

A dialogue between artists at Mather's



The pieces in this exhibit, *pushmepullyou*, are entirely hands-on. Unlike at traditional museums and art shows, viewers of these pieces are encouraged to touch, feel, and interact with the art they see. (Photo by Crisia Miroiu.)

Eve Eisenberg

If you visit the Mathers Museum between now and December 18, you can see—and, perhaps as importantly, touch—“pushmepullyou: A Jewish/German Dialogue Revealed,” an exhibition of collaborative art by Karen Baldner, a German Jew, and Björn Krondorfer, a non-Jewish German. There are many hands in this exhibit, but despite the explosive potential for expressions of blame implicit in the project’s subject matter and participants, there is no finger-pointing.

Baldner and Krondorfer have known one another for years but did not begin working together artistically until recently. In separate interviews, both attribute the delay between their meeting and their collaboration to Baldner’s reluctance; she needed to know why he was “so invested in Holocaust issues as a [non-Jewish] German.”

Baldner warmed to the idea of working with Krondorfer after having a positive experience with artistic collaboration on Bloomington Breast Project, and also after she began to deal more honestly with her own feelings of having been affected by the Holocaust—or rather the Holocaust as it was transmitted to her by her parents, who were young adults during the Holocaust.

She also began to learn more about Krondorfer’s work, which includes the book Remembrance and

Reconciliation: Encounters Between Young Jews and Germans (Yale University Press, 1995). The book chronicles some of Krondorfer’s extensive efforts to bring Germans and Jews together for direct, productive and communal dialogue about



Björn Krondorfer was one of the collaborating artists for this exhibit. (Photo by Philip Brasch Studio.)

Check it out!

What? *pushmepullyou*: a Jewish/German dialogue revealed

When/Where? Mathers Museum between now and December 18 (Visit www.indiana.edu/~mathers for museum hours/location)

Why? Ultimately, the exhibit tells an intricate and nuanced story about two people, their conversations about painful topics, and how their complex feelings about national identity and their families interweave, and, at times, speak through them.

the Holocaust.

The dialogue with Krondorfer, says Baldner, really started when they began to discuss their families. Family is the lens through which the artists approach one another’s experiences of Germany, especially in pieces such as “Obituaries,” in which Krondorfer and Baldner contributed their grandfathers’ actual obituaries.

Just as the panels of “Obituaries” fold and unfold, layer and delayer, Baldner and Krondorfer have to piece together and pull apart history and what they were told about it in order to have a clearer dialogue. Krondorfer explains an important component of his collaboration with Baldner was her willingness to listen to him tell his family’s stories, even though he didn’t “censor” the stories or “clean them up” for her; Krondorfer says that he

and Baldner realized these family stories “defined us up to a certain point; we grew up with them. But they don’t define us as who we are today... and we don’t have to deny [the stories], we can still be present to each other and be honest.”

The exhibit fuses Baldner’s expertise in various visual artistic media, especially bookmaking, and Krondorfer’s extensive experience trying to help Jews and Germans have fruitful dialogue about the Holocaust. Although both grew up in Germany, they both feel, as Baldner describes it, “ambivalence” about their homeland; nowhere is this more apparent than in the exhibit piece “Heimat.” Those who don’t speak German will have to make use of materials nearby to help them understand some of the text (though some is also in English), but picking up the book and leafing through it gives you insight into both the uneasiness and the longing for home that Germany elicits in Krondorfer and Baldner. Baldner put the small book together using medieval book-binding techniques, and infused the pages with bits of maps and different versions of photographs from



Karen Baldner stands in front of one of the pieces in the exhibit at Mathers Museum. (Photo by Crisia Miroiu.)

both her and Krondorfer’s families. They sent the book back and forth in the mail (she lives and teaches here in Indiana; he is a Religious Studies professor at St. Mary’s College, Maryland) over many months, each one adding text to the pages in response to the other’s entries. Home, it turns out, is both homey and eerie.

Ultimately, the exhibit tells an intricate and nuanced story about two people, their conversations about painful topics, and how their complex feelings about national identity and their families interweave, and, at times, speak through them. Visitors need not speak German in order to understand the exhibit pieces. Visitors should also feel free to handle and move all of the exhibit pieces; some (such as “Where Are Thou,” a sort of an interactive map) are only comprehensible when viewed in multiple positions. Visit web.me.com/j.g.dialogueproject for more information.

You can also meet Karen Baldner and Björn Krondorfer in person on October 5, at a symposium and reception for the exhibit at the museum (from 1 to 7pm). 