

RL16

Aura Rosenberg

Berlin Childhood + The Angel of History

Exhibition: June 10 – August 6, 2022

Opening: Thursday, June 9, 7–9 p.m.

Memory and History – (Auto-)Biography and Historiography: At the center of Aura Rosenberg's exhibition at RL16 are two series of works, *Berlin Childhood* and *Angel of History*. In these, the artist, whose father emigrated from Germany to the USA in 1939, draws on well-known publications by Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). She translates observations and formulations from them into images of the present. Coincidentally, the apartment-like exhibition space of RL16, located on the second floor of a nineteenth-century building, suggests the ambiance of Benjamin's bourgeois childhood upbringing.

Walter Benjamin began *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* (Engl. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*) in 1932, when he left Berlin for what he feared would be a long exile. The book was published posthumously in 1950. The definitive German-language version comprises 42 short texts in which the author recalls his bourgeois upbringing in turn-of-the-century Berlin. Although the texts draw on events and locations from Benjamin's childhood, they are nonetheless allegorical. Benjamin's book offered Rosenberg a new perspective on the city where, since 1991, she has spent summers with her husband John Miller and her daughter Carmen Rosenberg-Miller.

Pursuing this project over many years, Rosenberg produced a multi-layered body of photographic work that reflected not only Benjamin's viewpoint but also her own as a historically aware artist and mother. In these, analogies to Benjamin's texts become recognizable, for example revisiting the locations or seeking out events that he describes. In this way, Carmen's experiences became a contemporary parallel to Benjamin's own a century earlier.

In Spring 2001, the daadgalerie (then located at Kurfürstenstraße 58 above the Café Einstein Stammhaus) showed these photographs for the first time. For the current exhibition at RL16, we borrowed some of these photos from mainly private lenders. The process of picking them up unexpectedly became a tour of the former West Berlin, where Rosenberg's life here began.

About sixteen years ago, Rosenberg met Walter Benjamin's granddaughter Chantal Benjamin. They became friends, and after Chantal gave birth to her daughter, Lais, Rosenberg began to document them in relation to the *Berlin Childhood* texts. In the films included in this exhibition, Rosenberg collaborates with the artist Frances Scholz. These films feature Chantal and Lais Benjamin while, in voiceovers, Lais reads her great-grandfather's texts.

The show includes sculptural works as well. The needlepoint tapestry (*Sewing Basket*, 2004/2022) was inspired by Benjamin's text "Der Nähkasten" (Engl. "The Sewing Box"). The "Siegessäule" (Engl. "Victory Column"), represented in several photographs, also appears here as a gilded miniature from the edition *The Missing Souvenir*. After realizing that there were no souvenirs of this sometimes-conflicted monument, Rosenberg produced this edition for the Berlin Biennale in 2004. In so doing, Rosenberg confronts the traumatic history that so troubled Benjamin.

Paul Klee's watercolor *Angelus Novus* inspired Benjamin to write the "Engel der Geschichte" (Engl. "Angel of History"), a section of his philosophical theses *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1940) (Engl. *On the Concept of History*). In a series of montages and an animated film, Rosenberg turns Benjamin's text back into images. In Rosenberg's film (2013), a "storm from paradise" mercilessly blows the angel backward into the future. "The storm is what we call progress," yet the angel, caught by the wind in its wings, watches the rubble of world history pile up before its eyes. Rosenberg also montages angels onto the front pages of current newspapers, with headlines about the Corona pandemic, gun violence in the US, and the Russian war on Ukraine.

Text: Barbara Buchmaier

Many thanks to the lenders: Sammlung Artothek des Neuen Berliner Kunstvereins (n.b.k.), Marita and Matthias Deecke, Hartwig Holst and Sabine Odenkirchen, Dirk and Ise Kössendrup, Regula Kukula, Anna Winger and two private collections in Berlin; many thanks also to Efremidis Gallery for the loan of the monitor.