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Exploring Difficult Truths and the Possibility of Healing and Transformation through the Art of Norman Rockwell and Samuel Bak

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Abstract: Racism remains a pervasive problem in society. Beyond iconic photographs that capture a distinct moment in history that prompt reflection on racism, art can be a powerful prompt to encourage society to reflect on this persistent difficult truth. Norman Rockwell and Samuel Bak reconfigured highly recognized photographs into portraits with the intention to explore questions about racism. The photographs and the art they inspired feature a single child in the midst of surrounding racism. Through the use of these images, Rockwell and Bak move audiences beyond the immediate consideration of racism, toward healing, and to future transformation.

Keywords: Samuel Bak, Norman Rockwell, Photography, Racism, Viewers, Interpretation

In his classic book, Alex Grey examined the mission of art and the artist. He posited that artists "offer the world pain and beauty of their souls as a gift to open the eyes of and heal the collective… and art sings and shouts from the axis of truth to wake us up to who we are and where we are going" (Grey 1998, 8). Images, from photographs and paintings, often confront people with difficult truths of history and at the same time can help to heal deep wounds of the individual and of society. Beyond healing, images offer us a way to revisit difficult questions about the causes of trauma in the past and in the present, and in doing so create a better future. Throughout modern history, racism has caused immeasurable trauma, and its oppressive legacy continues in contemporary times. How might art not only begin to heal these wounds, but also challenge individual viewers and society as a collective to work towards the eradication of racism?

The Role of Images in Confronting Racism

Addressing this question, this essay examines racism as represented in Norman Rockwell's (1898-1978) *The Problem We All Live With* and selected art from Samuel Bak's (1933) series, *Icon of Loss*, through the framework of Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT). The TRHT framework suggests we should disrupt historical and contemporary inequities based on ill-founded and dangerous beliefs of racial hierarchy, embrace healing, and encourage change (W.K. Kellogg 2016). TRHT uses narratives, including those from the visual arts, to explore truths, truths that can be uncomfortable, perhaps even inconceivable. TRHT characterizes racism and oppression as monstrous antagonists and centers the oppressed as the key protagonists in the narrative. In the final component of the framework, use of the narrative encourages transformation via the jettisoning of racism and envisioning a world without racism. In the artwork examined here, each painter reconstructs an iconic, historical photograph into a visual narrative painted on canvas. In their confrontation of the painful truths of two distinct eras, Rockwell and Bak juxtapose innocent children with historical moments that exemplify racism. Their artistic renditions do much more than emphasize the monstrous racism depicted in the original photographs. The artists re-envision the original subjects, and what emerges is an even more powerful narrative. Rockwell's and Bak's revisualizations also attempt to heal deep-seated racism and complete the TRHT process in that the new images encourage transformation. The art challenges audiences to consider a world in which racism is jettisoned from individually held beliefs about human value as well as from the systems of our society (W.K. Kellogg 2016; Christopher 2016).

Rockwell and Bak recreate photographs that not only speak *of* the world but *to* the world—and in doing so, raise consciousness. Audiences that take a somewhat simplistic interpretation of the art may note that Rockwell focuses on racism in the United States during the Civil Rights era and Bak provides testimony of the antisemitic racism that gave rise to the Holocaust. However, while set in specific historical contexts, their artwork transcends the past eras and atrocities portrayed in the photographs. Through their art, the painters challenge viewers to ask new questions about the persistence and complexities of racism, perhaps even emboldening viewers to envision a world that somehow attempts to repair past oppressions. Thus, the power of these images becomes exponential; as Grey argues, "When artists give form to revelation, their art can advance, deepen and potentially transform the consciousness of their community" (Grey 1998, 8).

Parallels exist between Rockwell's painting, *The Problem We All Live With*, and Bak's collection of works, *Icon of Loss*. Rockwell based his painting on photographs of Ruby Bridges and U.S. federal marshals solemnly, yet somewhat routinely, traversing the stairs of Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1960 (see Figure 1). Bridges was the first Black child allowed to attend a formerly all-White public school in the completely segregated schools in New Orleans. At the time this photograph was taken, numerous other photographs of events surrounding the Frantz school appeared in the media. Many of these photographs captured much more disturbing images of vitriolic racism, such as crowds of protestors, some holding placards with hateful references to Bridges or carrying Black dolls lying in coffins. In other photographs, mothers, with contorted faces and their small children standing next to them, screamed at Bridges as she entered the school. Despite the many adults and shocking evidence of racism that appear in other photographs, Rockwell chose to focus on the child rather than the crowds or the marshals. The title of Rockwell's painting serves as a pointed reminder that despite a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that supposedly ended the segregationist schools and challenged segregation policies and practices, racism remains an ongoing problem.

Bak based his portraits on a boy pictured in *Pulled From the Bunker by Force*, commonly referred to as the *Warsaw Ghetto Boy* (see Figure 2). Taken in 1943 to provide Nazi officials evidence of the liquidation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto, the photograph ultimately served as evidence in the 1945-1946 Nuremberg Trials. The photograph portrays a sobering scene, but similar to the nature of the photograph that inspired Rockwell, the image seems benign when compared to other graphic photographs of the horror of the Holocaust. In the photograph, the boy is surrounded by others, yet Bak chose to focus on the child rather than the crowd or soldiers. Both Rockwell and Bak depict racism and symbolically the consequences stemming from racism. In Bak's case, the racial antisemitism ultimately evolved into genocide throughout Europe. Bak titles his series, *Icon of Loss*, to remind his audience that the cost of racism is this lasting icon—a widespread and undeniable image—of a murdered boy.

Figure 1: U.S. Marshals with Young Ruby Bridges on School Steps
Source: Uncredited U.S. Department of Justice Reporter 1960

Figure 2: Pulled From the Bunker by Force, commonly known as the Warsaw Ghetto Boy
Source: Unknown photographer 1943

Rockwell and Bak use their art to call attention to, elicit empathy for, and evoke indignation about the truth of racism within unique historical contexts. Both artists portray children during eras wrought with unfathomable violence and hatred, and they use their art to further emphasize the racism portrayed in the original photographs. Yet the perspectives Bak and Rockwell offer also prompt audiences to ask questions about racism that transcend those specific eras. Examining parallels between *The Problem We All Live With* and the *Icon of Loss* series draws additional attention to past racism but also encourages us to work toward racial healing and transformation by envisioning a different future by raising questions regarding continued racism.

"The Problem We All Live With": Racism in the United States

In November 1960, Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old Black girl, transferred to her new school, a previously all-White school in a deeply segregated city. Bridges walked by aggressively hostile protesters who tormented her every day for the remainder of the school year. State and community leaders echoed the racist sentiments of the protesters. Systemic racism permeated Bridges' world, including the state government of Louisiana and the New Orleans public school district. Officials in both groups vehemently opposed school desegregation, despite the 1954 landmark *Brown v. Topeka* U.S. Supreme Court ruling that found separate-but-equal education systems in the United States to be far from equal and deemed school segregation a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution. The ruling brought a presumed end to the ugly legacy of sanctioned anti-Black racism in the schools and the hope this would extend beyond public education (Schaffer, White, and Viator 2020).

Despite growing support for the U.S. civil rights movement in the early to mid-1960s, most Americans viewed school desegregation as a Southern problem, but a single painting helped change that perception (see Figure 3). In 1964, *Look*, with its national circulation in the millions, published a two-page illustration in which Norman Rockwell reimagined the iconic photograph taken of Bridges four years earlier (Rockwell and Rockwell [1959] 1994). Rockwell intended the painting to commemorate the Brown ruling. Painted a decade after Brown and four years after Bridges enrolled in Frantz Elementary School, the *Problem We All Live With* suggests Rockwell may have felt progress toward racial equality had stagnated and advanced far less than some Americans assumed. By purposely centering his portrait on the young and innocent schoolgirl, Rockwell personalized school desegregation for many Americans who lived outside the South. *Look* brought Rockwell's

inescapable image of childhood innocence juxtaposed with the repulsive graffitied racial epithet into homes throughout the United States. To every reader of *Look*, Rockwell posed the problem of school segregation as a true shared disgrace for all Americans. For many, "The greatest power in this particular visual image is that it raised some questions that helped people see things in a way they might not have before" (Plunkett 2015).

Figure 3: The Problem We All Live With
Source: Rockwell 1963, The Norman Rockwell Museum

With the *Look* illustration, Rockwell announced a decisive shift in his view of himself as an artist. Rockwell was known previously for his sentimental, nostalgic depictions of White, middle-class Americans that appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. The portrait for *Look* revealed a new and somewhat surprising focus reflecting the artist's decision to use his influence and platform to fight racism targeting Black Americans. Furthermore, *Look* printed the title of Rockwell's art, something the *Post* did not do. Using only six ingenuous words, *The Problem We All Live With*, to title his image of Bridges, Rockwell undeniably told *Look*'s readers that the issue of racism continued, despite the Brown ruling, and extended well beyond the South (Gallagher and Zagacki 2005).

Rockwell's iconic painting reconfigures the photograph of Bridges and creates what, according to some, is "the single most important image ever done of an African-American in illustration history" (Laird 2016), and the distribution of *Look* magazine placed it in homes and offices across the United States. President Barack Obama chose the portrait to hang, for a brief time, in the White House. Public demand to see the painting remains strong. It is the most requested work by visitors to the Norman Rockwell Museum as well as the museum's most often loaned work to other museums. It has been viewed by over 10 million people (Norman Rockwell Museum 2020).

Although Rockwell portrays the girl as innocent, she exists within a profoundly scarred landscape, and her innocence cannot spare her from this backdrop of violence and hatred. Rockwell illustrates Bridges wearing a bright, white dress in stark contrast to the faded tones in much of the painting. The girl carries a ruler, red and blue pencils, and a star-covered book—the simple tools of a school child but also symbols of the American flag—as she passes a blood-red tomato splattered on the wall, laying to rot on the sidewalk (Solomon 2013). Although the undeniable focus of the painting, the girl is not in the center. She is much closer to the left edge of the painting, as if she wants to distance herself as far as possible from the violent impact of racism represented by the splattered tomato on the right. But can she really escape? Although the graffiti on the wall has faded, the hateful sentiment represented in the racial epithet and "KKK" vividly remind the girl of the racism that surrounds her. Despite her innocence, the Brown ruling, and the implementation of school desegregation policies, the girl remains segregated, entrapped by powerful and unyielding racism and hatred represented by the wall. The cement wall is cracking, but it is nowhere near crumbling. Rockwell paints much more than a single child. The girl represents not only Ruby Bridges but all Black Americans who live in the context of racism, trying desperately to end it, but seemingly never able to escape it.

The marshals, at first glance might seem to protect the girl, but Rockwell purposefully includes their yellow armbands identifying them as representatives of the U.S. federal government, reminding viewers that desegregation was not welcomed in the state of Louisiana and occurred only as a result of a ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court. However, Rockwell's portrayal of the federal marshals includes additional complexities. While they offer protection for the girl, their position and badges elicit questions about the trajectory of the civil rights movement. Their depiction raises questions such as, to what extent will authorities protect those who advance civil rights, or in what ways will authorities try to contain or manage the movement? The symbolism in the painting represents the constraints on Black Americans who would not be afforded power over the future of their civil rights. Rather, those in power would frame and control the pace and extent to which Black Americans would be permitted to realize equality. The painting seems to predict an era following the civil rights movement in which many White Americans believed racial healing and transformation had begun and were oblivious that it remained insidious, intractable, and inescapable for Black Americans.

Icon of Loss: Horrors of Antisemitism

In the 1930s, Bak, born into a Jewish family in Vilnius, at the time in Poland,[1] led what he describes as an idyllic life until the time of the Nazi occupation. As the Nazi regime gained power and momentum in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it methodically terrorized Jews. German forces rounded up Jews across Eastern European cities, forcibly consolidating them to live in confined and racially segregated areas and killing those who resisted or attempted escape. Ghettoization forced millions of Jews to live in deplorable, overcrowded conditions. A subsequent and more horrific practice of liquidation involved the deportation of Jews from the ghettos to extermination sites. A contemporary of Bak in 1943, the boy in the *Pulled From the Bunker by Force* photograph lived in Europe's largest Jewish ghetto, the Warsaw Ghetto. The Nazi photographer took the picture of the boy following the Jewish uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto and the resulting liquidation of the ghetto (Bak 2001).

Like the photograph of Ruby Bridges, the photograph of the boy from the Warsaw Ghetto has gained iconic status. In November 2016, using extensive research and input from journalists, photographers, curators, and historians, *TIME* deemed *Pulled From the Bunker by Force* one of the 100 most influential photographs ever taken. According to Dr. Lucjan Dobroszycki, a noted historian of Poland's Jewish community and himself a survivor of the Lodz Ghetto and the detention, concentration and extermination campus known collectively as Auschwitz (Margolick 1982), the image has a sacred, even holy, status and appears in "nearly every photographic book on the Holocaust" (Zelizer 2010, 140). The image of the boy in the photograph has moved many, including Bak.

The boy pictured in *Pulled From the Bunker by Force* and recreated in *Icon of Loss* reflects only one of several metaphorical subjects included in Bak's prolific work. A child prodigy who began painting before the Holocaust, Bak continued to create art for more than 80 years. His works have been viewed by audiences in major museums, galleries, and universities, including at the Tolerance Center in his boyhood home of Vilnius and the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem. While the style of his art evolved throughout his career, Bak's legacy is how he conceptualizes the Holocaust using allegory and symbols rather than graphic scenes of genocide. The similarities between the boy in Bak's *Icon of Loss* series and the boy in the Warsaw Ghetto photograph are unmistakable. However, Bak's *Icon of Loss* series depicts much more than simple renditions of the boy in the photograph. The boy on the canvas is a haunting resurrection of Bak's childhood friend, Samek Epstein, and also serves as a mirror-image of the artist as a child. Nazis forced both Bak and Epstein to live in the Vilnius Ghetto as young children. Bak survived; Bak's father, grandparents,

[1] At the time of Bak's birth, Vilnius was considered to be a part of Poland. As a result of the 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, the city fell under the control of the Soviets who subsequently transferred governance of the city to Lithuania.

and his friend, Epstein, did not. Nazis shot Epstein and left his body in the streets for days to dissuade residents of Vilnius from hiding or helping Jews. Bak's family members were likely removed from the ghetto and taken to Ponary, just outside of Vilnius, where they were shot and buried in a mass grave. The pervasive brokenness in all of Bak's paintings symbolizes the horror of this time not only for him but also for the millions of victims and survivors of the Holocaust whose worlds and families were shattered. With a single subject, Bak provides a provocative visual narrative of himself, Epstein, and the 1.5 million children murdered during the Holocaust (Bak 2001).

Like the sacred qualities Dobroszycki ascribed to the *Warsaw Ghetto Boy* photograph, *Icon of Loss* art includes spiritual imagery referencing both Judaism and Christianity in Bak's interpretations of the original image. For example, one finds the Star of David, Jewish burial stones, and the stigmata of pierced palms in *Identification* (see Figure 4), a Tallit, angel's wings, and crucifixion cross, as seen in *In Their Image* (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: Identification
Bak 2007, Pucker Gallery

Figure 5: In Their Image
Bak 2007, Pucker Gallery

Figure 6: Targeted
Bak 2008, Pucker Gallery

Bak often paints his boy in the same pose as the boy in the photograph, hands raised in declaration of his innocence, resignation of his fate, or perhaps a combination of these two sentiments (*Identification* and *Targeted*, see Figures 4 and 6). As in the context of the Warsaw Ghetto's liquidation, the boy in Bak's works presents as an innocent child posing no danger. He wears a hat, coat, short pants, and shoes common for a child his age. Bak portrays the boy in angelic clothing but at the same time in darker tones and carrying fire and a gun symbolic of violence and loss of innocence. Each child, controlled by a puppeteer, casts his eyes downward in meek supplication to the force that controls him (*In Their Image*). The boy's surroundings are broken beyond repair. Bak's backdrops for the boy are damaged, fractured and crumbling, and frequently pockmarked with bullet holes (*Targeted*). Bak uses the boy to convey that innocence cannot liberate the child from the grip of the deadly racism that has decimated his world. The boy cannot escape his imprisonment in stone (*Identification*), the controls of puppet strings (*In Their Image*), or his position behind a target and a wall (*Targeted*).

Questions Raised by the Art and the Artists

While each of the two photographs capture a finite moment of truth, Rockwell and Bak deconstruct and then reconstruct that truth. In doing so, each artist transforms an already powerful iconic photograph focused on a single child into something new—something even more powerful and something transcending that moment and the individual subject within the image. The metamorphosis from photograph to canvas secures the unforgettable nature of the images of Rockwell's girl and Bak's boy. Each artist intends their work to encourage audiences to raise questions about racism and also consider the possibility of healing and transformation. A comparison of their art serves as a powerful means to accomplish that to which Rockwell and Bak aspire.

The subjects of the photographs and the paintings, the boy and the girl, most likely wanted nothing more than to live as a carefree child, but they exist in a time and place framed by pervasive racism. In both photographs, adults surround the children on three sides. Within the frame of the

photographs, the children appear to have an opening should they wish to exit the scene. Of course, neither of the children in the photographs could escape, a reality depicted in both paintings. Rockwell surrounds Bridges with four towering U.S. marshals who confine the girl. Bak often frames, even at times embeds, the boy with stone. The artists' frames contain the children, but the audience is left to ponder if the containment protects the children from the violence that surrounds them. Perhaps the frames restrict the children, indicating their limited ability to escape their circumstances. Or perhaps the frames represent systemic racism and the powerful and stalwart institutions that not only perpetuate it but use their power to contain those who provide testimony of it or the attempts to fight against it.

Whatever the initial intention of the photographers might have been, their pictures draw the viewers' eyes to the children and away from the adults. In doing so, the photographs memorialized the children. The artists further immortalize the children by intentionally singling out the children. Rockwell draws attention to the girl by painting her a bright dress that contrasts the neutral colors used in most of the painting. He portrays her stoically walking forward, out of step with the four marshals who walk synchronously, almost as if they are marching. He extends his depiction of the marshals beyond the painting, relegating the men to faceless anonymity. In Bak's paintings, the boy often appears alone, the singular focus of a painting. The boy's face is stoic, sometimes even featureless. What is the audience to make of the isolated stoic children in the artworks? For some, the stoicism may be representative emotionless resignation of children who accept racism and its consequences as a fate they cannot change. To others, the children may be defiant in the face of fear. For yet others, Rockwell's and Bak's portrayals could elicit interpretations that focus on the children's bravery and resolve to survive, despite the evils of their world.

In both photographs, the children appear just outside of a walled structure, the boy being roused from the ghetto and the girl being escorted from her school. The walls of these structures symbolize the racist structures oppressing the children. For the girl, the school system created numerous barriers to stop her and other Black students from integrating public schools. Paradoxically, the walls, born from racism, had imprisoned the boy while they had prevented the girl from entering the school. For the boy, the ghetto would not have existed outside of antisemitism. For the girl, the all-White public school epitomized the inequities of anti-Black racism. Rockwell's wall provides the entire backdrop of his painting. No matter how far or how fast the girl distances herself from the violence represented in the blood red tomato or the extent that her forward gaze avoids acknowledging the racist-laden graffiti, racism is an ever-present, inescapable reality for her. In Bak's work, the boy cannot free himself from the wall as it has become forever part of this reality. Although Bak's walls appear to be in disrepair, they and the racism they symbolize remain partially intact. The two painters seem to challenge audiences to contemplate the extent racism persists, having only morphed into a new form. Their art prompts viewers to question what might shake the consciousness of humankind and end the racist attitudes that devalue and demonize people.

Despite the stark situations in the two photographs, viewers can find glimmers of hope and healing. While his fate is uncertain, the boy from the Warsaw ghetto is still living at the time the picture was taken.[2] The girl is leaving the formerly all-White school where she is now allowed to enroll. By placing the girl past the violently splattered tomato and by putting schoolbooks in her arms, Rockwell's use of these symbols alludes to the promise of an improved education. Bak also alludes to hope by including a symbol within a symbol—the arc in *Targeted* represents a rainbow, a representation of hope from the Bible's Old Testament that holds meaning in both Christianity and Judaism. Bak provides references to healing as well. In *Identification,* the Star of David that marked the boy as the target of antisemitism now envelops and comforts him as a survivor. With these symbols of healing, Rockwell's and Bak's art encourage audiences to draw strength from this hope and seek ways to rid their world of racism.

Photographs reflect an isolated moment in time, yet the two photographs examined here also allude to an upcoming change. Albeit deplorable, the ghetto offered some semblance of a home for

[2] The fate of the boy remains unknown. Over the decades, researchers' attempts to identify the boy have failed, and a handful of Holocaust survivors have claimed to be the boy.

the boy. Its liquidation, captured in the photograph, portends a grim future for the boy, possibly murder. The girl's future is quite the opposite. She is leaving the building, likely to return to the safety of her home, escaping the school and the racist systems and ideologies it represented. Both artists encourage audiences to consider not only the changing narrative for the children, but also a much larger change, a transformation for society. Rockwell's girl determinedly walks forward. Her pace appears faster than that of the marshals, as if she is eager to move past them. The girl symbolizes the desire of many Americans to move beyond the racist systems that confine them. Bak's boy exists in a broken scene, yet the walls and the boy himself have somehow survived the unimaginable. Although forever changed, he and the other survivors he represents live on, left to transform their broken world into something new.

Persistent Racism: A Difficult Truth

Rockwell's and Bak's call for transformation remains unrealized as racism lingers and casts a long shadow, enduring well beyond the eras captured in the photographs. As Rockwell foreshadows in *The Problem We All Live With*, school desegregation has fallen exceedingly short of its potential promise. New racist practices manifested quickly following 1960 and continue to limit the educational equity of Black students not only in New Orleans but throughout the United States. At the same time Bridges entered Frantz Elementary School, some parents of White students withdrew their children from public schools and enrolled them in private, all-White schools. Between 1960 and 1980, the racial makeup of New Orleans public schools changed from approximately 42% to 16% White and from 58% to 84% Black (DeVore and Logsdon 1991). Whites' exodus continued, and by 2005, only 3% of students in New Orleans public schools were White, while 93% were Black. Ten years later, the percentage of Black students had fallen slightly but still represented a majority of students in the public schools (LDOE, n.d.). The resegregation of schools is not unique to New Orleans. Once U.S. courts released school districts from the post-Brown desegregation oversight, urban school districts tended to become more segregated, albeit gradually and not to the degree found in New Orleans (Reardon, Grewal, Kalogrides, and Greenberg 2012). Public schools in the United States remain segregated due, in large part, to the remnants of White flight precipitated by school desegregation and the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

The intersection of poverty and race exacerbate the academic challenges faced by many students. As the Black population of New Orleans grew, so did its poverty rate. By 2000, 67% of New Orleans' residents were Black, yet 84% of the city's poor were Black (Berube and Katz 2005). The impact of poverty on school performance is well documented, and the consequences of poverty in New Orleans' schools were no exception. Student academic test scores declined, and dropout rates reached discouraging numbers in public schools in New Orleans and other cities across the United States. Federal legislation increased focus on academic success as reflected by standardized tests, measures notorious for racial bias (Tienken and Zhao 2013). The implementation of federally mandated testing drew increasing attention to the Black-White achievement gap, and the gap persists across the United States (Ravitch 2013). Decades after the Brown ruling, disparities in achievement of Black and White students, as well as low-income and middle-/high-income students, continue. The scores provide evidence of racism, and in particular the inequities of being both Black and poor.

Test score disparities represent only one aspect of systemic racism. Research in the late 1980s corroborated by the testimonies of students found that New Orleans' public-school teachers disciplined Black students more harshly than White students who committed similar infractions in the classroom (Committee to Study the Status of The Black Male 1988). This occurs in schools throughout the United States. Data from the U.S. Department of Education reveals that Black students—male and female, preschoolers to teenagers, and especially those with disabilities and from low-income homes—have a greater risk for expulsions and suspension than similar White students (Cardichon and Darling-Hammond 2019). In other words, decades after Rockwell

presented racism as *The Problem We All Live With*, racial healing and transformation have yet to be realized, as Black students are not treated equitably in all public schools.

Bak's *Icon of Loss* paintings, with their haunting boyish ghost, prompt audiences to also confront lingering questions regarding racial antisemitism. The world's shock and revulsion to the Holocaust "significantly inhibited" antisemitism following World War II (Anti-Defamation League 2013). However, as the collective memory faded, a significant upsurge, described as an "unprecedented" "wave" of antisemitism, began at the turn of this century (Anti-Defamation League 2002, 61). As the context changed, so too did the forms of antisemitism. Contemporary antisemitism includes Holocaust distortions and denials (Anti-Defamation League 2013). Also, antisemites now disseminate their ideology rapidly and to a worldwide audience through the internet and social media (Aloni 2020). The resurgence and new expressions of antisemitism provide grave reminders that this form of racism exists well past the horrific events of Nazi Germany.

Over the last ten years, the number of Jews targeted in aggressive incidents and threats and references to antisemitic stereotypes have risen sharply worldwide, with notable spikes in Europe (Kantor Report 2020). In Bak's childhood home of Vilnius, vandals damaged a series of murals painted on the walls of the former Jewish quarter. The murals depicted day-to-day life in the city's Jewish community prior to the Holocaust. Just as the *Icon of Loss* series portrays Bak's memories of an idyllic childhood scarred by the Holocaust, the graffiti disfigured the memories of Vilnius' Jews (Jewish News Syndicate 2019).

Antisemitism in Bak's adopted home, the United States, mirrors recent European trends. In 2019, the Anti-Defamation League recorded the highest number of antisemitic incidents involving harassment, vandalism, and assault in the United States in the organization's nearly 40 years of data collection. Incidents were reported in 47 of the country's 50 states (Anti-Defamation League 2021). Media has drawn attention to high-profile events, including for example, the 2017 demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, at which people shouted, "Jews will not replace us" and threatened to burn synagogues (Green 2017) and the 2018 mass shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Robertson, Mele, and Tavernise 2018). However, many acts of antisemitism receive much less attention, such as the 4.2 million English language antisemitic posts on the mainstream social media platform, Twitter (Anti-Defamation League 2018). Interestingly, researchers found a notable increase in antisemitic rhetoric on social media following high profile events, including the Virginia demonstrations, particularly on fringe social media platforms (Zannettow, Finkelstein, Bradlyn, and Blackburn 2020). As indicated by the amount of concerning incidents and infiltration into social media, the antisemitism that traumatized Bak's childhood in Vilnius exists and extends into his new homeland and into his adulthood.

Challenging the Vision of the Future: Working toward Racial Healing and Transformation

Within the context of horrific racism, two photographs captured images of innocent children—a Jewish boy in the Warsaw Ghetto and a Black girl in the segregated southern United States. Two artists transport images of those children from photographs onto canvas and in so doing, raise important questions. In disturbing the original images, Rockwell and Bak disrupt the story and narrate far more than the problems of the individual children or the single era in which they live; rather, they make racism the central character and provide visual commentary on its persistence.

The difficult truths in Rockwell's and Bak's art are impossible to ignore. The majority of Americans are aware of the persistence of racism. Sixty years after the desegregation of public schools in New Orleans, the promise of the civil rights movement remains unfulfilled. Across the United States, many public schools remain both separate and unequal, and Americans' attitudes reflect their skepticism about any perceived progress to eliminate racism. Over 50% of people living in the United States believe the impact of slavery persists for Black Americans and progress toward racial equality has been insufficient (Horowitz, Brown, and Cox 2019). Likewise, although much has

changed since the 1943 photograph taken in the Warsaw Ghetto, racist sentiments and behaviors in the form of antisemitism remain a harsh reality. Over two-thirds of Americans believe antisemitism exists in their country and nearly 60% believe "something like the Holocaust could happen again" (Schoen Consulting 2018).

The Problem We All Live With and *Icon of Loss* paintings represent the trauma of the past but also healing and hope for transformation. As masterful artists, Bak and Rockwell provide perspectives that elicit their audiences to consider important questions that may lead viewers to insights not only about the past but also the future. Alex Grey described such art as visionary, images that draw their appeal and power from unsettling insights and the illumination of the truth they reveal. According to Grey, "The covenant the visionary art makes with a viewer is to catalyze the viewer's own deepest insight...planting seeds for their future spiritual unfoldment" (1998, 150). While Rockwell and Bak continue to help raise consciousness about the truth of racism through their art, perhaps their greatest contribution is encouraging their audiences to work toward racial healing and to question how the future may be transformed.

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