

Israeli Artist's Struggles with 'Mein Kampf' Provide Dark Inspiration

Gideon Rubin couldn't believe it when his wife presented him with a copy of Hitler's autobiography to help him on his latest work. It's now the 'black heart' at the center of his new exhibition in London (**Daniella Peled, Haaretz, Feb 12, 2018**)

Israeli-born artist Gideon Rubin's new exhibition brings "Mein Kampf" into the heart of Sigmund Freud's final home, in a work that manages to be both darkly redemptive and visually satisfying.

"Black Book" is set firmly within the context of the Freud Museum London – the Hampstead home where the founder of psychoanalysis spent the last year of his life in the late 1930s.

The exhibition reworks Nazi imagery, culminating in Hitler's autobiography itself, through a series of canvas, linen and paper paintings in which faces, troubling imagery and text alike are blanked out.

Absence is a recurring theme in Rubin's work and is particularly apt for this project. After all, Freud was all about repressed memory, Rubin says, "but there's never a void. Your brain has to paint over your memories to let new ones exist."

Rubin, 44, lives close to the north London museum with his Chinese-born wife Silia, also an artist, and their three daughters. He says he always loved to wander through these rooms – filled with a mixture of Mittel-European ephemera and anthropological treasures that remind him of his own parents' home.



"Black Book p.578" by Gideon Rubin (2017), 25x37.5cm, gouache on paper Richard Ivey

It's a source of inspiration, too. "I always come out with something," Rubin admits. For example, one visit a few years ago left him considering how Freud had left Vienna in 1938 with his family and his belongings.

Rubin, who has lived in the United Kingdom for the past 17 years, had been working on painting and adapting old magazines from the United States, Israel and pre-Cultural Revolution China. He then began to wonder what similar publications had looked like when Freud left Vienna, just as Europe was tipping over the edge toward war.

A quick search on eBay led to a batch of vintage magazines that became the jumping-off point for "Black Book."

Childish yet rewarding

Rubin says he was simultaneously attracted and repelled by the banal yet dark undertones of children's fashion and film reviews mixed with photos of Hitler Youth and military marches.

"I started painting, erasing images and sometimes text, seeing no difference between them, looking at them aesthetically," he explains. "I started taking out Nazi flags and marching soldiers. It was childish, but it made me feel better."

The work began to take shape, all intended to fit very specifically into the context of the roomy house into which Freud had transported much of his collection of papers, books, African masks, oriental rugs and antiquities.



Gideon Rubin at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art exhibit of "Memory Goes as Far as the Morning" in 2015. Tomer Appelbaum

Rubin has deftly inserted his own works into the glass cases displaying historical artifacts and the spaces Freud once occupied.

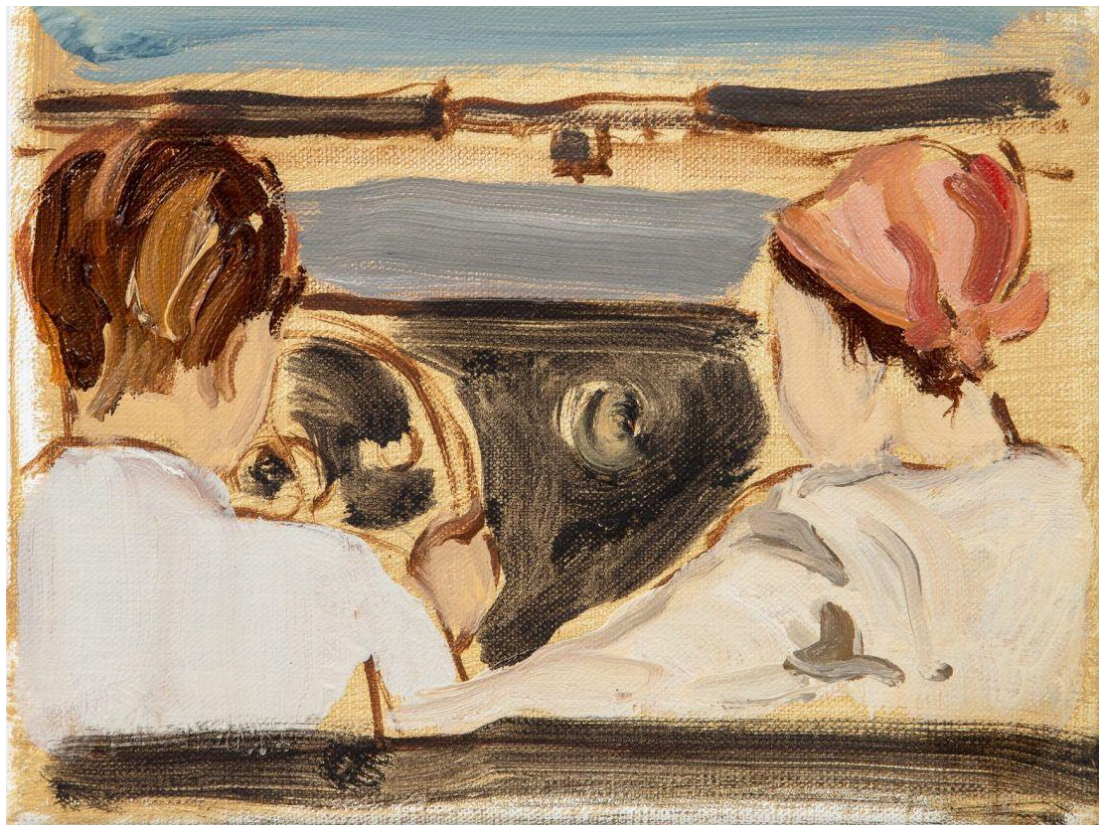
Small paintings reworked from magazine cuttings perch in vintage frames on the great man's desk, his legendary couch nearby; elsewhere, they fit in among family memorabilia such as his daughter Anna's hairbrush and traveling bag.

An actual black book – or “black heart” as Rubin describes it – has its own dedicated case upstairs. This particular part of the exhibit came about quite by chance, Rubin says, when he asked his wife to find another tranche of vintage German documents to work on – something with useful, meaty, 1930s imagery to work from.

“After a week or two, a package arrives and she said, ‘This is what you wanted.’ I opened it and chills ran through me. For a very long minute I looked but couldn't quite understand what I was seeing. My darling Chinese wife had bought me ‘Mein Kampf,’ serialized in English.”

Rubin experienced a visceral reaction to the book. “At first I thought I would throw it away, but then felt it was too dirty for the bin. Then I thought about burning it but my wife said, ‘No way, it was too expensive – resell it.’ I couldn't do that, either. So I wrapped it up, took it to my studio and put it in my tool cupboard, which I rarely open. But as I recently realized, when I reject something so firmly, it actually shows I am interested in it.”

He began to work on the book, painstakingly blocking out images and text in black paint to create an abstract work of rhythm.



"Untitled" by Gideon Rubin (2017), 30 × 24cm, oil on linen. Richard Ivey

“It took six months. It’s so dark. And although I tried, it’s in English – which makes it difficult not to read. At the beginning, I felt like I needed to wash my hands each time I touched it. The push and pull got even worse.”

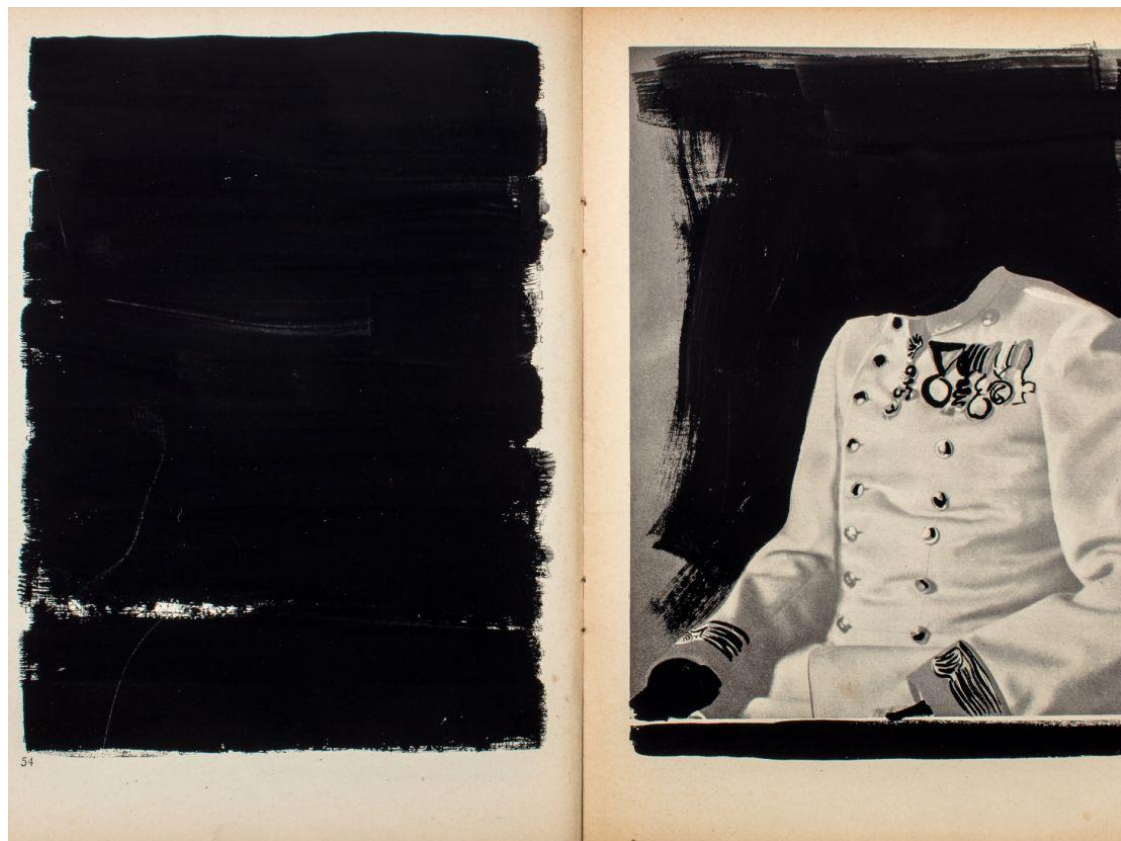
He says he prefers to think of himself as “painting over” rather than erasing. It’s a way of reclaiming a historical narrative of evil, pulling it into the present and taking back an element of control.

Trapped in Armageddon

Rubin used to draw very differently, he says, and when doing his master’s degree in London would spend two or three months painting self-portraits. But then came 9/11. Rubin was in New York that day – on Eighth and Broadway.

“I had taken my friend’s dog for a walk, and instead I found the sky falling in on me,” he recounts. “Like everyone else, I thought it was Armageddon.”

Something changed that day for him and he could no longer paint in the same way. “I had a lot of things to unload,” he says.



"Black Book p.57" by Gideon Rubin (2017), 25x37.5cm, gouache on paper. Richard Ivey

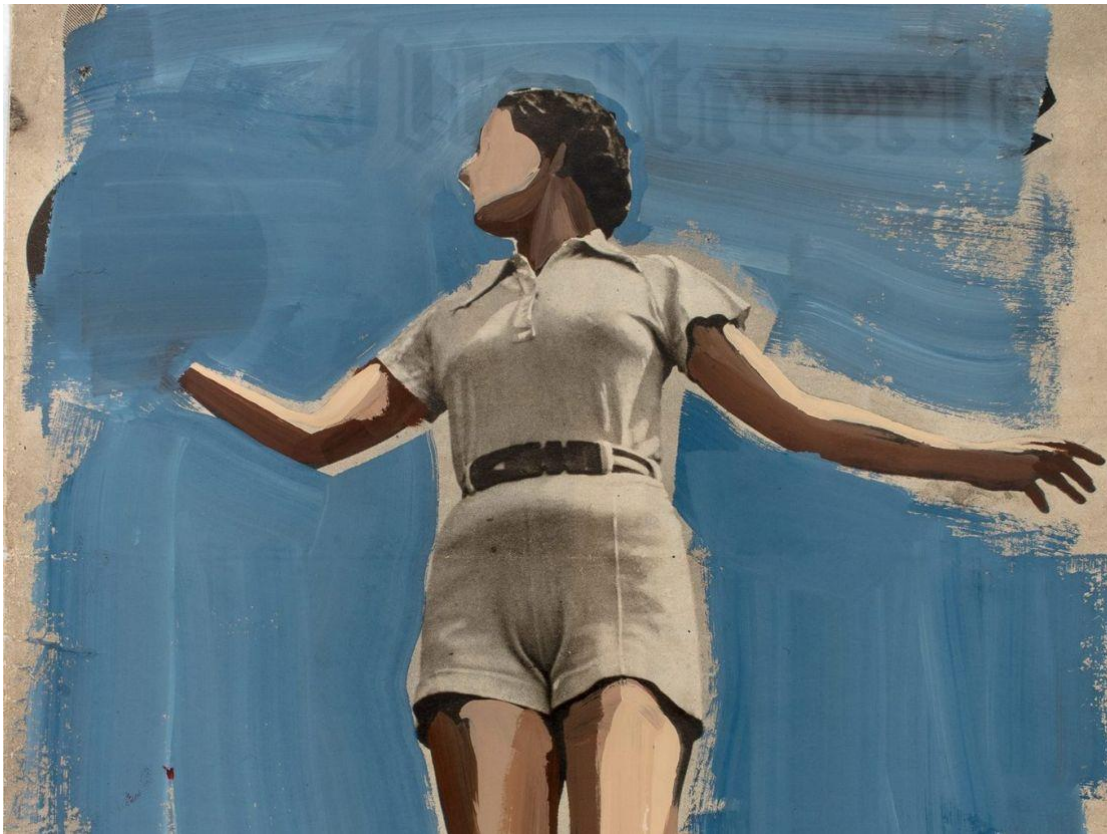
So, for the next two years he worked on a series of still lifes of his childhood toys, old dolls missing limbs or eyes. Then he began shifting back to portraiture. In Hampstead antique stores, he hunted down anonymous 1920s photo albums and vintage photographs for inspiration.

“I was painting memories, not necessarily my own,” Rubin explains. Faded black-and-white images of long-lost families can’t fail to resonate with postwar Jews; the nameless images somehow served to replace his own family albums.

One side of his family came from Romania, the other from Poland. From the latter branch, he says, maybe two photographs of a couple of aunts survived. “The rest are gone, burned with them. I was both creating a past and filling in gaps that could have been mine,” he notes.

Sometimes, these realities merge in an uncomfortable way. One image – enlarged on canvas and positioned prominently on the Freud museum’s main staircase – is of a young woman in short khaki shorts and a white vest, standing outside, holding a stick up to the sky with both hands.

In the original magazine photo the girl had a swastika on her top; Rubin painted it out. “And now it looks like a chalutz,” he says, referring to an early Zionist pioneer. “You change a few details, but the nationalistic systems of representation stay the same. The message is very different, but the ways of getting there are similar.”



"Untitled" by Gideon Rubin (2017), 37.5 × 27.5cm, gouache on paper. Richard Ivey

Zionism is inevitably part of “Black Book.” Rubin’s grandfather, who died when Gideon was 1, was the famous Israeli painter Reuven Rubin – whose work was rooted in depictions of the land and its peoples.

“There is a very crucial difference between me and my grandfather,” says Gideon. “He painted the new Jews and the future. I paint about memories of the past.”

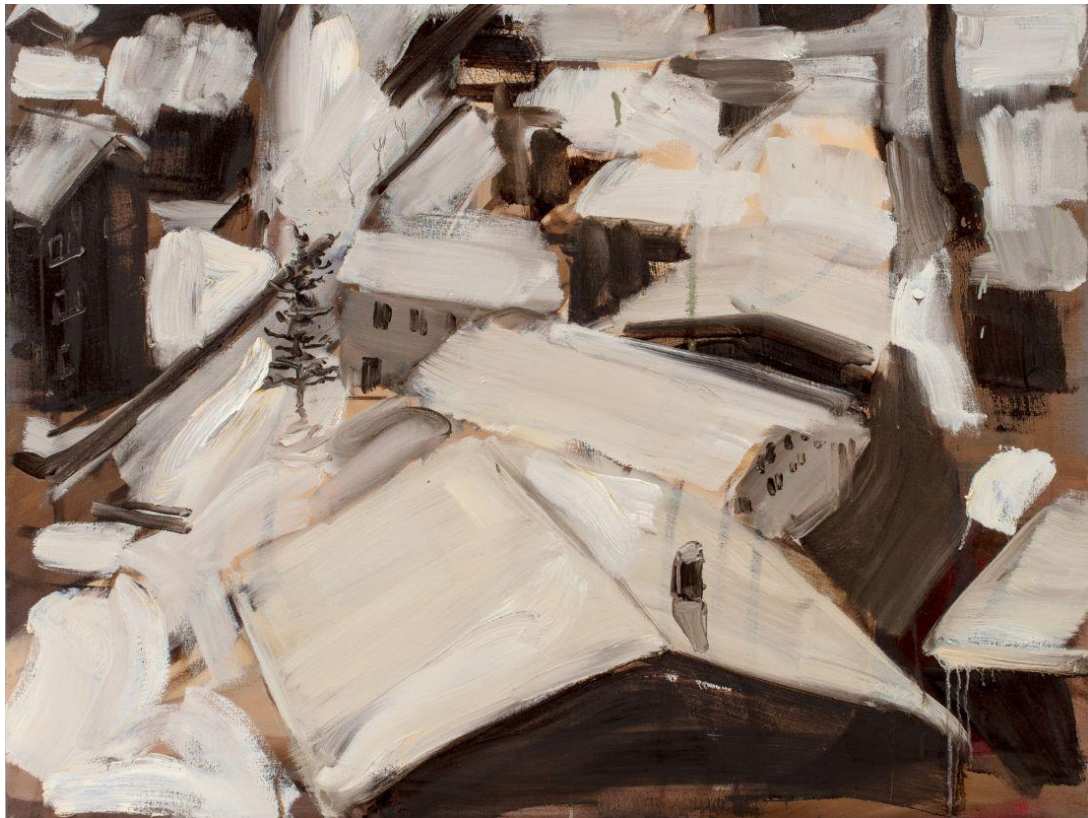
Rubin says his generation was brought up not to question Zionism. “The break came with the assassination of [then-Prime Minister] Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. It all began to fall apart.”

It’s a fragmentation that continues today. Immersed as this project is in issues of refuge and persecution, Rubin struggles to understand the Israeli government’s attitude toward the African asylum seekers it is now frantically seeking to deport.

“How could a country that suffered so much be so insensitive?” he wonders. “This is a finite problem of 40,000 people in a nation of more than 7 million. It’s a drop in the ocean.”

His only explanation is that Jews, despite their history, remain as afraid of difference as all other people do. It’s a conundrum he struggles to unpick, leaving him to conclude: “I understand a lot more in my studio than I do outside.”

“Black Book” is at Freud Museum London until April 15, 2018.



"Untitled (Snow)" by Gideon Rubin (2017), 91 × 91cm, oil on canvas. Richard Ivey