

Summer Lecture: 'Painting and stained glass in the work of Ardyn Halter'



This lecture was truly serendipitous since an article entitled 'Ardyn Halter: Israeli artist in paint, print and glass' had appeared in a recent *Journal of Stained Glass* (Vol. XXXIX). To actually meet the artist and hear his version of events was a fairly unusual occurrence for those who crowded into the Art Workers' Guild auditorium last Thursday.

Ardyn himself turned out to be both well prepared and articulate. Inevitably he covered much of the ground described in the article, but he brought a fresh perspective to these events through vivid descriptions of so many unusual commissions. His childhood had inevitably been influenced by his father's continuing recall of the terrible experiences undergone as a child slave labourer for the Gestapo and the loss of the entire family excepting an elderly grandmother in Israel. This background had inevitably influenced the direction taken by Ardyn's own life and work. His talent as an artist was revealed early although his decision to express ideas in paint and glass came somewhat later. From school he gained a scholarship to read English Literature at St John's College, Cambridge then gained financial support for a journeying period through the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan, studying, looking, thinking and sketching. It was from this time of travel and contemplation that he formed the desire to paint (rather than write about) these experiences.

Ardyn explained some of the background to his relationship with architectural glass, telling his audience how he and his sister Aviva worked with their father in preparing the carved wooden moulds for casting the bronze and aluminium filigree used instead of lead for several Synagogue windows created by Roman Halter during the 1980s.

From 1979, however, Israel has been Ardyn's home. For us, he described with poignant clarity the memorial created in Israel with his father named 'Yad La Yeled' (literally: the symbol to the child), which commemorates the million and a half Jewish children who died in the holocaust (Shoah in Hebrew). Ardyn showed us some amazing images of this unique building (based on the idea of a white sandcastle, below) and he described the journey taken in the creation of its unique windows (top right). In their determination to create colourful, simple yet relevant images for the memorial, Ardyn and his father referred to a book of poems and drawings made by children imprisoned in



Theresienstadt entitled 'No more Butterflies in the Ghetto'. Ardyn gave us a vivid word picture of children of different backgrounds from all over Israel dancing and playing in the coloured light that bathes the interior.

Ardyn then described the creation of another memorial to a deeply shocking event: the murder of the Tutsi people in Rwanda, Africa. Finance had been provided in 2003 by the 'Aegis' Trust with support from several governments as well as the Clinton Foundation. Following acceptance of the design, Ardyn gave us a graphic description of the difficulties encountered in taking everything needed to create the memorial from start to finish. 'I remember there were over 700 people working on site. Paving and plastering, welding and building, carpeting and mending. He showed us incredible photographs of barefoot workers building the timber frames for the stained glass panels and women carrying soil and cement in baskets. 'It was five steps forward and three steps backward as barefoot workers carrying earth in wicker baskets on their heads walked through the building leaving loam footprints after the occasional heavy rain'. This apparently chaotic scene slowly resolved into the powerful memorial that can be seen today.

Ardyn recalled an event for us that revealed all too clearly the continuing tensions between local people. He noticed the apprehensive looks of a young girl working on the memorial and enquired the reason. Apparently she had observed the two young men who had murdered her parents standing a short distance away and was afraid they would come to kill her too.

These windows are uncompromising in their imagery. For the panel entitled 'Never Again', Ardyn has not hesitated to show the once loved dead in the form of heaps of skulls tumbled beneath a stairway. Both horror and violence are present here. But in the second window, Ardyn has shown 'The Way Forward' in which Hutu and Tutsi can ascend together.

Since he started working in paint and glass, whether assisting his father or working on his own commissions, Ardyn has never ceased to draw, paint, engrave and print. He concluded his talk by showing us some very beautiful works in these media, several of which could be seen in the UK at the Eames Gallery in Bermondsey, while books on his prints and paintings can be found online. Ardyn stressed the importance of working in different media, describing the refreshment that such work brings to an artist's sensibility. Although we were left rather awed by the serious nature of his commissions, many of us will certainly seek out and get permission to visit The Central Synagogue, The New North West Reform Synagogue and Leo Baeck College and St John's Wood Synagogue where this wonderful work can be seen.

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