

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



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ARTSEEN | APRIL 2024

Ceija Stojka: *We Lived in Secrecy (A Roma Memory)*

By David Carrier

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Ceija Stojka, *La mort siège dans le crématorium*, 1997. Acrylic on cardboard, 39 2/5 × 27 3/5 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Fleiss-Vallois. Photo: Olivia DiVecchia.

Ceija Stojka (1933–2013) was a survivor. An Austrian Romani, she was nine years old when she and her entire family were imprisoned during the Holocaust, which only some of them survived. She was held in the camps at Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, and Bergen-Belsen, but only much later, in 1988, did she begin making art about her experiences (in addition to painting, Stojka was also a writer and singer). Recently, her work has been shown in Austria, France and Spain, but this exhibition, organized by Marianne Le Métayer, Nathalie Vallois, and Georges-Philippe Vallois, is the first American presentation of her paintings.

ON VIEW

**Galerie Georges-
Philippe &
Nathalie Vallois,
Galerie Fleiss-
Vallois**

January 27–April
27, 2024
New York

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Ceija Stojka, *Untitled*, 1994. Acrylic on cardboard, 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Courtesy the artist and Fleiss-Vallois. Photo: Olivia DiVecchia.

After taking the elevator upstairs to Galerie Fleiss-Vallois, a Madison Avenue gallery, you enter a spacious room on the left where Stojka's cheerful canvases of the Austrian countryside are installed. These are bright, penetrating pictures depicting early life with her family, who were horse traders. Their caravan wintered in Vienna and then traveled to more rural districts during the summer.

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you turn clockwise in that room, you are confronted with very different subjects. Now you see the death camps: *Death Sits in the Crematorium (Der Tod Sitzt auf dem Krematorium)* (1997), *Bergen-Belsen, 1945* (1996), and a great, unbearable, quasi-abstraction *Auschwitz, August 1944* (2007). I cannot recall any exhibition with such a dramatic, entirely sudden change of mood. It becomes evident very quickly that when war came, Stojka's daily life was completely altered. And, finally, on the last wall are some ink on paper drawings, also showing Holocaust subjects.



Installation view: *Ceija Stojka: We Lived in Secrecy (A Roma Memory)*, Galerie Fleiss-Vallois, New York, 2024. Courtesy Fleiss-Vallois. Photo: Olivia DiVecchia.

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response to mass murder threatens to be absolutely barbaric. Perhaps this is why when I finally got to focus on *Auschwitz, August 1944*, I first saw the yellow and red forms at the left and right hand sides moving skyward. (I almost jumped when I saw that the painting is dated to the very month of my birth.) Then I looked at the frail touch of green at the far right. But what then caught and held my eyes was the gray smokestack at the center, with its red and violent fumes wafting off to the right. And only finally did I view the forms at its base, where the title is written out in paint. Compared with Stojka's earlier paintings, this almost abstract image seems an appropriate response to the difficulty of picturing this impossible subject. In her philosophical history *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton, 2002) Susan Neiman writes: "Auschwitz beggared expectation. The impossible became true." And then a few pages later she says that the Holocaust "was conceptually devastating because it revealed a possibility in human nature that we hoped not to see." Pressing her words in a more literal way than she intended, is this not an apt way of describing what is happening in this painting? We would prefer not to see *Auschwitz, August 1944* because it reveals truthfully a very real history.

David Carrier taught philosophy in Pittsburgh and art history in Cleveland.

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