



What Makes You Stronger

The Sculpture of Rytas Jakimavičius

DO YOU WANT TO REMEMBER? IN THE POETRY OF the abstract sculptures and figurative narratives that comprise Rytas Jakimavičius' installation *Remembrances*, memory is tenacious and unyielding. The only exceptions are the occasions when the artist becomes a revisionist, dealing out images of a past that was not and memories as they should have been.

Article by Anthony Stellaccio

MEMORIES AS THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN: In 1948, 40,000 Lithuanians were deported to Siberia. That was one half of the deportations in all of the Soviet Union. In 1959, when Jakimavičius was born into the era of Lithuania's Soviet occupation, there had already

been 16 years to try to eradicate the collective memory of a resilient nation and to dictate a new, Sovietized past. For those who survived the genocide, public amnesia became a forced social agreement. Socialist Realism, the glorification of Soviet achievement in art, was the visual manifestation of that agreement between oppressed and oppressor. Socialist Realism did not merely construct the present, but gave corpus to a reshaped history.

A RESHAPED HISTORY: In *Remembrances*, Jakimavičius confronts the typology of Socialist Realism – the poised soldier, the farmer, the woman at work and





other propagandised idealisations. But Jakimavičius' figures are nuanced. They are muted in colour, texture and in being brought to description without excessive detail. The figures are slightly askew and contorted, imperfect and hideous in ways that contrast the tenderness of their modelling and reveal the tremulous agony of real people who have been trapped inside caricatures of utopia. Subversive and haunting, a barely perceptible reality peeks through these adeptly rendered figures and catches the unprepared viewer off-guard.

A BARELY PERCEPTIBLE REALITY: Also caught off-guard are the figures themselves, most of whom stand frozen in a moment of surprise, cocking their heads

Facing page, top: Remembrances, Installation Shot.

Mixed media with audio recording.

Facing page, below: Alzheimer Hills. 2010. Handbuilt stoneware reduction fired, oxides, glazes and laser decals. 40 cm/h.

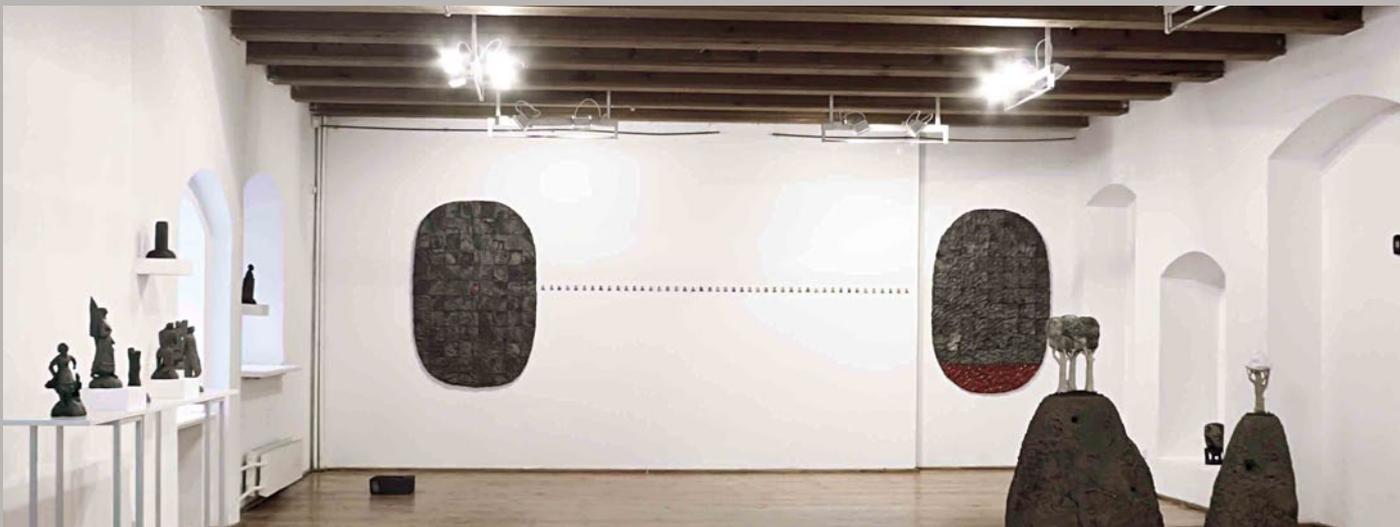
Above: Earth with Portraits (Detail). 2006.

Handbuilt earthenware woodfired in reduction.

Below: Remembrances, Installation View.

Mixed media with audio recording.

back, upsetting their labours and thrusting their views towards the sky. These people await a moment of rescue, the moment when the rhetoric of democracy and the promise of 'the West' would become thunderous action. These people await a moment that never came. The figures' paradox is thus a





Above: *Soldier from the exhibition Remembrances. 2009. Hand-built stoneware, gas fired in reduction, oxides. 25 x 17 cm.*

Below: *Detail of the project Remembrances. 2008. Handbuilt earthenware, woodfired in reduction. 24 x 15 cm.*

painful one, for in reliving the past as it should have been, the reality that was and the lingering agony of lost hope become more excruciating.

AND THE LINGERING AGONY OF LOST HOPE? In Lithuania, primarily in the time between its occupation in 1944 and the death of Josef Stalin in 1953, a little known war was waged against Soviet rule by Lithuanian partisans. It was the world's longest guerilla war, a war fought by all of those Lithuanian men and women who absconded to the forest and came to be known as "Forest Brothers". In that fight, death

in the battlefield as well as capture, horrific torture – the removal of testicles, fingernails and eyes from the living and, finally, execution took nearly 30,000 Lithuanian lives. In that fight, the forest, long held as the spiritual epicentre of Lithuanian culture, was stained with the blood and memory of Lithuania's martyrs.

In Jakimavičius' *Remembrances*, trees and hillsides described in clay become entire forests and emblems of the earth. Dappled ceramic tiles are also earth. These are the places where Lithuania's collective memory resides.

THE PLACES WHERE COLLECTIVE MEMORY RESIDES: In a linear fashion reminiscent of the horizon, the artist has arranged a series of portraits, photo-decals fired on to clay, above the trees and hillsides. In another instance, similar portraits appear as inserts in two compositions of tiles where they are repeated rhythmically like plots in a graveyard. The portraits on clay immortalise the dead, the named and nameless victims of a methodical and heartless extermination, they also bear resemblance to the mortuary practice of placing ceramic cemetery pictures, plaques and medallions, upon tombstones. The transfer of images on to clay, present in numerous works by the artist, also takes the ephemeral and gives it permanence. In a hyper-informed age of delete and forget, these images, much like the entire exhibition, recall the past and give it substance, dimension and duration.

RECALL THE PAST AND GIVE IT SUBSTANCE: Knowing from his biography that members of his own family had been deported to Siberia, one might propose that Jakimavičius' work is deeply personal and therapeutic. It is, to be sure, as more intimate details of his life also suggest. But Jakimavičius obscures the more personal dimension of his work by traversing and perhaps even equating personal and social histories and he lays no claim to the strength and suffering in his work.

Knowing his generation, those who were born into the Soviet era, confined to it and shaped by it, one





comes closer to the median point. For the post-war generations of Lithuanians, those who had lived in an occupied country since birth, there was no other life and, 'officially', no other history than the one that was publicly agreed upon. Thus, for the non-complacent of Jakimavičius' generation, identity was not so much defined by experience as by a constant and often painful flux between the collective memory of a free country, the lie of the present and any aspiration that could be mustered.

AND ANY ASPIRATION THAT COULD BE MUSTERED: For post-independence generations of Lithuanians, the collective memory is no longer one that recalls the golden years of opportunity and prosperity in an independent nation. Rather, the collective memory that is now handed down is one that remembers the blood that was spilled and the sacrifice that was made for a freedom and country now too easily taken for granted by its own children. That memory is the message, burden and responsibility of Jakimavičius' age and it is the message behind the material in Jakimavičius' creation.

MEMORY IS THE MESSAGE: Comprising individual works created over several years and assembled into a thematically focused exhibition, *Remembrances* is a moving and elaborate discourse. The discourse, however, at times masks the raw and strained emotion that is the greatest asset of the artist's work. By this measure, Jakimavičius' most recent work, a piece entitled *Alzheimer Hills*, which was made, appropriately, in communist China, marks the artist's ascent to mastery.

THE SUFFERING THAT CAN ONLY BE EXPRESSED IN THE SILENCE OF A FRACTURED AND DISEMBODIED LANDSCAPE: In *Alzheimer Hills*, the artist has compressed the import and complexity of *Remembrances* into a narrow arrangement of concise sculptural elements. Although these elements work in tandem, the relationship seems to have been forced, resulting in a sense of isolation and arbitrariness that lingers about



Left: *Lithuanian Stories (Detail)*. 2009. Handbuilt stoneware, gas fired in reduction, glazes and laser decals. 50 cm/h.
Right: *Worker Carrying Wheelbarrow with Stones*. 2008. Handbuilt earthenware, woodfired in reduction. 30 x 15 cm.
Border, all pages: *Detail of Lithuanian Stories*.

and between them. Were that unintentional, the work would suffer. Instead, it seems that the effect is calculated, conveying the suffering that can only be expressed in the silence of a fractured and disembodied landscape.

AND UNBREAKABLE STRENGTH: In this landscape appears the eyesore of a defunct Soviet factory and a nearby prison. In literal form we also find a monument to the fallen. As in *Remembrances*, this landscape also includes references to the forest but the trees in *Alzheimer Hills* are only twisted, withering stumps, while images of the fallen are now set into recesses within hilltops. Here the optimism of *Remembrances* has vanished along with the forest, and the memory of the dead and their struggles belongs only to a silent earth. These are painful, desperate moments of emotional brinkmanship by an artist who, like his work, is flooded with emotion, edgy and full of longing. But Rytas Jakimavičius' work is instructive, as painful memories can be. More distinctly, however, this irreproachable sculptor's work is a combination of the soul-wrenching melancholy and unbreakable strength that I have come to know as distinctly Lithuanian.

Anthony Stellaccio is a freelance artist and scholar. He currently serves as curatorial research specialist and project manager for an exhibit entitled *Earth Matters*, which is scheduled to open at the Smithsonian, National Museum of African Art in April 2013.