945, when the British liberated the camp. These years are represented in a flood of emotive gestures: black ink is scribbled on paper or cardboard, while watercolors in bruised shades of black, purple, red, and yellow depict scenes of unspeakable torture. Most of the works are labeled with what year or camp is being depicted. One harrowing drawing depicts black twisted train tracks that intersect and overlap, sprinkled with drops of red paint. Two signs hang at the top: to the left, Ravensbrück, to the right, Bergen. Withered black and green trees blow in the wind, and a dark black building is intercepted by a giant red and yellow face emblazoned with a swastika, begging the question: could this be a gas chamber on fire? Stojka leaves it to the imagination. In another drawing from 2003, she remembers a scene from 1943: a faceless SS officer, cigarette lit, holds out a whip that slashes a group of children while their mothers watch in horror. The children scream, "Mama!" while the mothers hold out their arms and reply, "Mein Kind!" over and over again.

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Ceija Stojka, *O Gott, U.D. SS. im KZ*, 2010. Ink on paper, 11 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches. Courtesy Austrian Cultural Forum. Photo: Matthias Reichelt.

The memory paintings burn with raw rage and intense shame, so much so that there is a trigger warning at the entrance to the show. *The Beautiful Women of Auschwitz* (1997) is just one work that makes the warning understandable. Set in a hazy pink and purple background filled with barbed wire are seven female figures, emaciated and naked, clinging to each other and covering what they can of their bodies. In a 2009 interview with the curator, Lorely French, Stojka said, "Yes, these are people of Auschwitz, and they are ashamed. These women feared the Nazis, but they only had two hands, and they didn't know where to put them, whether to cover their genitals or their eyes." She continues, "This is the truth, the true beauty."

In a video on the top floor of the exhibition, we meet Ceija herself, who tells the story of *Lebensbaum*, the tree of life, a motif that reappears throughout the exhibition. In front of the barracks in Bergen-Belsen stood a tree with two branches that split in the middle, where the sun poked through. One day, she touched the leaves, sticky with sap, and ate one, to which her mother remarked, "You're so smart, my child. This is life." As she tells the story, Ceija paints a tree with all the colors she remembers—yellow, a "watery" green, and rust brown. She tells us this with a smile on her face, remembering her mother and the tree that gave her hope and courage; after all, what should she be afraid of after all that she's been through?

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