

ARTS

Lisa Oppenheim Subverts Nazi Legacy To ‘Seize’ New Art In ‘Spolia’, Her Fourth Solo Show At Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

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Sep 30, 2022, 07:51am EDT

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Lisa Oppenheim Installation view, 'Spolia' , Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, September 7 – October ... [+] PHOTO BY PIERRE LE HORS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK / LOS ANGELES

Viewing the reflection of Lisa Oppenheim's silver gelatin photographs exposed to firelight on the floors of [Tanya Bonakdar Gallery](#) in New York's Chelsea sends our gaze inward and outward. We're forced to confront our own relationships, or lack thereof, with Nazi history, and to explore Oppenheim's personal history from her maternal lineage, a commitment to Jewish communities, and the complexities surrounding ongoing restitution of cultural objects.

Spolia, Oppenheim's fourth solo show at Tanya Bonakdar, is on view through October 22, offering an unparalleled exploration of how to represent what no longer exists or is otherwise obscured. Consider a punched out hole in a photograph by Walker Evans, an American photographer and photojournalist best known for his work for the Farm Security Administration documenting the effects of the Great Depression, or the material and colonial histories of photographic substrates (the surfaces being printed on).



Lisa Oppenheim Installation view, 'Spolia' , Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, September 7 – October ... [+] PHOTO BY PIERRE LE HORS COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK / LOS ANGELES

These absences enable Oppenheim to navigate emotionally-charged histories and materials to produce artworks that are imbued with both. Wrangling the fungible space between intangible memory-driven legacies and materiality underscores the relationship between human frailty and fragility of objects.

“The meaning of an artwork changes with (the) historical moment in which it is viewed, and so I’m not able to anticipate how future generations will view my work. That said I do of course hope that it inspires people to learn more about at least aspects of the histories with which my project engages,” Oppenheim said via email. “Even as fewer and fewer survivors are alive to tell their stories, I believe it is crucial to explore how the history of the Shoah is embedded in the objects, social structures, family structures and in so much more that constitute the present moment.”

The exhibition takes its name from the Latin word for “spoils.” Spolia refers to the reuse of building material or decorative sculpture for new buildings or monuments. There are myriad examples, such as fragments of sculptures honoring Marcus Aurelius and Trajan added to the Arch of Constantine to symbolize the equal greatness of Constantine.

Oppenheim repurposes and subverts the Nazis’ own extensive documentation of their looting as the foundation for all her works. Her goal is to create new artworks out of the images and fragments of information that remain, rather than recreate or recuperate what was lost.



Lisa Oppenheim Installation view, 'Spolia' , Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, September 7 – October ... [+] PHOTO BY PIERRE LE HORS COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK / LOS ANGELES

“The images that I produced were already both physical and digital. There was the original artwork that was destroyed, the image of the artwork that Nazis photographed that was eventually digitized, and then my work materializes this thing that was once tangible,” said Oppenheim. “In a way, the artwork was repaired but not replaced. By using the Nazi record of the original artwork to produce my photographs, the images have developed new meaning—they can live again, not as they once were, but in a new form that allows the viewer to reflect on the artwork’s historical significance.”

Seizure of Jewish religious artifacts and books in Germany started in the late 1930s, and the Nazis expanded looting to the occupied territories during World War II. Religious objects were melted down and Jewish books were burned or used for pulp. The Nazis preserved samples of Jewish

culture for what they called “scientific” purposes, in a larger effort to collect “enemy research.” Extensive efforts to erode Jewish culture became a competition among several agencies including the Sicherheitspolizei (Security Police), the Wehrmacht (the unified armed forces of Nazi Germany from 1935 to 1945), and those working under politician, military leader, and convicted war criminal Hermann Wilhelm Göring, who oversaw Adolf Hitler’s Vierjahresplan (four-year plan).

In January 1940, Hitler instructed all offices of party and state (which a month later combined to form the Nazi Party) to assist Baltic German Nazi theorist and ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, who became head of the Nazi party foreign policy office in 1933, in assembling a library for a new educational and research institute.

To create *Miroir entouré d'oiseaux* (Mirror surrounded by birds), which inhabits most of the ground floor gallery, Oppenheim commissioned a photographer to shoot the sky above 38 Avenue Henri Martin in Paris, the former family home of German-French art collector Adolphe Schloss, depicting the site where it was stolen. Printing the shot in negative to mirror the size of the lost painting conveys the vapor hinting at its apparent disappearance as well as the flame Oppenheim uses to produce the solarized fragments of a photograph taken by the ERR. Other works in the show utilize the smoke technique.

Oppenheim produced every image in the show in the darkroom through traditional photographic techniques and then solarized the prints with firelight, inverting some

then solarized the prints with firelight, inverting some positive and negative components of the image and disintegrating the dichotomous nature of traditional photography.



Lisa Oppenheim 'Entartete Kunst, Märchen, 1937/2022 (Version I)' (2022) Silver gelatin photograph ... [+] PHOTO BY PIERRE LE HORS

When asked how she transitions emotionally and intellectually from process to completion, Oppenheim said: “As the mother of two young kids I don’t use this metaphor lightly but it’s like giving birth. Hormonal fluctuations and all.”

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