

Marcia Annenberg 'The Disappeared' 1996 Acrylic on Canvas



Overview of Painting

This is a painting by American artist, Marcia Annenberg, which she made as a response to the Bosnian genocide in 1995. Although not directly related to the Nazi Holocaust, in this work, artist Annenberg explores the effects of genocide. She says: "The Disappeared" was my response to the massacre at Srebrenica. The method of selecting out the men and boys of the town and taking them to the woods to be shot was reminiscent of the mass murder at Babi Yar. The ethnic cleansing of Bosnia and the incarceration of men in concentration camps was revealed on the cover of Newsweek in 1992. It was this photograph that sent a shock of recognition that the term, "Never Again", had within the space of 50 years, indeed happened again, albeit to a different population. The painting itself was based on a photograph in the New York Times of men on a street in Bosnia carrying water jars. I wondered if they were still alive 6 months later.

Biography

Annenberg studied with Isaac Soyer and Robert Beverly Hale at the Art Students League and later received an M.A. in Studio Art from New York University. Her paintings have been exhibited at museums and galleries throughout the USA. Annenberg's work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions including Raandesk Gallery, 55 Mercer Street Gallery, the Puffin Rom Gallery and Makor Gallery in New York City; the Rockland Center for Holocaust Studies in Spring Valley, New York; the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio; the Red Chair Gallery in Kansas City, Missouri and the Women's Museum in Dallas, Texas. Her paintings are in the permanent collections of the London Jewish Museum of Art; the Yad Vashem Art Museum in Jerusalem; the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum in Vilnius, Lithuania and the Florida Holocaust Museum.

Additional information can be found on the artist's website, www.mannenber.com.

Materials and Techniques

This painting has been made using acrylic paint on canvas.

There are five men in the picture, and are all painted in a very light grey, and outlined in a darker grey. Only some details are included, such as the edging of a jacket or hat, but Annenberg has left out all of their facial features. This makes the painting look unfinished. The men do not cast a shadow, nor do they feature any shading or colour, making them seem flat, and 2-D.

The dark red sky looks flat too, but the deepness of the red makes it seem heavy, as though a storm is coming. It is the darkest red section of the painting, and feels oppressive compared to the lightness of the men.

The buildings in the background are also painted in flat colours, and the geometric shapes, such as squares and rectangles, make the buildings feel huge and weighty. The grey colour suggests concrete, and the smaller dark grey squares resemble windows, looking into dark, empty rooms.

Finally, the red ground is painted in a different style from the buildings, sky and men. It seems to have been painted much faster and with thinner paint, and we can see the brush strokes made by the artist. The lightness of the paint means that we can almost see the white canvas through the thin layer of paint.

Form and Composition

Annenberg has used a “restricted palette” of reds and greys. This means that she has chosen to limit the paints used to different shades of reds and greys. The entire canvas is completely filled with deep, dark red and grey shades, aside from the outlines of five men, which almost look as though they are waiting to be painted.

In this painting, Marcia Annenberg uses a technique called “perspective drawing”. This means that the painting is constructed around lines, leading from a central point, in order to create the illusion of depth. That point is called the vanishing point, and is where objects would appear smallest, as they are furthest away. In the painting, we cannot actually see the vanishing point, as it is behind the two men on the right, but we can see the lines used by the artist – two diagonal lines protruding from behind them.

There are aspects of this painting that are realistic – for example, the scale is accurate. The men at the front, closer to us, are depicted larger than the men and buildings which are behind them. Although the shapes and sizes of the men and buildings are accurate, the colour is obviously not.

Content and Ideas

Who are the men in the portrait?

Annenberg based this painting on a photograph she saw of men walking down a street, carrying water jars, in Bosnia, during the Srebrenica massacre. We don't know anything further about these men – not even how they are feeling, which we might be able to know, if we could see the expressions on their faces. They are anonymous figures with unknown identities.

Where are they and what are they doing?

They are walking down an unknown street. The man on the right is holding a water jar, or jerry can (large vessel used to hold water); perhaps he is going to fetch water for his family. His posture is straight and he looks as though he is walking with purpose. The rest of the men are not holding anything, and appear to have a more casual stance; the man on the left has his hands in his pockets.

Why don't they have faces?

Marcia Annenberg explains that she does not know who these men are, or if they even lived for long after the original photograph was taken. This means that the empty faces could represent the many men who died in the attack. By being devoid of any identifiable features, the figures become ghost like. The blank faces could also be a representation of "the common man". By leaving out recognisable features, Annenberg could be saying that this man could be someone you know, that this kind of tragedy (relating to the Bosnian genocide) could happen to anyone. It could also suggest that when mass genocides are carried out, the perpetrators do not consider each individual, or the personal lives of those affected. They simply group people together on mass, as one 'enemy', bestowing the victims with an anonymous and therefore 'meaningless' identity.

In a similar way, the setting of the painting gives us no clues as to where the men are in the world. The buildings, streets and scenery are left blank, implying that this could be happening anywhere in the world. It also implies that genocide is always wrong no matter when or where it takes place.

This idea is further supported by the title. *The Disappeared* is a generic title, which implies that this painting of protest against genocide has been made for every victim that has ever suffered.

Terms Explained

Bosnia - a region in the Balkans (the countries occupying the part of SE Europe) forming the larger, northern part of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Genocide (intentional mass killing of an ethnic or national group)

Massacre - an indiscriminate (random and thoughtless) and brutal slaughter of many people.

Reminiscent (Reminds, is similar to)

Incarceration - the state of being confined in prison; imprisonment.

Ethnic Cleansing - the mass expulsion or killing of members of one ethnic or religious group in an area by those of another.

Oppressive - Unjustly inflicting hardship and constraint particularly on a minority or other subordinate group. Weighing heavily on the mind or spirits; causing depression or discomfort.