The New York Times

Shedding Light on a Roma Artist, and the Fate of Her People

Ceija Stojka, who made visible the historical injustices to the Roma people during and after the Holocaust, is the subject of a stirring show at the Drawing Center.

In 1943, Ceija Stojka, then 9 years old, and members of her Romani family were taken by force from their home outside Vienna to a series of concentration camps — Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Ravensbrück. By the end of World War II, an estimated 500,000 Roma and Sinti people — two historically marginalized ethnic groups in Europe — had been killed, alongside millions of Jews and other victims of Nazi persecution. Stojka, her mother and four siblings barely escaped that fate; her father, younger brother and nearly 200 members of her extended family perished.

Only decades later, well into her 50s, did Stojka begin speaking out about her traumatic experiences, first in a 1988 memoir, "We Live in Secrecy: Memories of a Romni-Gypsy," and then in paintings and drawings that drew attention to the often- overlooked history of the Roma genocide. In the Romani language, the horrors are called "Parajmos," or "The Devouring" — made manifest in a 1995 watercolor by Stojka, a terrifying view down the gullet of a screaming Nazi soldier, his red lips lined with tiny but menacing white teeth.

"They New York audiences will finally be able to see the artist's ambitions in "Ceija Stojka: Making Visible," an exhibition at the Drawing Center in New York that opens on Feb. 20.

The most comprehensive exhibition of Stojka's work as a contemporary artist in the United States, it will include more than 60 paintings and drawings made between 1992 and 2011 (she died in 2013), along with sketchbooks, archival material and documentary films made while she was alive.

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“Stojka’s work is such a powerful and eloquent response to the Holocaust, and the Romani holocaust in particular,” said Lynne Cooke, a former curator at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, who organized the current show with Noëlig Le Roux. But, she added, “subject matter alone doesn’t guarantee anything about artistic eloquence or forcefulness of expression. It’s how they’re made that makes them so powerful.”

In images that are not simply diaristic or anecdotal, but rather a form of storytelling that conveys emotions and sense memories through poignant details, Stojka was determined to speak about her community’s past. “I must tell how they lived, how they live today, and what happened to them,” she said in her 2008 book, “Auschwitz is My Overcoat.”

Her mission included making not only pictures of the horrors she and her family experienced, but also images of Roma ways of life, before they were interrupted by the Nazis’ arrival in Austria in 1938 — bucolic scenes of caravans in beautiful landscapes, with her family and the community.

Among these are “Sad Earth,” a mixed-media painting on cardboard from 1998, depicting gusts of wind and flocks of crows sweeping through a camp, past huddled figures and two guards goose-stepping among them.

Careful interventions — including a red figure along the bottom edge of the picture, perhaps a bloodied corpse but as likely a visionary specter of

death — suggest something poetic and fraught rather than reportage. In other pictures, reportage is fully abandoned in favor of expressionistic brushwork and minimal mark making, as in an untitled 2004 gouache and ink piece, rendered in quick strokes of yellow, ocher and brown that coalesce into faceless, emaciated figures.

Its harrowing beauty is underscored by Stojka's inscription: "The 15th Of April 1945. We Didn't Yet Know That This Day Was To Be Our Liberation Day. That's The Way It Was." For a 2003 ink drawing, Stojka abandoned the brush almost entirely, instead using her fingers and hands dipped in black pigment. The marks suggest a horde of figures trudging away from the viewer. "To the Crematorium," Stojka wrote across the bottom.

Ceija Stojka, "*Untitled (The 15th Of April 1945. We Didn't Yet Know That This Day Was To Be Our Liberation Day. That's The Way It Was).*" 2004, gouache and ink on paper. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Bildrecht, Vienna

The economy of means doesn't detract from the emotional valence of the picture — it heightens drawing's power. During the first decade of Stojka's practice, Cooke noted, the artist focused on traditional genres like landscape and still life.

"But then in the second decade, she starts working in a much more innovative way," Cooke said. "It becomes much more like a modernist practice, characterized by expressive forms, expressive abstraction, surrealistic dreamlike images, and text and image works." Stojka first picked up a brush alongside her granddaughters, working at her kitchen table in her large apartment

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in Vienna. (After a brief period of resuming an itinerant Roma lifestyle following her liberation from the camp, she settled in the city in the 1950s.) “The colorful paints would not let me go,” she wrote in 1995. “Here was something that accepted me patiently.” She did not have formal training, and didn’t go to museums, but did likely watch a nightly art and culture program on the television that was always on, and see posters for exhibitions that plastered the streets in her neighborhood around Kaiserstrasse. “Artists don’t have to have an academic training to be constantly bombarded by images of contemporary art,” Cooke said. “It’s filtered in different ways, but it’s still potent.”

Ceija Stojka in Auschwitz. She found a way to convey her survival of the camps through art and storytelling. via Estate Ceija Stojka

Stojka’s turn to art was prompted by the desire to make visible historical injustice in the face of its erasure: No Romani witnesses were called to testify at the Nuremberg trials; survivors faced serious obstacles when they sought access to the meager reparations they were offered; and the centuries-long discrimination and violence against the Roma people — which included pogroms, deportations, forced sterilizations, segregation in housing and education — continued long after World War II. The group

Sonja Palasch, a friend of Ceija Stojka, and her aunt Kathi Stojka, at the carpet market.. via Estate Ceija Stojka

But Stojka’s decision to defy a cultural taboo by speaking publicly

about her Roma identity was also triggered by troubling political and social trends in Europe, especially in Austria. “I’m afraid that Europe is forgetting its past and that Auschwitz is only sleeping,” she once said. “She felt the need to speak up and step over the barriers that there certainly were for her, because she sensed a rise in right-wing rhetoric,” said Ulrike Müller, a painter in New York and Vienna, who was living in Austria at the time Stojka began to emerge as an activist and artist.

The revelations about Kurt Waldheim’s Nazi past — which did not preclude him from being elected president of Austria in 1986 — as well as increased hate speech influenced her works like “Victory to Our Führer!” from 2001. Two stick figures with yellow hair and deformed faces, rendered in a brightly colored impasto, march against a crimson background festooned with swastikas. Another work, inscribed “1945, Ravensbrücke, 1995” (1995) records her return to the brutal women’s labor camp where she was sent 50 years before, near the Austro-Hungarian border. The image underscores the contradictions of a contemporary political drive to forget Austria’s complicity in the Holocaust: The foreground is lush and resort-like, while the background depicts an acid yellow sky and leafless, charred trees. An inscription on the back reads, “I can’t believe the people who live there today catch fish out of this lake where our souls are resting in ash.” This tendency to connect past and present were integral to Stojka’s work, artistic and otherwise. “She has always been one of us, and then found kind of a way to convey her survival of the camps through art and storytelling,” said Ethel Brooks, a professor of women’s and gender studies at Rutgers University and chair of the European Roma Rights Center, who is Roma. “But she was also an activist, inspiring and founding a number of Romani rights, history and cultural organizations in Austria.” Stojka was a key figure in getting the Austrian government to recognize the Roma as an official minority, and argued forcefully for reparations for Roma survivors of the Holocaust. “To do that as a woman within the patriarchal structures of her own community and of Austria in general was important,” Müller said.

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Ceija Stojka, “The Carpet Market,” 1993. Oil on cardboard. Her pictures “show the beauty of the family and the intimacy of everyday life.” Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ Bildrecht, Vienna; via Wien Museum

The show also includes depictions of fields of flowers — including sunflowers, a symbol of the Roma — and of the daily rhythm of traveling life. “The Carpet Market,” a 1993 oil on cardboard of colorful rugs hung beneath a canopy of flowering trees, includes a blond woman in the foreground — perhaps Stojka herself, who supported herself and her children as a carpet merchant before turning to art. “The pictures that show the intimacy of the family and the beauty of everyday life—that’s what calls to me,” Brooks said.

Stojka’s work has been widely shown in Europe in recent years, including a presentation at the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid in 2019 and 2020. The Times’s critic Jason Farago praised that show, writing that “Stojka’s art also stood up for the possibility — even the necessity — for human creativity to represent, and take ownership of, the darkest chapters of history.” The U.S. exhibition comes as Roma artists are becoming more visible in the contemporary art scene in Europe, and to a lesser degree in the United States. Last year, a billboard project on the High Line in New York featured the work of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, a Roma artist who represented Poland at the 2022 Venice Biennale.

Sidonie Stojka and her children, Karl, Maria (at the back), Joseph, Ceija, Hansi, from the mid-1930s. via Estate Ceija Stojka

Brooks said she hopes that the Drawing Center exhibition will shed light on Stojka’s role in the history of contemporary art while also opening up opportunities for “Romani cultural production within the Americas.” She noted that of the 12 million to 15 million Roma in the world, one to two million live in the United States; her own family arrived around the 1860s. “It’s really important, I think, for us as well, to have a Roma artist and an activist being represented in a U.S. museum.” Most of all, Brooks hopes that the show will make clear that, rather than a collection of stereotypes, “we are a people,” she said. “We have a history, we’ve had struggles.”

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