Preserving The Memory

Dennis Farber’s ‘Album Project’ explores the depths of genocide and hatred.

Bob Jacobson
Special to The Jewish Times

Dennis Farber calls his career “Infernal.” Yes, in 42 years as an artist, art teacher and administrator he has mastered — Hawaii, New Mexico, New York, California, to mention just a few of the far-flung places he’s worked and lived. But more to the point, his career has been varied, prolific and successful.

Mr. Farber’s eight-page resume includes 36 selected solo exhibitions, more than 100 group exhibitions, 21 visiting artist positions, three residencies and 13 awards. His assignments have been as varied as design work for the National Football League, covers for an Eastern Mountain Sports catalog and a Flying Fish Record album, and mural design and supervision for an Ocean Waters “ABC” After School Special.

His work has been showcased in the Museum of Modern Art’s New Photography exhibit, in Dozen of museums and corporations over his paintings and photographs. During the 1990s, one of his altered photo suites was shown at 14 museums as part of the traveling exhibition “Bridges And Boundaries: African American & American Jews,” organized by the Jewish Museum of New York.

Mr. Farber’s upcoming solo show at the Maryland Institute College of Art, titled “The Album Project,” accompanies the exhibition “The Nascism Of Minor Differences,” which showcases works by 18 artists who explore the dark side of intolerance. The show, which is displayed at the Bunting Center’s Pinakلد Gallery on the MICA campus, will run from Jan. 28 through March 13.

A full-time MICA teacher since 1998, Mr. Farber began working on the project after receiving an artist-in-residence grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1998. A $5,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1998 enabled him to develop the project.

“The Album Project,” in the summer of 2009, and in many ways it goes back to the 1980s. At that time, he began using images from vintage children’s books, as well as cabinet cards and photos from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when, he said, “Photography became democratized. Anybody could get their pictures taken.”

On later projects, with his large format Balord photos and inkjet prints, Mr. Farber began examining the themes. He carved out new spaces, added, blurred or distorted others. He also superimposed some people’s faces onto others’ bodies. He had some subjects hold masks up to their faces. Multiple photos were combined to create collages.

For his photo for the “Bridges And Boundaries” exhibit — three young children eating birthday cake — the artist added Ku Klux Klan hoods to the children’s heads (to show “the horrors of indiscrimination,” Mr. Farber said). All these approaches have resurfaced in his new show.

“The Album Project” includes close allusions to the Holocaust, with photos from the archives of Yid Vashem and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. One of the five albums in the exhibit has more Holocaust-related images than the others—a concentration camp scene; a firing squad, a pair of grim women with stars of David sewn on their dresses, a pit of tattered shoes.

Most of the entries in the albums are open to interpretation. “I’m not a politician,” said Mr. Farber, “but I’m concerned about the role of art in society.”

Mr. Farber points out that his MICA position has been the longest teaching post and residence of his career. He has wound up not too far from his native Pittsburgh, where he grew up on the largely Jewish neighborhood of Squirrel Hill, the
grandson of immigrants from Lithuania — one side of the family Orthodox, the other secular, in a city where “it seems there are churches every other block.”

Mr. Farber said he attended one of “several synagogues pushed into this one neighborhood.”

In his Lithetlville home, Mr. Farber gently laid out the five vintage photo albums that comprise “The Album Project.” Some have rather fancy covers by today’s standards—one with a hand-designed card glass, another with flowers made of fabric and a small seascape painted on leather, another with a warm, green velvet back.

The albums are a place of peace for those who died violently, and a disturbing place for those who died peacefully.

Earlier in the life of this project, Mr. Farber asked Mr. Eistar to look over the albums, interested in the response of an extended colleague. She turned her responses into the long poem titled “Five Albums.”

Part of the poem is about the only letter included in the albums, a letter written by German Jewish parent to the British family sheltering their refugee daughter. Mr. Eistar wrote:

“Death is the whole content of our life and we would be very happy…”

“We search for dyes to what their lives may have been”—happy, difficult, productive, cut short — and wonder what combination of illness, violence, happiness or happenstance they encountered at the end.”

— Dennis Farber

Opening the first album, the image facing the viewer is a pre-teen boy with dark hair and features bearing a serious facial expression. He is dressed in plaid shorts and a well-worn sweater, left arm held stiffly at his side, right arm positioned in a Nazi salute.

Is he a Jewish youth engaged in play? A German youth engaged in play? A future Hitler Youth? Someone and something entirely different.

Mr. Farber repeatedly emphasizes that his albums are not documentary, history or narrative.

Sad Amy Eisner, a poet who teaches

“After the war, and as the children grew older, they were told the story of how they had been hidden for seven years by the British family. They were also told about the meaning of their enrollment at the Jewish Center in Pittsburgh. This was the first time they had ever heard about their parents and relatives.”

But careful, don’t ask where the child will be taken.

“They may not take you far enough away. The poet says, ‘I began to wonder what my photo album look like. How much of a family’s experience is missing?’

That’s just the kind of question Mr. Farber hopes “The Album Project” raises. He is also hoping that this work will “inspire people’s lives aren’t forgotten. These people are part of us as well.”

Bob Jacobson is a local free-lance writer.

Now On Display

An opening reception for “The Album Project” will be held Friday Jan. 28 from 5 to 7 p.m. in the Mead Galleries of MICA’s Bunting Center 410 W. Mount Royal Ave.

MICA’s free galleries are open to the public Monday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday noon to 5 p.m. Both “The Album Project” and “The Nascism Of Minor Differences” will be shown through Sunday March 13.

Because of potential damage, the albums will be displayed in cases for most of the exhibit, available to touch on a very limited basis. A video will show a hand slowly turning the pages of each album. Lines of Amy Eisner’s poetry will be shown between albums, and she will also read her poetry at the show’s opening reception.

For information about “The Album Project” or “The Nascism Of Minor Differences,” visit mica.edu or call 410 225 2280 or 410 225 2300.

Steve Kried Romanoski Photography