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Review | Black Book by Gideon Rubin at The Freud Museum

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Youth, Black Book, Gideon Rubin

The Freud Museum, in Freud's old house, is a five-minute walk from Finchley Road tube station, away from the main road on a residential street. Other than the small sign and the two blue plaques which bear the names Sigmund and Anna Freud, the house blends into those on either side. Freud's house, in which he probed the human memory and subconscious, is a fitting location for its current exhibition, *Black Book* by Gideon Rubin.

Black Book is a work of erasure. Rubin erases the faces, figures, backgrounds, flags, and the text of works to create anonymous characters onto which we place ourselves, our locations, and the faces of those we know. This erasure, particularly of facial features, metaphorically plays with the concept of identity and self. This interrogation would be enough to understand the Freud Museum as an appropriate location for the exhibit. However, when you understand the context of the work, it gains in significance immeasurably. The erased works are Nazi propaganda, the text, Mein Kampf.

This contextual knowledge makes Gideon's work a statement on the current refugee crises; Freud himself a refugee in London. It turns the faceless figures from a comment on the individual into a comment on nationalism, on mass hysteria, on demagoguery, and on social forgetfulness. It is a comment on a historical moment which affected the families of both Freud and Gideon, but also is highly charged contemporary statement. It is harder to think of a more suitable mix of subject and setting.

Gideon's works are not confined to a single room but instead are placed throughout the Freud Museum. They are sometimes obvious, like the old newspapers stuck to the wall on the landing or the canvas paintings in the dining room. They are sometimes subtle, like the small images in vintage frames which sit on shelves amongst other photos or sit on Freud's desk amongst his old papers. The choice to display these works in locations both obvious and obscure adds to the insidious feel of the exhibit. Gideon works in layers. He makes you look and look again.



Tuxedo, Black Book, Gideon Rubin

The idyllic images only enhance the exhibit's insidious feel. Originally these pictures masked abhorrent content. Designed to beguile and allure they aimed to dilute Nazi message. Gideon, by removing aspects of the images, subverts this. Erasing part of them heightens our sensitivity to the context; painting over the pictures makes us more aware of their message. He plays with our collective knowledge and our collective memory. We know the doctrine these images promoted without being told. We can see how these images helped the spread of Nazism and in the faceless figures, we can see ourselves.

Gideon's use of the handsomely dressed couple shows the disarming nature of these pictures at their peak. The image of the couple, which recurs throughout the exhibit, grows from a small print into a full wall canvas and differs from the other images because they are more than beguiling or alluring, they are aspirational. You can't just see yourself in their faceless figures, you actively want to. This is the nature of the work. Devoid of context they are a successful couple. He is dressed in a full tuxedo and she in a matching flapper-esque body suit. They seem wealthy and, despite being featureless, you imagine them attractive and happy. They draw the viewer in despite the context. They are the ideal. They represent the ubiquitous 'happy couple' to which we all aspire. The growth of this painting, from a small print to a full canvas, seems to mimic the growth of this idea as promoted by Nazism. As you move through the Freud Museum and through Gideon's works, this image/idea grows and blossoms and culminates into a full canvas of the couple directly opposite the blacked-out text of *Mein Kampf*. Opposite *Mein Kampf* the fallacy of both images is highlighted. Vilifying others does not make you better than them. The happy couple, like *Mein Kampf*, are a harmful illusion. This becomes starkly contemporary in Freud's house, a man who dealt with forgetting and the repression of memories.

On the opposite wall in a room length glass cabinet is *Mein Kampf*. Eighteen open editions of blacked out pictures and text. Gideon's deletions are not uniform. Some pages are completely defaced, others have lines across the page regardless of the columns of print, others are divided in two where the columns of print separate down the page, others are individual words with the spaces left intact. The pages opposite the blacked out text are landscapes with buildings removed, portraits with blacked out heads above a chest full of medals, and blacked out marches with silhouetted people with their arms held in roman salute. It is particularly easy, when arranged opposite the marching scenes, to see organised columns of people in the blacked out text, to see rallies, to see the crowds at Nuremburg. The scenes are not shocking. We are all familiar with the icons of Nazism. What is shocking about Gideon's work is that its base text is in English. Gideon worked from a serialised English translation of *Mein Kampf* distributed in 1939. It is widely known and taught that Britain had a fascist movement lead by Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists. However, it is less known that an English version of *Mein Kampf* was available here in 1939, that those seeking refuge from Nazism in Europe were still being dogged by its propaganda while in England. These are less thought of, less remembered.

The Freud Museum is worth visiting, regardless of this exhibit, as a testament to the man who helped shape our modern definition of memory and self. Gideon's work is worth seeing as an independent work of art for its technique and beauty. But the thematic combination of setting and subject elevates the Gideon exhibit at the Freud Museum to a higher level, a deeper introspection on history and memory and national identity and immigration. The exhibit delves into history to confront highly contemporary issues, fittingly Freudian. Standing outside of the Freud Museum it is hard to think that such a strong and probing debate about nationalism, mass hysteria, memory, immigration, war, and tragedy, is happening behind the walls of a quintessentially suburban home. Everything about this exhibit is a statement.

Black Book by Gideon Rubin at The Freud Museum runs from the 7 February 2018 until 15 April 2018.