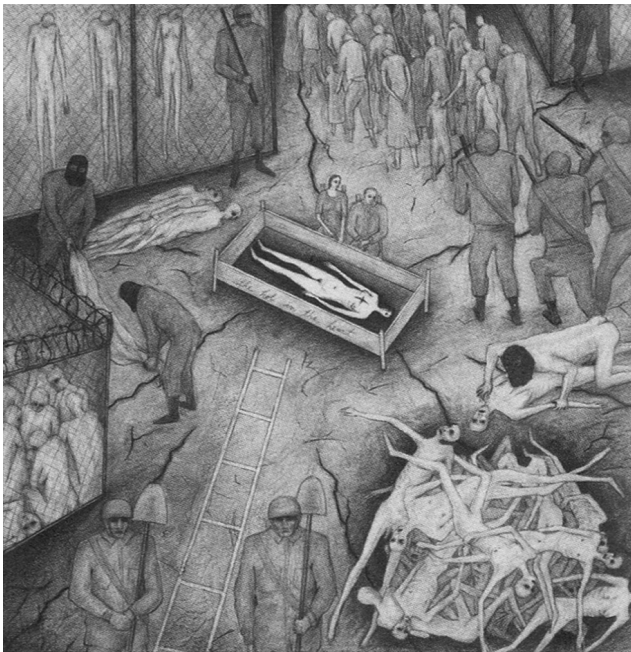


A Grandmother's Apron and the Holocaust

DYANE N. SHERWOOD

Review of: Rachel Feferman, *Golden Hands: Drawings and Reflections by Rachel Feferman*, afterword by Linda Brownrigg, Los Altos Hills: Anderson-Lovelace, 2009.

Golden Hands is centered around a series of drawings in pencil and graphite on paper. The artist shares her artistic process, as well as dreams, imagination, reflections, and memories that weave into and out of her work. She does so sparingly, not overwhelming us with material, just as her drawings reflect her unhurried care and discernment. Although this review focuses on the content of certain drawings, the work as a whole reveals a woman deeply in



Hole in the Heart #2, 18" × 19", 1986 (© Rachel Feferman 2009.)

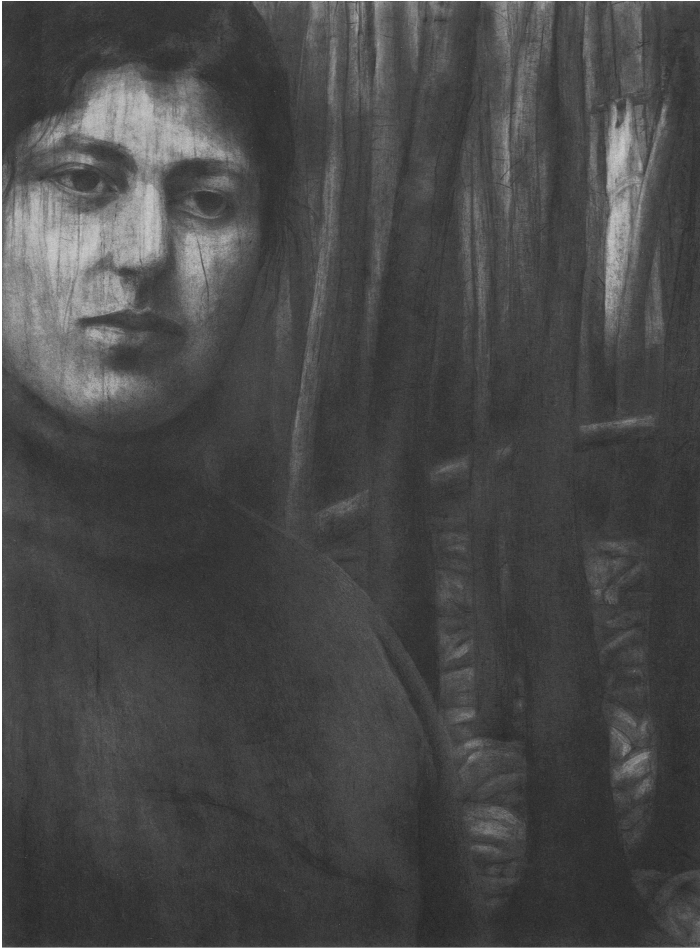


Drawing 21, *Golden Hands Series*, 1996. 30" × 22", pencil and powdered graphite on Arches 90-pound hot press (© Rachel Feferman 2009.)

love with life and attuned to the subtleties of ordinary experience, a poet of word and image.

Many of Rachel Feferman's drawings allude to the Nazi extermination of Jews in the mid-twentieth century. Prior to the *Golden Hands* series in this book, Ms. Feferman's work confronted the Holocaust in a direct and horrifying way. For example, in *Hole in the Heart #2* (1986) helmeted soldiers herd starving children, women, and men through a doorway to an interior where hanged bodies are visible. In the foreground, faceless soldiers carry shovels over their shoulders like

rifles. They stand between a cage, where naked people are crowded together, and a mass grave, the beginning and the end of this horrifying process. At the top of the mass grave, a naked but not emaciated, hooded figure leans over a body. Is it a Jew forced to participate in the slaughter? Does he or she recognize the dead person? Or, as it appears to be a man straddling a naked woman's body, is he about to rape the corpse? An open casket is in the center, with a couple sitting next to it. The naked body in the casket has a cross-shaped marking or incision on his chest, with the words, "Hole in



Grandma as a Girl. Drawing 26, *Golden Hands Series*, 1998. 30" × 22", pencil and powdered graphite on Arches 90-pound hot press (© Rachel Feferman 2009.)

the Heart." Who are the two seated, normally clothed figures? Are they parents, witnesses? Might each of us identify with these three figures—when we "witness" murder of those near or far, does part of us die, become less alive and less human? Do we suffer a "hole in the heart," a wound to our innermost being?

Ms. Feferman's *Golden Hands* series is less confrontational, as compared to her earlier work. Rather than a combination of stark reality and subtle ambiguity, the drawings are invitations to reverie. This series explores

her deep bond with her grandmother, Helen, who emigrated to southern California from Poland after the First World War in twentieth-century Europe. A seamstress of unusual talent and precision, Helen had been called *Gilde Manz* (*Golden Hands*) in the old country. When Helen moved to the Jewish Home for the Aged in Los Angeles, she gave her artist granddaughter the apron she had made as a girl. Later, in her studio in the Pacific Northwest, Rachel Feferman studied the apron intimately: the fine cotton fabric,



Drawing 1, *Golden Hands Series*, 1995. 30" × 22", pencil and powdered graphite on Arches 90-pound hot press (© Rachel Feferman 2009.)

the tiny stitches, its pleats, forms, folds, and textures. She writes,

Helen's apron was my touchstone, carrying me back across the century to the world of the old country. This world has all but vanished; . . . Her apron stands in counterpoint to the massacres of the Holocaust in the world that I drew, yet my grandmother herself was never in a concentration camp, . . . (1)

The *Golden Hands* series is lyrical rather than narrative. The space is fluid and open, and the images are delicately sensate and personal.

Drawings of Helen's face, hands, and apron evoke our most tender memories of texture and skin; of touch and caress; of being held and holding; of deep, uncritical love. Objects are alive with their meanings, as if they carry the memories of lifetimes: a vase with flowers drawn in outline, a challah, an open but empty envelope, patterned fabric, a still life with apples, a violin, a mysterious forest, wallpaper, a dove. Portraits of Helen young and old bear witness to a life lived out in fullness, with a legacy of children and grandchildren.

In unexpected ways, these vibrant images are intermingled with images of anonymous bodies and barbed wire. The viewer feels that this is not a contrivance or manipulation but an inner necessity of the artist to portray her felt experience. Love, care, delicacy, and kindness can be degraded, annihilated. We feel the true horror of what has been destroyed and what will never be again.

Emerging from the depths of her being, Ms. Feferman's *Golden Hands* series reveals an under layer of suffering caused by human atrocities. She conveys the wounding to all human beings, not limited to those who were directly involved. For me, her work evokes a very personal connection to the nameless *many* in every part of the world, whose lives and cultures have been destroyed by scapegoating mobs, by calculated ethnic cleansing, or by unchecked sadism during political strife. We recognize that dark shadows live in the collective psyche of every ethnic or religious group that has persecuted and perhaps eliminated minority groups or conquered peoples. And we understand more fully the fear living in survivors: they know it could happen again.

There is so much more to be discovered in this book. The writing is as beautiful and deep as the drawings. I am reminded of Emily Dickinson—a world of experience is evoked even though the range of subjects may seem narrow. You will want to revisit this book time and again and marvel at Rachel Feferman's golden hands and her sensitive inclusion of all that is.

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ABSTRACT

This book beautifully presents *Golden Hands*, a series of drawings, originally made in pencil and graphite, that explore Rachel Feferman's deep feeling for her grandmother, a Jewish immigrant from Poland. Although her grandmother escaped the Holocaust, delicate and tender images of her grandmother, as well as objects associated with her, are intermingled in the artist's psyche and drawings with images of bodies and barbed wire. These drawings express the undercurrent of wounding caused by human atrocities, even for those who are not obviously affected. Included are carefully selected passages describing the artist's creative process, as well as dreams, imagination, and reflections relevant to the creation of this series.

KEY WORDS

artist's process, concentration camp, dream, ethnic cleansing, *Gilde Manz*, *Golden Hands*, grandmother, Holocaust, Jew, seamstress, skin