

Sarah Dobai: The Donkey Field

During this show's run, the *Guardian* ran a story with the headline 'Half of Britons do not know 6m Jews were murdered in Holocaust', a depressingly familiar report on historical amnesia. This would be bad enough, but - as Sarah Dobai's exhibition attests - it's not just a lack of historical knowledge that is to blame, but an active malevolence. The show opens with *Tow Path* (all works 2021), a seemingly innocuous photograph of the Thames riverside. An accompanying text describes how V', an 82-year-old who has lived in London since the 1950s, found a piece of graffiti there - 'google 6,000000 lies' - which, with difficulty, he scrubbed away. J, it turns out, is one John Dobai. Showing upstairs in the gallery, his younger relative (daughter, niece? It's not clarified) Sarah's 20-minute film *The Donkey Field* gives further weight to his erasure of an erasure.

Not only in conversation with the central catastrophe of the 20th century, but also with Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar*, 1966, Dobai's film references Bresson's in following a girl and her donkey, both silent, as they are beset by a gang of boys and the animal is mistreated. The text captions, though, meet it at an angle by recounting the childhood experiences of V', based on recollections by John Dobai: accompanied by the second movement of Franz Schubert's mournful *Piano Sonata No. 20*, they tell of the Nazis' actions in Budapest, steadily ratcheting into horror. First, in a patch of land called the Donkey Field which J passes through daily on his way to school, he begins to be ostracised from his social group because he is, they say, a 'Z'. He is spat on in the street, his family has to move to a ghetto, they pass through decrepit safe houses as more and more 'Z's are sent to the camps, the safe houses becoming unprotected. Following the Siege of Budapest, J emerges into a city in ruins, Jews hanging from lampposts. He and his family leave, making a pact of silence that J only breaks many years later.

All of this - linked, in WG Sebald-like fashion, by the coincidence of the name 'the Donkey Field' - is paired with the empathy-inducing trials of Balthazar the donkey and the young girl, themselves universalised examples of uninvited suffering. If Dobai doesn't achieve the heart-piercing effect that Bresson did in his close-ups of the mute, suffering animal, the same spirit is there. (Nor is this Dobai's first engagement with Bresson: her 2015 film *Hidden in Plain Sight* was in conversation with his 1959 film *Pickpocket*.) Visually, *The Donkey Field* deliberately scrambles time. It is set, seemingly, in modern-day Budapest, but the male youths' haircuts feel like throwbacks to eight decades earlier, as if to drive home that human cruelty has no expiration date, and contemporary Budapest is of course no haven of equality. Having suffered so much from historical fascism, Hungary is today descending into right-wing autocracy. Dobai's exhibition, a classical warning from history, asks one to imagine what it



Sarah Dobai, *The Donkey Field*, 2021, film

must be like, having experienced what John Dobai did, to see the hellish tide rising again. The central action within the show, then, is unseen, offscreen. It's the mental image of this old man stooping and laboriously removing a toxic lie painted in his own neighbourhood: of a dying generation of witnesses versus a growing phalanx of conspiracy theorists and liars.

If one visits this exhibition as a left-leaning, Guardian-reading denizen of the contemporary art world, the initial reaction may be that, for all the effective staging of Dobai's film and photography, it is preaching to the choir. I'm not sure I learned anything particularly new here; I was aware, before entering, that we are living in parlous and anti-historical times. But Dobai reminded me that it is not enough just to know, or think you know, because that way lies complacency, whereas neo-fascists are ever busy spreading their noxious bullshit online and on walls. Resistance is the accumulated sum of small acts carried out by individuals who recognise that you can't trust others to remember, that the effort is continual and communal; 40 years ago one might have assumed that the memory of the Holocaust would last forever, but that was when the WW2 generation weren't leaving us and before distracting new terrors - ecological collapse, for instance - hadn't fully arrived. *The Donkey Field* does the work of individual testifying and uses familial connection - and the recognised requirement to speak, after much silence - to make of this an obligation that passes down the ages. John Dobai, an octogenarian, asserts truth against pernicious untruth; Sarah Dobai, in her mid 50s, exemplarily does the same.

Sarah Dobai's *The Donkey Field* was screened at Danielle Arnaud Gallery, London, from 2 October to 13 November and the Imperial War Museum, London 28-31 October.

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