

OMAHA MAGAZINE

Absence Makes the Heart

Sep 10, 2018 • By Lindsay Wilson



“Where are you from?”

This common question is a complex one for Los Angeles-based conceptual artist and summer 2018 Bemis artist-in-residence Jenny Yurshansky. She was conceived in Moldova in the late-1970s, when it was part of the USSR; while her refugee parents were en route to the United States, she was unexpectedly born in Rome. The family ultimately settled in the San Fernando Valley in 1979.

"I was technically stateless when I was born," says Yurshansky, whose Jewish parents experienced systemic oppression before fleeing Soviet-era Moldova under great duress. In punitive acts by the Soviet regime as it worked to expel hundreds of thousands of Jews, they were forced to abandon their jobs for a year and surrender all educational documentation before leaving. Yurshansky's surprise, early arrival in Rome caused an additional delay of a few months while her parents worked to assemble the proper paperwork for the family to complete its journey to the U.S.

But Yurshansky's story is just one small stitch in a larger, intergenerational family fabric of borders, fear, fleeing, and absence. From her grandmother's escape from the Nazis to her parents' decision to leave their hostile homeland, the family's ongoing diaspora deeply affected not just the individuals who had to leave, but the places they left behind.

"There are two pockets of emptiness: One in the group that leaves—because as traumatic or difficult as their relationship with home may be, it's still where they formed their identity and the core of who they are—and also in the place that's left behind," says Yurshansky of the refugee experience.

Yurshansky's past work explores the topic of immigration as it relates to the way we think about human migrants using the allegory of invasive plants species. During her Bemis residency, Yurshansky focused on her *Crusted Memory* project—a more personal exploration of immigration that looks at her family's legacy as migrants from a matrilineal perspective.

"Instead of dealing with migration on a general level like I did with the plants, I'm looking at my own family's history as being a refugee story," Yurshansky says. "It's a case study that can be used to reflect on the refugee experience, not solely on a diaristic level, but also as a way to reflect one story onto other stories and experiences. I'm looking at the state of being a refugee, in terms of traumas experienced by the people who leave and also by the place that's left behind."

As a conceptual artist, Yurshansky uses many mediums. *Crusted Memory* incorporates textiles, glass, sculpture, photography, and other elements to explore a family legacy she says is rooted with her maternal grandmother. Her grandmother was a highly skilled seamstress whose budding career was interrupted by World War II when, instead of heading to Paris for an apprenticeship as planned, she fled Moldova for Uzbekistan, narrowly escaping with her life.

Fittingly, it was Yurshansky's grandmother who taught her how to sew as a child during a visit to the U.S. Yurshansky calls sewing her "initial place of creative output" as an

artist. "Since my mother's mother is the root of the story, a lot of the work [in *Crusted Memory*] will focus on weaving or embroidery," says Yurshansky.

In 2016 and again in 2017, Yurshansky and her mother traveled to Chişinău, Moldova's capital city and her mother's hometown.

"Neither of my parents had been back because [it] was too traumatic," she says.

On their journeys, Yurshansky collected notes, artifacts, photographs, and conversations which inform the works in *Crusted Memory*. One piece—an embroidered, soft sculpture—draws from a visit to Yurshansky's great-grandfather's overgrown gravesite, where she did a rubbing of the towering headstone that mimics a limbless tree, symbolizing a life cut short. Another poignant piece is based around traditional rose-patterned Moldovan rugs.

"At the house I grew up in, my mother planted 116 rose bushes," Yurshansky says. "When we went to Moldova, I saw roses everywhere—from fabric patterns to medians—and something clicked. I said, 'Mom, now it makes so much sense to me why you planted roses at home and had so many around—you were basically replicating home.' But she said, 'I don't know what you're talking about. There were no roses there.' For her, a lot of memory is suppressed, and that's what I mean about these kinds of gaps, both in the person that leaves and the place that's left behind. So, I'm recreating this carpet, but with the roses dropped out. A lot of my work deals with absence and plays with that tension of what's there and what's not there through how I'm presenting these objects."

Yurshansky feels fortunate to have the resources provided during her Bemis residency to tackle this important project. "I'm really lucky to have this much room to play in and such an amazing set of resources," says Yurshansky, who welded at Bemis' Okada Sculpture & Ceramics Facility and did ceramics at The Union for Contemporary Art in addition to the multifaceted work she completed in her studio. "Being a conceptual artist, I start with the idea first and then find the materials, methods, and techniques that best express that idea, and Bemis is really wonderful because there are so many resources available to me and the people are so helpful. That has been invaluable to my work."

While Yurshansky had never been to Omaha before, she'd been aware of the Bemis for a long time.

"I had no idea what to expect from Omaha and I'm very pleasantly surprised," she says. "There's a lot going on and it's really hip. There's great food, concerts, the culture is awesome, the museums are great, and the people are just amazing."

In addition to her summer in Omaha, Yurshansky has been exposed to many other locales, having also lived in Sweden for 11 years and traveled widely, which greatly informs her global perspective. Though she acknowledges the heightened current conversation around immigration, she says it's actually long been a major issue.

"It just continues to escalate," Yurshansky says. "I think that's a reflection of our world as it becomes more undeniable that the idea of a border is actually an arbitrary thing, considering what a globalized society we are in terms of policy, economics, and how much, especially in the U.S., we have a hand elsewhere in the world."

Just as each thread is crucially connected in the tapestry of our globalized world, Yurshansky's work showcases the poignant interconnectedness of people, places, and empty spaces—the places that made us who we are, those that make us who we will become, and the empty spaces we create along our journeys.

For more information, visit jennyurshansky.com.

This article was printed in the September/October 2018 edition of Encounter.