

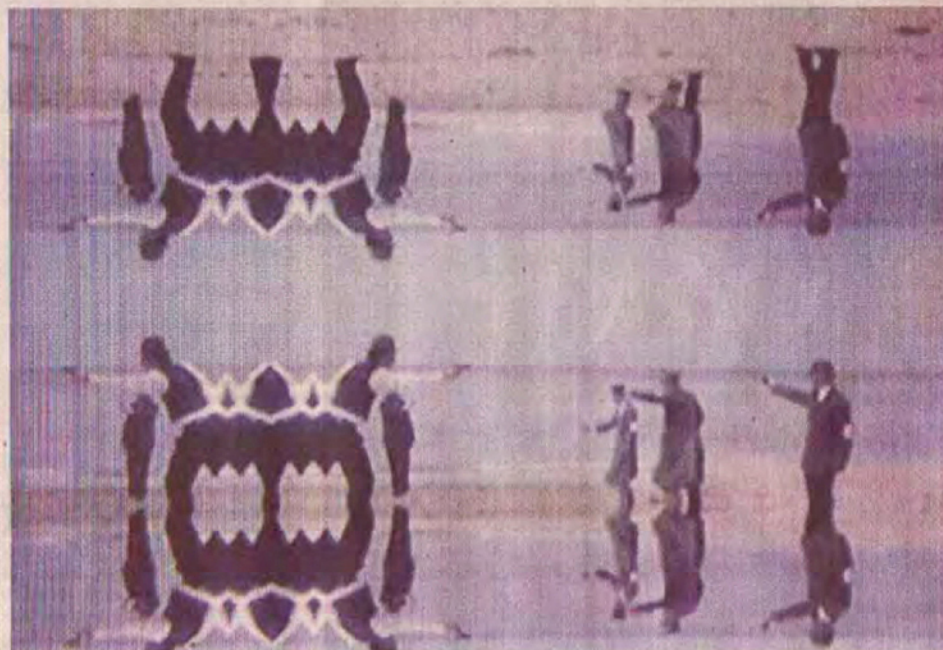
The past speaks to the present

By LEAH OLLMAN
Special to The Times

In Robin Kandel's short, silent video, "Mythological Parentage," six men confront each other on a beach. Three wear coats with Nazi armbands. The other three are dressed in suits of a similar vintage.

The groups shoot at each other, but then they start exchanging hats and coats, switching sides it seems, before shooting some more. The brief passage shifts from slow motion to the accelerated jerky movement of early silent film, as if part distant dream, part theatrical skit. The imagery is indelible — poignant, tragic and slightly comic, much like the family history that Kandel draws upon in her absorbing recent work at Sherry Frumkin Gallery.

We learn in one of the installations that Kandel's maternal and paternal great-grandfathers were brothers. In 1910, their paths diverged: One immigrated to the U.S. and the other stayed in their native Russian town of Berezhno (now Ukraine). During World War II, the Ukrainian strand of the family, successful cattle merchants, was subjected to German occupation, forced into a Jewish ghetto and sent to a labor camp where peat squares were dug and dried for fuel. When rumors of imminent killings reached the camp, the family escaped into the surrounding woods, hiding for the remaining two years of the war, losing numerous members of the group



Sherry Frumkin Gallery

ROBIN KANDEL: Role-swapping combatants face off in the short, silent video "Mythological Parentage." Part distant dream, part theatrical skit, it is poignant, tragic and slightly comic.

along the way to discovery and death.

The American branch of the family, assimilated Jews in Detroit, had ties in the 1920s and '30s to gun-runners and bootleggers known as the Purple Gang. Kandel's grandfather served time for driving a getaway car for cousins who ended up in Alcatraz. This side of the family — unaccented, glamorous and vaguely dangerous — was the side the young Kandel preferred as she was growing up.

The two tales interweave throughout the show, most explicitly in "Benjamin & Julius," which incorporates a timeline, framed wall panels (most with text, a few blank), a globe, map and chalkboard, and snippets of stories printed on colored paper and scattered on the floor. The stories pick up in the middle and leave off without closure. They

are anecdotal, reflective. They skip back and forth through time, from past accounts to their recent discovery.

Kandel, a Bay Area artist, learned the details of her father's wartime childhood only six years ago when he gave her copies of several taped interviews a graduate student had made with him in 1983. Her assimilation of the information, her incorporation of it into her own sense of self has been the focus of her work ever since.

She approaches the stories and their legacy in various ways. Some works — a large paper weaving made from cut strips of maps, for example — feel facile and slight. An installation pairing an assembly of globes with a painting evoking the ocean as it appears on a globe also seems too generalized to have much impact.

The most affecting works marry the literal and the metaphorical. In "Backward Text," Kandel transcribes a long excerpt from her father's testimony, writing it by hand, in reverse. The pain of the story itself is echoed in the strain of reading it. This isn't information easy to receive or deliver.

In her performative videos, Kandel negotiates her inheritance of a fractured past in concentrated, evocative vignettes. Trauma is laced with levity.

In "Dress Up," she puts on clothing associated with her mother, her father and others (even a Nazi) that played roles in the formation of her family's story. She physically assumes the layers contributing to her own identity. In another video, of unlikely objects deliberately stacked in piles, she refers to the stacking of peat squares in the

German labor camp as well as to the broader notion of identity as multilayered, compressed, geological in its stratification.

Kandel's family history is powerful raw material. Through her strengths as both storyteller and image-maker, she gives it further dimension and relevance, extending its power to the present.

Sherry Frumkin Gallery, 3026 Airport Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 397-7463, through Aug. 11. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.frumkingallery.com

LOS ANGELES TIMES
AROUND THE GALLERIES
FRIDAY, JULY 27, 2007