

KATJA JACOBS AND HANIBAL SROUJI: THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

Shirley Fiterman Gallery
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Katja Jacobs and Hanibal Srouji met when they shared a studio at an international artists' workshop held near Marseilles in 1995. Despite their radically different origins and formations as artists, they discovered that they shared many pivotal, transforming experiences, experiences that changed the course of their lives. Each is a multi-lingual polyglot with a complex, multi-ethnic background and history of exile and migration, both forced and chosen. Each, as child and adult, experienced dramatic changes not only of place, but of language, and even of alphabet. Both survived horrifying wars.

Not altogether surprisingly, given this common ground, Jacobs and Srouji discovered complex and subtle relationships in their work, which led to a provocative and fruitful dialogue. Although both are abstract painters, there is no overt resemblance between what they do, yet each explores issues of loss and retrieval, of displacement and disconnection, of spirituality, and personal and cultural memory.

Jacobs, born in Hamburg, was a small child during World War II and has vivid memories hiding during bombings. As a schoolgirl in rural Yugoslavia, where her engineer father was working, she added Serbo-Croatian and a Cyrillic alphabet to her native German, then returned to Europe, to French-speaking Belgium, to study art. As a young woman—with no English – she immigrated to Canada where she still lives. Srouji, who comes from a Christian-Lebanese-Arab-French family, was born in Beirut, where he spent his formative years. As a teenager, he and his family fled Lebanon's destructive civil war for Montreal where he went to art school. Today, he lives in Paris.

Both Jacobs and Srouji strive to discover concrete, ambiguous images for their deepest feelings. Jacobs often incorporates images from family photographs and diaries in her loosely layered collages: she "wounds" and "heals" sheets of paper and canvas, creating rich palimpsests that are metaphors for the accumulated emotional baggage of the alert, sensitive individual. Srouji literally uses the materials and processes of destruction to make delicate, often beautiful images, transforming the dangerous into the contemplative. He "paints" with rusty iron, "draws" by piercing the canvas with a blowtorch, or shapes pieces of canvas with a flame, at once recapitulating the chaos of Beirut during adolescence and radically changing the meaning of these brutal methods by using them to create harmony and order. For both artists, the search is for ways to at once celebrate and exorcise potent recollections.

Karen Wilkin
Curator