

## צייר הפורטרטים דיוויד קאסן ניצולי שואה כחלק מהמלחמה באנטישמיות הגואה

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צילום: יח"צ David Jon kassan : ניצול השואה יהושע קאופמן ציור

על חשיבות הנצחת השואה אין צורך להכביר במילים. עם ירידת מספר ניצולי השואה שעודם בחיים משנה לשנה חשיבותה של ההנצחה זו הולכת ומתעצמת. הדרכים להנצחה הן רבות ואם בשנים עברו היינו רגילים לקרוא עדויות של ניצולי שואה או להקשיב להם מספרים את סיפוריהם. כיום זו אינה הדרך היחידה להנצחה ותייעוד. אחת הדרכים היא שימוש במדיום האמנות למטרה נעלה זו. המפגש בין צייר הפורטרטים האמריקאי דיוויד קאסן (David Kassan) למושאי הפורטרטים שלו – ניצולי השואה, הינה מחויבות הדדית הן של הצייר והן של (David Kassan)!



צילום: יח"צ David Jon kassan : ציור

פרימו לוי, סופר ניצול אושוויץ כתב: "בהזדמנויות רבות, אנו ניצולי מחנות הריכוז הנאציים שמנו לב כמה מעט השימוש במילים הוא בתיאור חוויותינו. "קבלת הפנים הלקויה" שלהם נובעת מהעובדה שאנו חיים כיום בציביליזציה של התמונה, רשומה, כפולה, משודרת בטלוויזיה, וכי לציבור, במיוחד הצעירים, יש סיכוי נמוך יותר ליהנות ממידע כתוב ... [אני] מהסיפורים שלנו, מילוליים או כתובים, מוצאים ביטויים כגון "בלתי ניתנים לתיאור", "בלתי ניתנים להבנה", "מילים אינן מספיקות", "צריך שפה עבור ...". זו הייתה למעשה המחשבה היומיומית שלנו; השפה מיועדת לתיאור "החוויה היומיומית, אך כאן זהו עולם אחר, כאן היה צריך שפה "של העולם האחר הזה", שפה שנולדה כאן

פרוטסט קונבנציונאלי נועד לייצג את האדם המתועד בדרך האוטנטית ביותר והכי קרובה למציאות. מה שמרכזי בפרוטסט הוא ההבעה הייחודית של נושא הציור. בדרך זו, האמן המצייר דיוקן יכול ללכוד על ידי שחזור פניו של נושא הציור, את מצב הרוח, הגיל והשקפת עולמו. על האמן להחליט אילו מהתכונות של הנושא עליו להראות – כיצד עליו לבטא את עיניו או הפה שלו? איזו הבעה צריכה להיות על פניו – האם הוא צריך לחייך? להזעיף פנים? האם הוא צריך להיות מסתורי? במילים אחרות, כמה מאישיות נושא הדיוקן ומנפשו על הצייר לחשוף? באיזה מצב רוח הוא צריך להיות, ומה המסר שהוא רוצה להעביר לצופה בדיוקן. לשם כך על האמן לנהל דיאלוג פנימי עם עצמו ועם נושא הדיוקן, עליו להחליט על כל הדברים האלה על מנת לדעת מה הוא רוצה להציג על הבד. לפני ציור הפרוטרטים האמן דיוויד קאסן ערך מחקר וצילם את עדויותיהם של ניצולי השואה כדי להכירם לעומק. ההיכרות האינטימית שנוצרה עימם ולימוד ההיסטוריה הייחודית שלהם איפשרה לו להעביר תחושות וחוויות שלהם מתקופת השואה אל קווי הפנים והמתאר של הניצולים. כך הפכו הפרוטרטים של קאסן לסוג של עדות בפני עצמה, הפרוטרטים חושפים את המראה של אנשים ששרדו גיהנום ויצרו חיים חדשים. אומנותו של דיוויד קאסן מביאה לחזית גוף עדות החורג מעבר למילולי ו/או הכתוב באמצעות תקשורת חזותית בלבד. עדות זו, הבנויה מאמנות הייצוג המדהימה של קאסן, משאירה רושם על הצופה שקשה לשכוח. סדרת הפרוטרטים של קאסן מצליחה לבדוד את המציאות הפרטית של האנשים המתועדים מהמספר הכולל והבלתי נתפס של 6 מיליון הנספים ומצליחה להעביר את נפשו הייחודית של כל אחד מהם ואת נס קיומה.



צילום: יח"צ David Jon kassan : ציור



צילום: יח"צ David Jon kassin : רוזלין ובלה שרף ניצולות שואה ציור

דיוויד ג'ון קאסן, יליד 1977 הוא צייר אמריקאי עכשווי בינלאומי, הידוע בעיקר בציורי דיוקנאות שלו בגודל טבעי, המשלבים נושאים פיגורטיביים עם רקע מופשט סמלי. ציוריו עוסקים בעיקר בתיעוד, הם ריאליסטיים הלוכדים את האנושות בצורה אותנטית. כאמן, קאסן משמש כמתווך אמפתי בין הנושא שהוא מצייר לבין הצופה. כאמור, יותר מאשר רק לצייר את מושאי ציוריו קאסן מבקש להבין אותם ולהכירם באופן אישי, הוא מבקש ללכוד את המהות ונפשם של אלה שהוא מצייר, ולבסוף לציירם בקול הייחודי שלהם.

... חיפוש

## כתבות אחרונות

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# Shoah Survivors Featured in David Kassan Paintings at USC

By Roberto Loiederman

Published October 2, 2019

Surrounded by painter David Kassan's moving and painstakingly detailed portraits of Holocaust survivors, Executive Director of USC Museums Selma Holo quoted novelist Hermann Hesse: "When artists create pictures ... it is in order to salvage something from the great dance of death." What Hesse meant is that artists, when they create, are aware that their art will outlive them.

Holo made her comments in reference to "Bearing Witness, Survivors of Auschwitz," a massive (17 1/2- by-8-foot), luminous, hyperrealistic, multipanel, lifesize painting of 11 Auschwitz survivors, all of them based in Los Angeles. It is a masterwork that took Kassan two years to complete. Look at the painting long and hard and you'll begin to see traces of the survivors' suffering and strength, their disasters and their triumphs, their inner light, even their very souls.

The "Bearing Witness" survivors look out at you without self-pity. It's impossible to face them without having a strong emotional reaction. There is so much to focus on: the hands, the veins in their arms, the shadows in their faces, their stalwart expressions, the dreamlike background and edges, drawn from actual scenes Kassan saw when visiting Auschwitz.

This painting is the centerpiece of "Facing Survival," the not-to-be-missed current exhibition at the USC Fisher Museum of Art. But Holo, who co-curated the exhibition with USC Shoah Foundation Executive Director Stephen Smith, said Kassan's talent and sensitivity also can be seen and felt in

his other works in the exhibition, including other paintings of survivors and old masters-like sketches of faces, arms and hands that he executed as studies for “Bearing Witness.”

The son of a U.S. Air Force pilot, Kassan, 42, is Jewish and was brought up in Little Rock, Ark., as well as on military installations. “I grew up very secular and I never had any cultural understanding of what it meant to be Jewish,” Kassan told the Journal. “When I grew up, being Jewish was something to be ashamed of, unfortunately. And then that all changed when I went to Israel six, seven years ago, and I studied there. Actually, I taught there for two, three weeks, and I got this tattoo when I was there.”

“Paintings like David’s are not disposable items ... and by combining the [survivors’] testimonies with the paintings, we are left with something immortal.”

— USC Shoah Foundation Executive Director  
Stephen Smith

He points to the Hebrew letters spelling out the word *shorashim* (roots) tattooed on his forearm — the same area where Jewish concentration camp prisoners had their ID numbers tattooed by the Nazis. Kassan committed himself to what would become an obsession to memorialize some of those who survived.

“I’ve met almost 40 survivors who have adopted me in a way,” Kassan said. “They all wanted to feed me. They all wanted to Facetime with my fiancée, whose name is Shayna. [They said:] ‘Shayna! Beautiful!’ So I’ve grown to understand my culture and be proud of being Jewish by doing this project. ... I’m so proud now —proud of Jewish artists, proud of meeting these people and learning what they’ve been through, learning what they’ve overcome.

“People are always asking me, ‘Being with Holocaust survivors, does this depress you?’ No, because I don’t define them as being Holocaust survivors. I define them by Ed being a developer and real estate guy, and meeting the family that Joshua has built and his four kids — just the joy they have in their family. And Pinchas being this amazing educator and cantor.”

In fact, Pinchas Gutter plays a key role in “Facing Survival.” A resident of Toronto, some years ago Gutter gave taped testimony to the Shoah Foundation, which, along with the Fisher Museum, is a co-sponsor of Kassan’s current exhibition.

Since its founding by Steven Spielberg in 1994, the Shoah Foundation has videotaped, catalogued and digitalized more than 50,000 interviews relating to the Holocaust, in 32 languages and 56 countries. Most interviewees were survivors, but there was also testimony from soldiers who had liberated camps, those who had lived in hiding or escaped to the East, even lawyers from the Nuremberg trials.

In recent years, the Shoah Foundation has expanded its mission, having become a resource for information and education about other genocides, and broadened its technical capabilities.

One of the highlights of the “Facing Survival” exhibition is that a visitor can interact with Gutter on a lifesize screen. Apart from his original testimony with the foundation, Gutter was filmed for five days, speaking about his life. Those answers have been programmed so that the on-screen Gutter can answer questions put to him — a technology useful in setting the groundwork for visitors not fully aware of the Shoah.

“I think it’s important for people, especially young people who may not know much about the Holocaust, for them to have portals of entry, and sometimes regular paintings or things that we grew up with are not as compelling to

young people who have so much action all the time. Their attention span can be so diverted by all the stimuli they're subjected to," Holo said. "So for them to come here, sit down and have a virtual conversation with Pinchas, it's a portal, first of all, into the experience of the Holocaust and they can learn something about it. And then, I think, they're more positioned to go calmly through the exhibition and get what you want them to get out of it."

What any visitor gets out of the exhibition is that Kassan has a lot in common with venerated old masters who honed their craft for the sake of the transcendent experience they had while working on a painting.

"I do the paintings because I want to learn about these people," Kassan said. "I don't even like the idea of showing and exhibiting. I like doing the painting for me, to have an experience and to understand things. Having to show it is the anxiety. And within painting, I don't want any anxiety or stress because that's kind of my sacred place."

"But there must have been a turning point," Holo said to Kassan, "when you realized that these [paintings] have to be shown ... these [paintings] are you extracting a visual testimony that simply doesn't even belong to you anymore at some point. It has to be part of the public experience."

Kassan's work is "a form of testimony," Smith said, "and when I saw his work online, I wanted the Shoah Foundation to be involved. There is a literary and poetic quality to his visual art. David's methodology is that he goes to the survivors' homes and talks with them and listens to their testimonies as he paints them. Paintings like David's are not disposable items ... and by combining the [survivors'] testimony with the paintings, we are left with something immortal."

*"Facing Survival" is on view through Dec. 7 at the USC Fisher Museum, 823 W. Exposition Blvd. Admission is free. For more information, visit the [website](#).*





David Kassan, *Study of Jack Lewin's hands for Bearing Witness*, 2017, Col-erase pencil on Moleskin paper, 8 x 10 in., Collection of the Artist, © David Kassan

#### INTERVIEW

## ‘Depth and Luminosity’: A Conversation with David Kassan

**Samantha Baskind**

February 4, 2020

*Artist David Kassan discusses his most recent portrait series and exhibition, Facing Survival. Known for his highly realistic life-size paintings, Kassan used this series as a way to artistically portray Holocaust survivors and their stories.*

**Samantha Baskind:** What compelled you to create an entire series of portraits depicting Holocaust survivors?

**David Kassan:** The series started five years ago when a collector of mine from Israel asked if I could paint his mother-in-law on commission. I had some bad experiences early on in my career when I was commissioned, and since then I try to avoid them like the plague. I told this collector that I appreciated his interest in my work, but I wasn't taking on commissioned work at the time. He then said that his mother-in-law is a survivor of the Shoah. I was immediately interested in meeting and painting her. Later that week, he asked his mother-in-law about the painting and showed her my work. Unfortunately, she politely declined to be painted.

**SB:** Why did her status as a survivor change your mind about taking the commission?

**DK:** At that time, I was into filming my process as well as interviews with my subjects. I love the idea of hearing a subject talk about his or her life and using it to give the painting more context, and I felt that this process would be especially interesting with Holocaust survivors. I also found that I was connecting with my own family history. My paternal grandfather escaped ethnic cleansing in 1917 to come to America from the border of Romania and Ukraine. My father didn't have a relationship with him and I never got to hear his testimony. I've only read it in a book that he wrote, which I just found out about a few years ago.

**SB:** The USC Fisher Museum of Art is currently exhibiting thirteen of your highly realistic individual portraits of Holocaust survivors, along with one large group painting of eleven Auschwitz survivors. Clearly, your interest was piqued by the commission that fell through. How did you eventually paint a survivor, let alone so many more?

**DK:** This series started with the purpose of getting to know one survivor and documenting her first-hand account of the Holocaust. Since then, its scope changed to gathering information, filming interviews, and creating paintings as testimony of the many different perspectives of survival during the Holocaust and the survivors' lives afterwards. The whole series started by word-of-mouth. The USC Shoah Foundation took notice of the paintings and put me in touch with a number of survivors from all over the United States, Canada, and Europe. I received grants to travel to parts of the U.S. and abroad to paint some of the portraits.

**SB:** How did survivors react to your request to paint them?

**DK:** Some survivors refused to be painted either before or after seeing the preparatory sketches for the painting, while others loved to be painted and found it to be therapeutic. I've seen a full spectrum of reactions to both being painted and to the painting after it was complete. I believe that we think of ourselves as being in our early thirties or at a time when we were younger, and that self-image sticks with us. Because I'm painting them now and in a very raw and truthful way, it's hard to confront that vision.

**SB:** How long were the sittings? Did you talk to your sitters about other subjects aside from their Holocaust experience?

**DK:** The interviews that were filmed lasted anywhere from an hour to a few hours. I would photograph them after the interviews in their homes. The interview went in whatever direction the survivors wanted to take it – it was very open-ended.







**SB:** Did you want the portraits to convey not just the survivors' Holocaust experience but also their life after the Holocaust?

**DK:** Yes, I wanted to define them by their entire lives. I loved hearing about the large thriving families that most have built. These life-sized paintings strive to document each individual's unique history, a sense of their experiences during the Holocaust, as well as their full lives, in an attempt to capture their spirit, pain, and dignity. It was important to me to focus more on the parts of their lives that they had control over after the Holocaust.

**SB:** How do these portraits function beyond capturing an individual's likeness? In other words, what about the portraits portray the sitter's Holocaust experience?

**DK:** I think that we, as human beings, have our skin as a barrier to our outer experiences and wear our lives on our faces, hands, and in our posture. What do the portraits portray of the sitter's Holocaust experience? I'm not entirely sure. It may be how they hold themselves or in the way they choose to represent themselves, or it might be in what they choose to wear for the painting. Some survivors who sat for me held photos of loved ones who were murdered, as a way of speaking for those who can't. In my portrait of Elsa Ross, she holds a photo of herself and her parents. It's the only photo of them that she has, which was taken when she was only five years old. She was smuggled out of the Warsaw Ghetto in a workman's truck and never saw her parents again. These paintings can't encompass an entire life story but they can spark an interest, and hopefully the added context of filming can help to amplify these stories of survival. I believe that these paintings stand as sacred documents that serve as proof of these survivors' existences.

**SB:** Were you a portrait painter before this series?

**DK:** I've always been into painting people since I first started making art. I grew up outside of Philadelphia and was always visiting the Philadelphia Museum of Art and learning a lot about the artists that painted and lived in the Philadelphia area. But, I don't think of myself as a portrait painter. Although, the way I paint and the scale I use might lead folks to think I am because all my subjects are life-size.

**SB:** What is oil on acrylic mirror panel, the surface on which you paint, and why do you use it instead of a more traditional oil on canvas technique?

**DK:** I haven't used canvas in forever. Canvas is too flexible a surface – it's not archival enough for me. Oil paint, as it dries, needs to be on a sturdy and stable surface so that it doesn't crack over time. The panels I use look like a regular mirror but are not made up of a real mirror, which would be very fragile. I found that this surface has more depth and luminosity, and I also love it conceptually in a number of ways. I love that the painting is a mirror and it slightly reflects the viewer; I think of the one-eighth-inch clear space in the painting between the surface and the mirror as a space for the survivor's testimony to live.

**SB:** Please describe your meticulous technique. Do you work completely from life, like artists of the past such as Rembrandt, or do you also take photographs to which you refer? Do you paint straight on the canvas? Do you ever work from photographs projected onto the panel?

**DK:** My process is super meditative. I start with a charcoal drawing, blocking out the large forms, and then moving into smaller forms. I've been filming my process of these drawings and time lapsing them, and voicing over the testimony of the survivor that I'm drawing. These works are all done from photos I use as reference, not projected on the canvas, because I want to be as unobtrusive in my sitters' lives as possible. By working from the photos, they don't need to go through the sometimes grueling process of sitting for the hundreds of hours that I need to make a painting. With my other paintings, I try to work from the actual live model as much as possible. But most of the time, it's a combination of both live sittings and photographs.

**SB:** Did you always paint from nature? How did your art develop into the kind of realism you are using now?



**DK:** I think that I paint towards my temperament and try to push past my comfort zone. I used to only paint from life but found it limiting. So I try to take the best aspects of what a photo can give me as well as what I’ve learned from painting from life. I use a photo as reference, versus painting the photo verbatim without thinking. As I learn to be a better photographer and a better painter, and learn more about the technology that I can use to get a better reference to work from, the more authentically I can paint my subjects.

**SB:** Is *Facing Survival* complete or do you hope to augment it with more paintings?

**DK:** So far, I have only painted and drawn a little over half of the survivors I have met. I also get lots of emails from survivor families through social media. However, I have been working on donations to get to certain places to meet folks, but in most cases I can’t see everyone that I would like to. There are survivors in Australia, Brazil, Shanghai, and South Africa that I would love to meet with, but they are outside of my means at this time. I’m also hoping to someday pull together all the video footage that I have been collecting from my trips into a documentary film.

*Samantha Baskind is Distinguished Professor of Art History at Cleveland State University. She is the author or editor of six books on Jewish American art and culture, which address subjects ranging from fine art to film to comics and graphic novels. She served as editor for U.S. art for the 22-volume revised edition of the Encyclopaedia Judaica and is currently series editor of Dimyonot: Jews and the Cultural Imagination, published by Penn State University Press.*

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## ENTERTAINMENT &amp; ARTS

# Holocaust survivor portraits at USC museum call on ‘profound’ beauty to fight hate

**By Deborah Vankin**Staff Writer |  Follow

Sept. 12, 2019 8 AM PT

Death is not something 91-year-old Joshua Kaufman is afraid of. Not now, after having survived four Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Not even after he'd been ordered, at Dachau, to pile up the weak, injured and nearly dead human beings, his fellow prisoners who had collapsed from forced labor and were to be transported to the crematorium.

A different fear seems to plague Kaufman: forgetting.

“The younger generation, they have to remember,” Kaufman says of the Holocaust, while turning to a newly installed portrait of himself at the [USC Fisher Museum of Art](#). “Those people, they looked up at me and said: ‘If you survive, don’t let them forget us.’”



Holocaust survivor Joshua Kaufman in front of his portrait, by David Kassan, during installation of the exhibition “Facing Survival” at the USC Fisher Museum of Art. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

Kaufman’s portrait, by Albuquerque artist David Kassan, is part of the solo exhibition “Facing Survival,” opening Sept. 18. It includes sketches, charcoal drawings and oil paintings of more than two dozen Holocaust survivors along with their recorded testimonies. Visitors can watch videos, read transcripts, even ask questions of a virtual survivor in an interactive video installation.

The show is co-organized by [the Fisher Museum](#) and [the USC Shoah Foundation](#), which was founded by Steven Spielberg and has collected more than [55,000 testimonies](#) from survivors of nine genocides globally. That includes the Holocaust as well as the 1915 Armenian genocide, the 1975 Cambodian genocide and the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

“Facing Survival” comes at a critical moment, says Shoah Foundation executive director Stephen D. Smith. The exhibition is one of the foundation’s “Stronger Than Hate” initiatives, a program launched after the 2017 white nationalist march and car attack in Charlottesville, Va., and the rise of anti-Semitism, racism and hate crimes globally.

“We’re in a place I never thought that we would be again,” Smith says. “But because of our archive, we can shine a light on that, provide pathways to counter it and to educate and illuminate. If ever there’s a time that the Shoah Foundation is needed, it’s right now.”

The Kassan exhibition offers “a way of bringing beauty to this conversation,” Smith says.

Testimony — verbal and visual — is the backbone of the exhibition. It’s an integral part of Kassan’s process. The artist, whose work has been shown at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery in London, travels internationally to meet with Holocaust survivors. He conducts lengthy video interviews with his subjects, probing their histories while photographing and sketching them. Occasionally he even arranges for a live audience, turning the investigative process into a piece of documentary theater. He later listens to those interviews, along with recorded testimonies in the Shoah Foundation’s archive, when painting their portraits in his studio.

“Being in their living rooms and getting to know them — it soaks into the painting, it’s a more empathetic eye,” Kassan says. “Paintings are vessels. I want the works to be a history of their lives in layered paint. Because it takes me layers of process — months and years — to do them.”

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In January 2017, Kassan interviewed and sketched Kaufman in a friend's downtown L.A. loft before an audience of about 60 people, many of them art students. It was a fundraiser for the project. "Facing Survival" will include a video installation meshing four of Kassan's interviews, with five different survivors, all shot and edited by the project's videographer, Chloe Lee.

That process of "profound investigation," says Fisher Executive Director Selma Holo, is what makes Kassan's otherwise traditional portraiture feel so contemporary.

"What David does, in terms of the works themselves, is: He reaches out for technique into distant memory. You can almost feel the Dutch artists, the old ways of incredible traditional realism at his foundation. But his subjects are very much of the now — their dignity now, their pride now. They're not victims."



A painting titled "Survivor of the Shoah" at the exhibition "Facing Survival" at the USC Fisher Museum of Art. (Wally Skaliy / Los Angeles Times)

Kassan is Jewish but was raised secular when growing up in Arkansas, Germany and New Jersey as his father was in the Air Force. The artist began his painting project five years ago. Five of his subjects have since died. In 2017 Ojai painter John Nava introduced Kassan to Smith and Holo. They were so taken with what Kassan was doing that they raised money to create what's now been a two-year artist-in-residence position so that he could complete the project. "Facing Survival" will be Kassan's first solo museum exhibition.

The oil portraits in the exhibition — most painted on mirrored acrylic panels to give them visual depth and to literally mirror their subjects' experience — share a dark, cloudy background; but they are also brazenly unsentimental and current, all subjects painted late in life who have defied staggering odds to survive. Each painting will be accompanied by a QR code on the wall so that visitors can access video testimonies from each subject on phones.

One of the works in the show is a five-panel painting of 11 L.A.-based Auschwitz survivors whom Kassan photographed, together, at the Museum of Tolerance in 2017. Visitors can click on an accompanying screen to access brief, or extended, text transcripts of their testimonies.



The interactive video installation “Dimensions in Testimony” at the exhibition “Facing Survival” at the USC Fisher Museum of Art. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

Also on view in the exhibition is the interactive video installation “Dimensions in Testimony,” which features hologram-like virtual survivors — in this iteration, Pinchas Gutter and Eva Schloss — of whom visitors can ask questions. The installation, which debuted in 2015, has been shown at the United Nations and at museums including the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm this year. This is the first time it’s being shown in L.A.

Just don’t call it a hologram or a work of artificial intelligence, Smith stresses, adding that those digital terms, often used in commercial gaming, might suggest a fictitious avatar. There’s an AI aspect to how the database records visitors’ spoken questions and continually refines answers, essentially becoming smarter, but the AI doesn’t fabricate the content. The onscreen personas in “Dimension in Testimony” are real people who have given up to 20 hours of video interviews to fill the installation’s database with answers to about 1,900 possible questions.

“We don’t want there to be a misperception that these testimonies are made up,” Smith says. “Holocaust deniers have become more sophisticated and tend to engage

more in revisionism, where they might question the scale or cast doubt on what occurred, undermining the historical truth.”

It’s been nearly 75 years since the Holocaust ended, but 91-year-old Kaufman — who went on to have a family and still works as a plumber in L.A. — remembers that dark history all too clearly.

He glances, one last time, at his portrait, which the Fisher has purchased for its collection.

Others will remember, now, too.

“This is just the beginning,” Kassan says. “I want to record and document as many survivors as possible. This exhibition is not the end.”

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### 'Facing Survival'

**Where:** USC Fisher Museum of Art, USC

**When:** 12- 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; 12-4 p.m. Saturday; Sept. 18–Dec. 7.

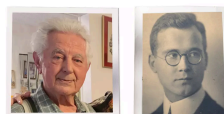
**Info:** [fisher.usc.edu/davidkassan/](https://fisher.usc.edu/davidkassan/)

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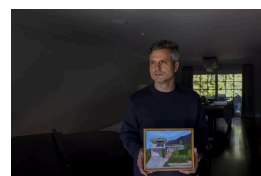
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David Kassan works on his portrait of Holocaust survivor [Joshua Kaufman](#) ahead of a special exhibition at the USC Fisher Museum of Art. (Photo/Courtesy of USC Fisher Museum of Art)

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## ARTS

# Personal stories of surviving the Holocaust unveiled at powerful art exhibition

**Portraits of Holocaust survivors appear alongside interactive testimonies in Facing Survival, a USC Fisher Museum of Art and USC Shoah Foundation collaboration open through Dec. 7.**

September 17, 2019

**Eric Lindberg**

Painter David Kassan has sat with survivors of the Holocaust for countless hours during the past five years, carefully listening to their stories of pain, grief, resilience and quiet victory.

He has grown to know them intimately, learning about how they viewed the traumatic experiences of their youth and their journey in the years that followed.

That deep knowledge is critical for him to do his work: preserving their memories through portraits.



Kassan's *Hanna Davidson Pankowsky, East of the Storm*, oil on acrylic mirror panel, on loan from Gallery Henoeh. (Image/Courtesy of USC Fisher Museum of Art)

Now the public can see those strikingly personal paintings, and hear the stories behind them, during a new exhibition at the USC Fisher Museum of Art. The show, *Facing Survival | David Kassan*, pairs dozens of the artist's poignant and lifelike portraits with a life-size display from USC Shoah Foundation — The Institute for Visual History and Education. The high-tech screen allows visitors to ask survivors, including several featured in Kassan's artwork, about their life before, during and after the genocide and hear their prerecorded replies.

“We are taking art and using it to honor human memory at times when it is so difficult because it's so painful,” said Selma Holo, director of the USC Fisher Museum of Art and professor of art history. “Art is a kind of knowledge, and when you put it together with other kinds of knowledge and technology, you create something very special.”

The exhibition runs from Wednesday to Dec. 7 at the art museum on the University Park Campus. It's a culmination of Kassan's residency with the museum and USC Shoah Foundation that started in 2017, as well as a showcase of the realist painter's

ongoing efforts to capture both the appearance and essence of people who survived the Holocaust.

About a dozen of the survivors portrayed in the paintings came to an opening reception Tuesday. Speaking at the event, USC President Carol L. Folt said it was an honor to meet the survivors in person.

“My heart is full, just being here,” she said. “The Fisher Museum is a gem and I plan to be here many times. I know that art can speak about things that we can’t say so easily with words.”

Folt added that USC Shoah Foundation is “one of the great points of light in the world right now.”

“It bears witness to the unthinkable,” she said, “yet it also tells the stories of people, and is so filled with life and hope and meaning.”

Like the thousands of hours of video interviews with genocide survivors captured and maintained by USC Shoah Foundation, Kassan views his work as a form of testimony about their experiences.

“They are so different — it’s the spectrum of humanity,” Kassan said. “Some people say, ‘Oh, it was just a thing that happened.’ Some people still think about the camps every day. It’s a personal story that can speak to somebody. Maybe it can speak to a Holocaust denier who now sees the humanity in these people.”

## **Haunting personal narratives of Holocaust survivors come to life in USC exhibition**



Pinchas Gutter is filmed for USC Shoah Foundation's Dimensions in Testimony project at the USC Institute for Creative Technologies. (Photo/Kim Fox)

Ask Pinchas Gutter what he ate while being held in the Majdanek concentration camp in Poland decades ago, and he will describe how he and his fellow prisoners might receive a cup of tepid water steeped with acorns for breakfast. For lunch and dinner, they'd swallow a thin soup with old potatoes and if they were lucky, a few pieces of tough, spoiled meat.

He recalls the way his twin sister's golden braided hair shimmered in the sun as she was separated from him with the other girls and women. It's the last memory of her he carries. Nazis murdered her with the rest of his family in the camp's gas chambers.

Gutter also remembers the day he awoke in another concentration camp, Theresienstadt, and discovered the guards had abandoned their post. He cautiously crept through the gates and found a horse and cart, unattended. He rode away from the grim prison toward the nearest town — and his freedom.

Those intimate details and many more are captured in perpetuity through USC Shoah Foundation's Dimensions in Testimony, the interactive interview project that has collected more than 20 life stories from Holocaust survivors.

Gutter's image is among those on display at the art exhibition, available for visitors to ask questions and learn more about his experiences during and after the war. His likeness is also rendered in paint on canvas, his soft blue eyes and the creases around his mouth carefully shaped by Kassan's brush.

## **Artist strives for humanity in portraits of Holocaust survivors**

Kassan is known for his raw and unvarnished approach to portraiture, which he describes as an effort to bring forward the emotion and personality of his subjects.

"I'm very much about documenting the realistic aspects of a person, the luminosity of their skin and all that, but also getting at the deeper aspects of their pathology," he said. "It doesn't necessarily make people look pretty; it's not always flattering. But sometimes people say, 'Wow, that's exactly who I am.'"

Showing those wrinkles on their faces and hands honors the survivors' physical resilience, said Stephen Smith, the Finci-Viterbi Executive Director at USC Shoah Foundation. It also speaks to the long lives they have led after the trauma of the Holocaust.

"Kassan places them far out of reach of the Nazis and their destructive genocidal world," he wrote in a catalog that accompanies the exhibition. "In the portraits, it is

clear that these individuals outlived their oppressors and are no longer victims. They are dignified. They display no anger or bitterness. There is wisdom and depth in their eyes. They tell a story with no words.”

Holo, who curated the show with Smith, elaborated: “David is interested in seeing if he can expose a soul. So he keeps going deeper and deeper. What shows is what they want to reveal to him, and he’s honoring that.”

## Portraits bring personal side of genocide to light

Kassan’s Holocaust survivor series started when a collector asked him to paint a portrait of his mother-in-law. Although he rarely takes commissions, Kassan became interested when he learned she had survived the Holocaust. Although she eventually decided not to sit for a painting, the idea took root in his mind.



Kassan’s first portrait in the series, *Sam Goldofsky, Survivor of the Shoah*, oil on acrylic mirror, from the collection of Brian and Sheri Anderson.  
(Photo/Courtesy of USC Fisher Museum of Art)

Soon, Kassan had connected with other survivors in New York and New Jersey. His first portrait in the series is of Sam Goldofsky, who survived Auschwitz and a death march. In the painting, Goldofsky stares into the distance, the fading and blurred lines of his concentration camp tattoo visible on one of his crossed arms.

“His story is really intense,” Kassan said. “We met and did the interview, and at that point I thought: This is a worthy subject.”



Kassan said curiosity about his background also played a role in his desire to paint survivors. Although ethnically Jewish, he wasn't raised in a religious home and wanted to learn more about his family roots. He also found insight into the experiences of his paternal grandfather, who escaped ethnic cleansing on the border of Romania and Ukraine and emigrated to America in 1917.

The artist continued working on his portraits for several years, traveling the globe to meet and interview people who lived through the Holocaust. Then he was invited to Los Angeles to meet with survivors through the Museum of Tolerance. When Kassan learned that a group of survivors of Auschwitz met regularly at the museum, he decided to create a large portrait featuring 11 of them. The resulting 18-foot-wide canvas, which he painted in sections over two years in his studio in Albuquerque, N.M., is arguably the centerpiece of the USC exhibition.

"I wanted to do something indelible, something impossible to ignore," he said.

## ***Facing Survival* show prompts visitors to reflect on humanity**

Several years ago, when an artist friend introduced Kassan to Holo, the USC Fisher director quickly saw the potential for a collaborative show with USC Shoah Foundation. She helped raise money for his residency at USC, and the museum purchased one of his portraits for its permanent collection.

Kassan and the curators decided to name the USC exhibition *Facing Survival* because of its multiple meanings.

"I'm putting faces to survival," Kassan said. "The people who view the show are facing the survivors. The subjects had to face what it meant to survive, to have survivor's guilt."





Visitors to USC's *Facing Survival* exhibition can engage with an interactive display featuring Holocaust survivors like Eva Schloss, pictured here at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm. (Photo/Eric Lernerstål, The National Historical Museums, Sweden)

Holo is hopeful that visitors will take time to engage with each portrait and explore the interactive display. Statistics about the Holocaust — such as the millions of deaths that occurred — can be difficult to comprehend or digest on their own, she said. But practicing what Holo calls “slow looking,” including hearing and seeing personal stories, can help people develop meaning around the genocide, she said.

“It’s very important for us not to lose touch with the basic ways we represent humanity,” Holo said. “Storytelling is extremely important. Things happen randomly, but if somehow you piece it together into a story, people have a better chance of it imprinting on them. We’re honoring the old way of telling stories and then joining it with these new techniques that can make it even more accessible.”

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## Art Chat: Interview With Figurative Painter David Jon Kassan

In an age of post-abstract representational painting, Brooklyn-based artist David Jon Kassan's stark realism separates him from the pack.

**By Emily Waldorf, Contributor**

Art Consultant, Los Angeles

Jun 21, 2010, 03:34 PM EDT

**Updated** Dec 6, 2017

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"At work in the studio on Koi," 2008, Image Courtesy of Gallery Henoeh, NYC.

In an age of post-abstract representational painting, Brooklyn-based artist [David Jon Kassan](#)'s stark realism separates him from the pack. With a critical eye for anatomy, he expertly captures the subtle nuances of his subjects' physiognomies through the use of oil on panel, charcoal, and graphite in his life-size paintings and drawings. He recently completed a documentary, [Drawing Closer to Life: Documenting an Approach to Drawing](#), that records his meticulous studio process in action. David is currently working towards his

second solo exhibition at [Gallery Henoeh](#) in September 2011 in Chelsea and is teaching a workshop in the Belgian countryside this July.

**Emily Waldorf: You cite the Ashcan School of American Realists as an inspiration. Why realism? What other artists influence you, both contemporary and historical?**

David Jon Kassan: Realism is a philosophy as opposed to a style. For me, painting is about observing and recording my existence as accurately as I can, it's my way of understanding the world around me and staying constantly engaged with it, the more carefully and patiently I look at what interests me in the world the more faithfully and honestly I can document it. It is only through intense, subtly nuanced observation that we develop an understanding of the psychology of the subject. I'm hugely influenced by the stark truthfulness of Lucien Freud, Andrew Wyeth, and Antonio Garcia, as well as the psychological aspects of Jerome Witkin and Francis Bacon. I am also inspired by the usual suspects such as Rembrandt, Alma Tadema, Bouguereau, Sargent, and Waterhouse. They made paintings that breathe. I'm also a huge fan of the New York school painters, Rauschenberg, Klein, Jasper Johns, Twombly, to name only a few.

**EW: What's your philosophy on the nature of the portrait? What do you think it fulfills within society and what should its purpose be?**

DJK: Not sure if I have one. I'm aware of the history of the genre and I rarely do portrait commissions. When I do, they are rarely any good. I tend to paint my subjects exactly how they are and that is not always cool to the sitter, they want to look younger, thinner and with lower hairlines. I sort of feel that the role of a portrait in society is to represent the sitters, we see paintings of Shakespeare and we believe that it is what he looked like, well maybe a little older, fatter and with a higher hairline. I guess it would be cool if the portraits that were painted really did look like the sitter or expressed some sort of emotion that gave the viewers in the future a sense of the sitter's pathos at the time it was painted.

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"Peeling Paint," oil on panel, 20 x 16 inches, 2007, Image Courtesy of Gallery Henoch, NYC.

**EW: How do you view the concepts of the real, the hyper-real, the authentic and the imagined playing out within your works?**

DJK: I want my paintings to give the viewer a true sense of reality - that includes but is not limited to depth, scale and a tactile surface as well as the real sense of what the subject looks like and is feeling at the time that I painted them. There should be a discourse between the viewer and the subject, to feel as though they are in a way connected. My goal is not to set a narrative but rather to have the viewer bring their own experiences to the painting and the subject as they would if they had seen the subject on the street in real life.

**EW: Your figures are often set against a more abstract and somber background. Is this juxtaposition intentional? How do you create the background?**

DJK: The backgrounds in my works are referenced from thousands of photos that I have taken around Manhattan; street art, graffiti, torn advertisements, stains, construction barricades. I'm very interested in the anthropological aspects of the city; there are so many different layers that all come together in these random abstractions. It's easy to see where the Abstract Expressionists gained their inspiration. I usually compile these reference photos into Photoshop collages, looking at them as different formalistic abstractions where rigid typography is part of the composition as well rough accidental shapes caused from ripping or staining. I develop the backgrounds in Photoshop with the drawings of the subjects to compose the pieces, which I'll use as a basis for a final painting.

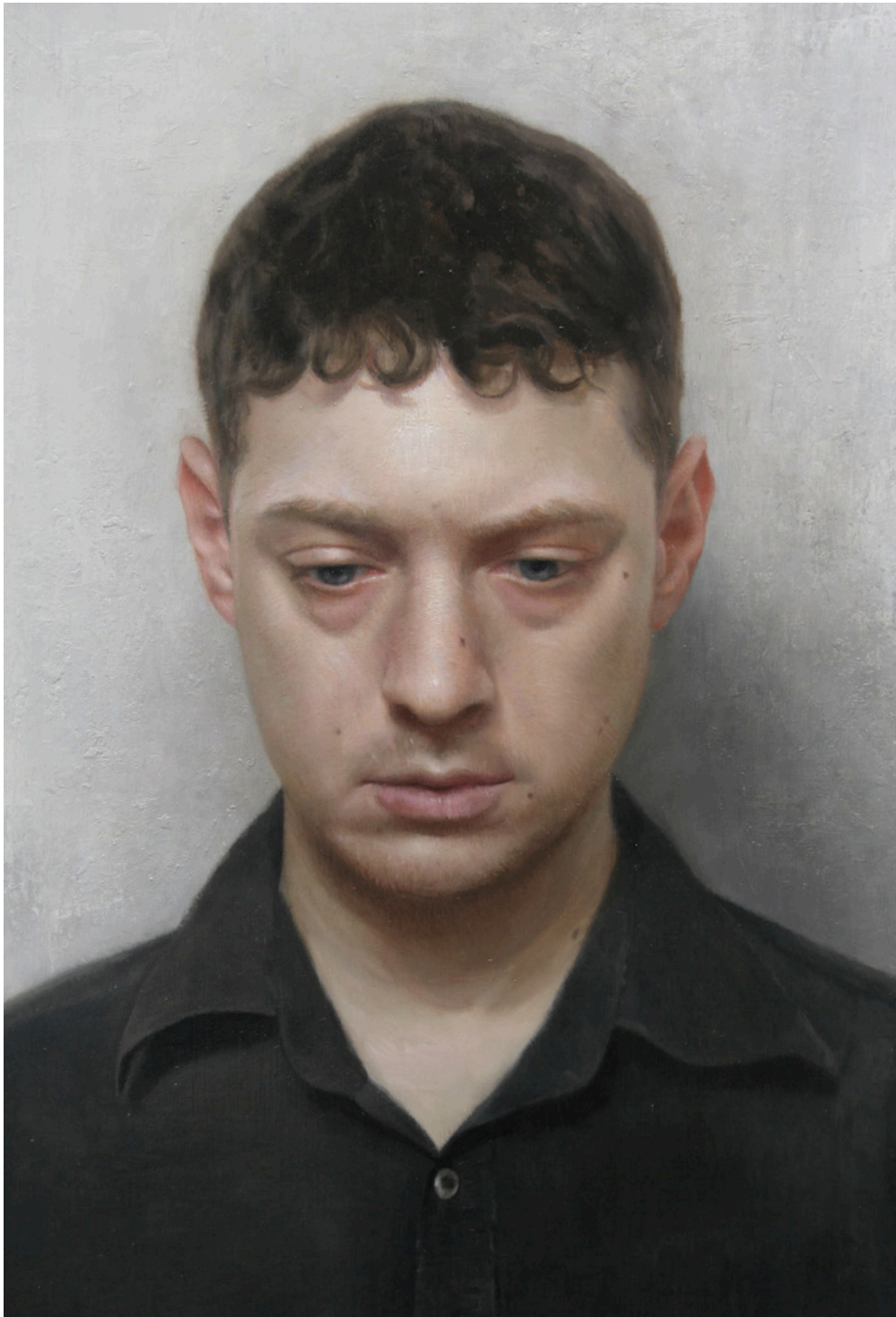
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**EW: Do you remember your first interaction with art? When did you decide you wanted to become an artist?**

DJK: My first interactions with art were vague daydreams that I grew up trying to figure out. While I was young, around the age of four, my family lived in Germany and my father was a pilot in the Air Force. We were able to travel all over Europe to all of the great museums and



churches. These first interactions were very confusing to me as I grew up and would have deja vu moments when I was older from seeing paintings and sculptures in books. When did I decide to be an artist? Hmmm, I don't think that I really ever decided to become one, it's just something that I did, something that came naturally enough to me that it wasn't work to learn more about it or how I could really push myself to get better.



"Self Portrait at 30," oil on panel, 26 x 40 inches, 2007, Image Courtesy of Gallery Henoeh, NYC.

**EW: You recently completed an instructional DVD and also do a lot of teaching. It seems like teaching drawing and painting is central to your artistic practice. How was your own experience in art school? What kind of formal training did you have?**

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DJK: Teaching is a huge part of what I do. I love to think about what I do out loud, and the best way to do this is to teach. I usually learn a lot from the students in my workshops, because we work to build the classes around a collaborative environment where everyone is working towards the same goal of learning how to observe and see the subject well, because everyone brings different approaches and experiences with them, the other students and myself learn new methods that we can add into what we do. My own experiences with art school are very varied, I studied theory and art history at Syracuse University, the program there was less drawing from life and technique based. Syracuse was incredibly freeing for my mind because there was no reading and regurgitating like I had gone through in high school, so going from the whole non creative environment to a creative environment was definitely something that really opened my mind. In NYC I wanted to develop my observational skills as well as technique so that I would have a better grasp of how to vocalize and paint my concepts. I decided to go back to school at the [Art Students League](#) to study life painting full time and better develop my observational skills and understanding of how to approach a painting of the model. I studied with Sharon Sprung,

Harvey Dinerstein and Costa Vavagiakis. These technical classes helped me discover how to paint instead of what to paint. A balance between something that is expertly technical as well as very carefully thought out and conceived is something that is extremely important to me.

**EW: Does living and working Brooklyn influence your work at all?**

DJK: Brooklyn is a huge influence to my work, both in its community and as an environment. Everything in my work is autobiographical. I want my work to reflect this area. The area is rough and urban, yet is very vivid visually; everything is constantly in a state of flux and change, that's why there is such a vibrant young art scene here.

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"Roberta Joy Kassan," oil on panel, 27 x 28 inches, 2009, Image Courtesy of Gallery Henoch, NYC.

**EW: What's a typical day in your studio like?**

DJK: Hectic. I work on five or six different paintings at a time, as I figure out different concepts I can spread the info throughout all of the pieces. Some days I'm preparing surfaces to paint, other days I'm painting the models, or building up a background or doing studies for new paintings. Most of my work is done outside of the studio wandering around Brooklyn and Manhattan just trying to get a feel for the city.

**EW: What are some of your favorite art world hangout spots? Do you go to a lot of openings, museums, galleries, and other artists' studios?**

DJK: My ultimate favorite art world hang out is the [Metropolitan Museum](#), especially the drawing room, where you can "order" almost any drawing in their collection and they will bring it out for you to study on an easel. I go to a lot of openings at different galleries each month, usually I'll end up at [Marlborough Gallery](#), the [Joshua Liner Gallery](#) or [Gallery Henschel](#). At the end of most gallery nights I'll end up at 151 Rivington with my artist friends. We always go to one another's openings and support each other during the Armory Week or down in Miami. Most of the time I'll end up at the [Half King](#) right after the openings, because it's pretty much the only decent bar between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues in Chelsea.

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## FROM OUR PARTNER





## David Kassan

Raw, poignant and profoundly honest, David Jon Kassan's work aesthetically captures humanity in its true form. As an artist, Kassan acts as an empathetic intermediary between the subject he portrays and the viewer. More than simply replicating his subjects Kassan

seeks to understand them. He seeks to capture the essence of those he paints, imbuing them with their own voice. They communicate with the viewer interpersonally and we see them through our own eyes. Our gaze transcends the picture plane and permeates deep into the subject's psyche. We are moved by Kassan's depictions, captivated by powerfully expressive hands, pensive faces, and flesh that appears warm to touch. Kassan's portraits pulsate with the lives of his sitters – the weighty streams-of-consciousness of past experiences, feeling and introspection. This is what reality means to Kassan – preserving the realness of nuanced emotion and expression emanating from the people he paints. Kassan's technical mastery of oil paint combined with adept draftsmanship enables him to fluently represent what he sees. This is evident in the stunning flesh tones Kassan achieves. Transparent layers of oil paint are built up, forming an intricate lattice of veins, blood and skin. Through this light enters and is reflected back, infusing the subject with veridical luminosity. We can also sense movement and life beneath the undulating creases and folds of clothing. It is the artist's intent to control the medium of oil paint so that it is not part of the viewer to subject equation. Kassan facilitates an interface between subject and viewer with which he is conscious not to interfere. The technical aspect of his work is thus a

means to an end; an end rooted in the viewer's experience. We find inherent contradictions in Kassan's work as it oscillates between representation and transformation, reality and abstraction.

### + Finding Purpose in my work

As a figurative artist I am always trying to challenge myself, to make a painting that is more real, more heartfelt, and as true to the human condition as I can. Something more meaningful. Over the past 3 years I have been focusing my work on telling other people's stories, mainly those of Survivors of the Shoah. These are important stories that would be tragic if we lost them to time. Most of these paintings have been one or two figures and the natural evolution of this series of paintings for me is to paint more figures and go larger!

I am starting the largest painting of my career; it is an 11 figure painting that will be 18 feet by 8 feet high. It is a continuation of my current series and the subject is 11 Survivors of Auschwitz, that I met with in January in Los Angeles.





This painting will be exhibited at the **Fisher Museum of Art in Los Angeles** in the spring of 2019 and has been partially sponsored by the **USC Shoah Foundation**. To help fully fund this two-year long non-commissioned painting, however, I'm reaching out to the art world to help me as well as to follow along in the complete journey. I recently set up a Patreon Page where I will be sharing all of the process, video, and backstage fun....for more details visit <http://patreon.com/davidkassan>

### **+ Draper Grand Prize and People's Choice award!**

I was super excited to have received the The William Draper Grand Prize and People's Choice Award from the Portrait Society of America at the end of last month (April 2017) at the Conference in Atlanta. So glad that my painting of Survivors, Louise and Lazar Farkas resonates!



David Kassan at work on his prize winning double portrait,

*"Love and Resilience, Portrait of Louise and Lazar Farkas, Survivors of the Shoah"*

To see more of David's work and explore his many endeavors, visit [www.davidkassan.com](http://www.davidkassan.com)

## Holocaust survivors see themselves in stunning new exhibit



David Kassan shows off his work with Holocaust survivor Ruth Steinfeld at Holocaust Museum Houston. (Photo by JHV: Judy Bluestein Levin)

By JUDY BLUESTEIN-LEVIN • Thu, Jul 25, 2024

*"Facing Survival | David Kassan" opening reception at Holocaust Museum Houston Aug. 1*

July 11 was a day that Ruth Steinfeld had waited for. In 2022, the Holocaust survivor was chosen to sit for world-renowned artist David Kassan. He worked on the painting until earlier this year. And now, at 91, she was about to see for the first time, her life-size portrait unveiled at Holocaust Museum Houston.

Her portrait is one of two Houston survivors brought to life by Kassan that is now showing at HMH.

The grand-opening reception for "Facing Survival | David Kassan" was postponed in July, due to Hurricane Beryl. The rescheduled grand opening, in the Josef and Edith Minckberg Gallery, will be held on Thursday, Aug. 1, 6-8 p.m.

As Steinfeld entered the building, Kassan was on hand to personally take her to the work of art.

Houstonian Steinfeld's portrait hangs at the exhibit's entrance. It captures her elegance, yet much more. Ruth and her sister, Lea, were deported to the Gurs camp in the French Pyrenees in 1940. Their parents were murdered in Auschwitz in 1942.

As Steinfeld paused in front of the image, she quietly spoke with Kassan about his technique and how well he captured her likeness. In the painting, she is proudly clutching the French Legion of Honor medal she received in 2021, in recognition of her long career teaching young people about the Holocaust.

"It's amazing that anybody could capture feelings, emotions – everything that the painting has shown," Steinfeld told the JHV.

While he's more comfortable sitting at his easel than meeting the public, Kassan loves getting to know Holocaust survivors. He has been painting them for the past 10 years.

“Meeting survivors, like Ruth and Elsa [Ross], getting to know them, getting to know their families, I really get to know these people through painting them and I learn their story in a kind of deep way,” Kassan told the JHV.

Aware that the window is closing, Kassan is painting like there’s no tomorrow.

“We’re losing survivors every single day,” he said, noting that three-quarters of those he’s painted have since died.

When Holocaust survivor Elsa Ross arrived, Kassan took her arm and walked with her to her corner of the exhibit. Next to her portrait are her favorite armchair and a glass-top table containing keepsakes. Beaming, she stared intently at the life-size portrait of her in a beautiful deep-blue dress. It’s the same dress she chose to wear to that evening’s opening.

“I’m deeply honored to have my portrait in this exhibition,” Ross told the JHV. “I really like the portrait.”

It’s not the first portrait of Ross that Kassan has produced. The first one was painted in 2015 and shows her starkly in a black dress clutching the only photo she has of her family. In it, she was 5 years old.

Ross met Kassan through his wife, Shana Levenson, an artist in her own right. She met Ross in Albuquerque, N.M., several years ago. One day they were chatting, and Levenson mentioned that her husband was painting Holocaust survivors.

Much to Levenson’s surprise, Ross told her, “I’m a Holocaust survivor. I’m a hidden child.” Levenson connected the two, and a deep and enduring friendship began.

“From that point on, she’s become like a grandmother,” Levenson told the JHV. “We just adore her.”

Kassan uses a photorealistic painting style that is utterly breathtaking. One could visit the exhibit purely to see the fine art, but because of the research that goes into each painting and the written stories that accompany each portrait, the exhibit has so many layers.

Alex Hampton is HMMH’s associate director of Collections and Exhibitions.

“When I first started at the museum, I went on a trip to Israel. I was at Yad Vashem, and they were talking about how we’ve entered this kind of twilight era in the world where we are slowly losing survivors – and we’re approaching this world without them,” Hampton told the JHV.

“I wondered how do we move forward? How do we tell their stories? When I saw David’s work, I just fell in love with it. I saw the importance of that work to continue these stories of survivors.”

Six years later, HMMH and Kassan have brought the exhibit to Houston.

Kassan’s approach to Holocaust survivors is to paint them as they are today. There is a certain defiance in his work. These are people who were not meant to survive; yet they have thrived and made it to old age

His portraits are life-size; there’s a real sense of connection to every piece. In one poignant portrait, Martin Greenfield, of blessed memory, the tailor to six U.S. presidents, is sitting with a tape measure draped over his shoulders and his sleeves rolled up – clearly showing his tattooed arm.

“I wanted to show him at work,” said Kassan. As a teen, Greenfield was imprisoned at

Auschwitz. His entire family was murdered there.

Another portrait depicts a survivor in the infamous striped work clothes of the death camps.

In the piece, "Bearing Witness," 11 survivors of Auschwitz look out from the canvas at their audience. The painting is enormous – 8-by-18 feet – and took Kassan nearly three years to complete. Each survivor was painted independently, and then the portraits were pieced together. Before the painting was completed, several of his subjects had died.

Andrea Galindo-Escamilla stared, filled with emotion, at the large painting.

"As humans, we tend to forget; we have a very short-term memory and having this as a testimony is so important," Galindo-Escamilla told the JHV. "It is beautiful, aesthetically impressive, of course. But on top of that, having all this history behind it and having a record of it is amazing."

Across the room, Eddie Filer, a member of the Portrait Society, was quietly studying Kassan's work.

"I'm overwhelmed. I'll be back next week with my wife and daughters," Filer told the JHV. "I'm going to come back more than once. I think it's going to take a bit for this to sink in."

Throughout the exhibit are articles and sketches describing how Kassan ultimately captured the essence of each survivor. He carefully researches his subjects during an intricate creative process. He videotapes interviews; he draws their hands and faces – elements of what will become the finished product.

"It's definitely fine art, but I also want people to understand that, at the end of the day, we are a history museum," said Hampton. "So, I delve a little bit more into the methods that David uses, how this project began. How he moves through the different levels that it takes to create one of these paintings, so you see some of his sketches.

"I also changed up the presentation of the [descriptive] labels for the survivors. I wanted it to feel as if the visitor was standing with that survivor and having a conversation as you read their testimony, because David paints in life-size, right? And so, I wanted it to feel a little more intimate as you are reading and experiencing what each of these people went through."

Seeing the world as an increasingly dangerous place, Kassan views his art as a way to combat hate; and his brushes, paint and paintings as his weapons against antisemitism.

"The exhibition promises to be an unforgettable experience, inviting audiences to bear witness to the strength and resilience of those who persevere through unimaginable adversity," Elyse Spector Kalmans, HMM board chair and third-generation Holocaust survivor, told the group in the gallery.

Steinfeld agreed. "I think that what he did was to bring to life people who were beaten down in life. All of us have been through hell and back."

"Facing Survival," in the Josef and Edith Mincberg Gallery, runs through Sunday, Jan. 5. It is presented in part with grants from the Houston Arts Alliance as well as the Humanities Texas and National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ronald Grabois Family Endowment Fund. For tickets, go to [hmm.org/tickets](http://hmm.org/tickets).



## Portrait of an Artist: David Kassan



*This is a continuing series of interviews with the forty-eight artists whose work was selected for the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition. The third OBPC exhibition opened on March 23, 2013, and will run through February 23, 2014.*

*David Kassan, who participated in our interviews last autumn, created the work Portrait of My Mom, Roberta for this competition.*



Portrait of My Mom, Roberta / By David Kassan / Oil on panel, 2010 / Collection of Robin and Michael Wilkinson

*Q: Where are you from, where do you live now?*

*A: I'm originally from the Philadelphia area; I currently live in Brooklyn.*

*Q: What medium(s) do you work with?*

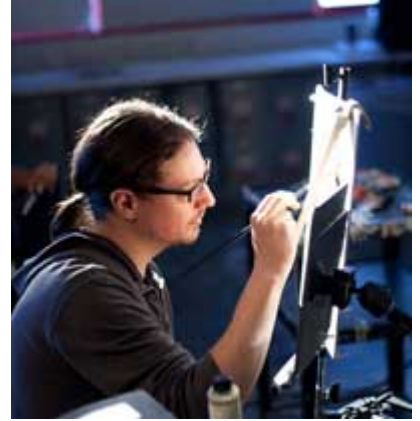
A: Oil on panel and charcoal.

*Q: Tell us about your technique/creative process.*

A: My work is a way of meditation, a way of slowing down time through the careful observation of overlooked slices of my environment. I am intrigued by the subtlety of emotion in the acquaintances who inhabit my environment. My paintings strive for reality, a chance to mimic life in both scale and complexity. The viewer is given an eye-level perspective of the subject—a view that is unbiased and in its most raw condition.

It is my intent to control the medium of oil paint so that it is not part of the viewer-to-subject equation. The image stands alone, without evidence of the artist. I displace textures by moving them out of their existing context. I take the abstract forms from the streets, where they get lost, and move them into the gallery space, where they can be contemplated as accidental abstractions.

The technical aspect of my work is a means to an end—an end rooted in the viewer's experience. I am interested in a painting's technical and transformative powers. Turning an ordinary painting surface into a textured trompe l'oeil documentation of the city, or turning the surface into a life-sized representation of a figure in space, transmits feeling that this technical process alters the viewer's experience.



*Q: How did you learn about the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition?*

A: A couple of friends and past painting/drawing professors have participated in previous Outwin Boochever Portrait exhibitions. It is an honor to follow in their footsteps.

*Q: Tell us about the piece you submitted to the competition.*

A: The painting that I submitted was a small life-sized painting of my mom. My parents live in Florida and don't travel much up to NYC, so I see them maybe once a year. This painting was my way of "spending" more time with her. Because painting is very meditative for me, I tend to lose myself in thoughts about the subject.

*Q: Tell us about your larger body of work.*

A: Lately my work has been getting more personal and more autobiographical; I've been painting lots of my family members, as well as close friends. I recently had a solo exhibition here in NYC. About six months before the exhibition, I had become a studio hermit and I noticed that the paintings that I had unconsciously started were of family members that I hadn't seen in a while and missed. Painting was my way of spending more time with those that I wanted/needed closer to me.

Painting for me is largely a therapeutic and meditative process. My paintings take me a long time to complete, and in reality they are never finished.

*Q: What are you currently working on?*

A: I'm currently working on a painting of the painter Antonio Lopez Garcia; he has been a huge influence on me. I have so much respect for his work and approach of working perceptually and keeping his work open-ended, so much so that some of his pieces have taken him ten years to develop.

It's so hard to fight the urge to create marketable work fast so that you can make a good living or enough of a living to be a painter. I find that the best work comes from a pure place within the artist and isn't market-driven.

Anyway, I ventured out to Madrid to meet up with Antonio, and he posed for a quick three-hour *alla prima* painting. He allowed me to photograph him for a more fully developed painting that is currently on the easel.

*Q: How has your work changed over time?*

A: My work has changed a lot over the years; I started out being really interested in painting the city and its textures when I first moved to Brooklyn fourteen years ago. Then I became interested in painting the people who lived in the city.

Most recently I've been really interested in combining and juxtaposing both the formalistic textures/graffiti/broken letter forms of the city with that of life-sized living figures. It's definitely been an evolutionary process over as my tastes become more defined.

*Q: Tell us about a seminal experience you've had as an artist.*

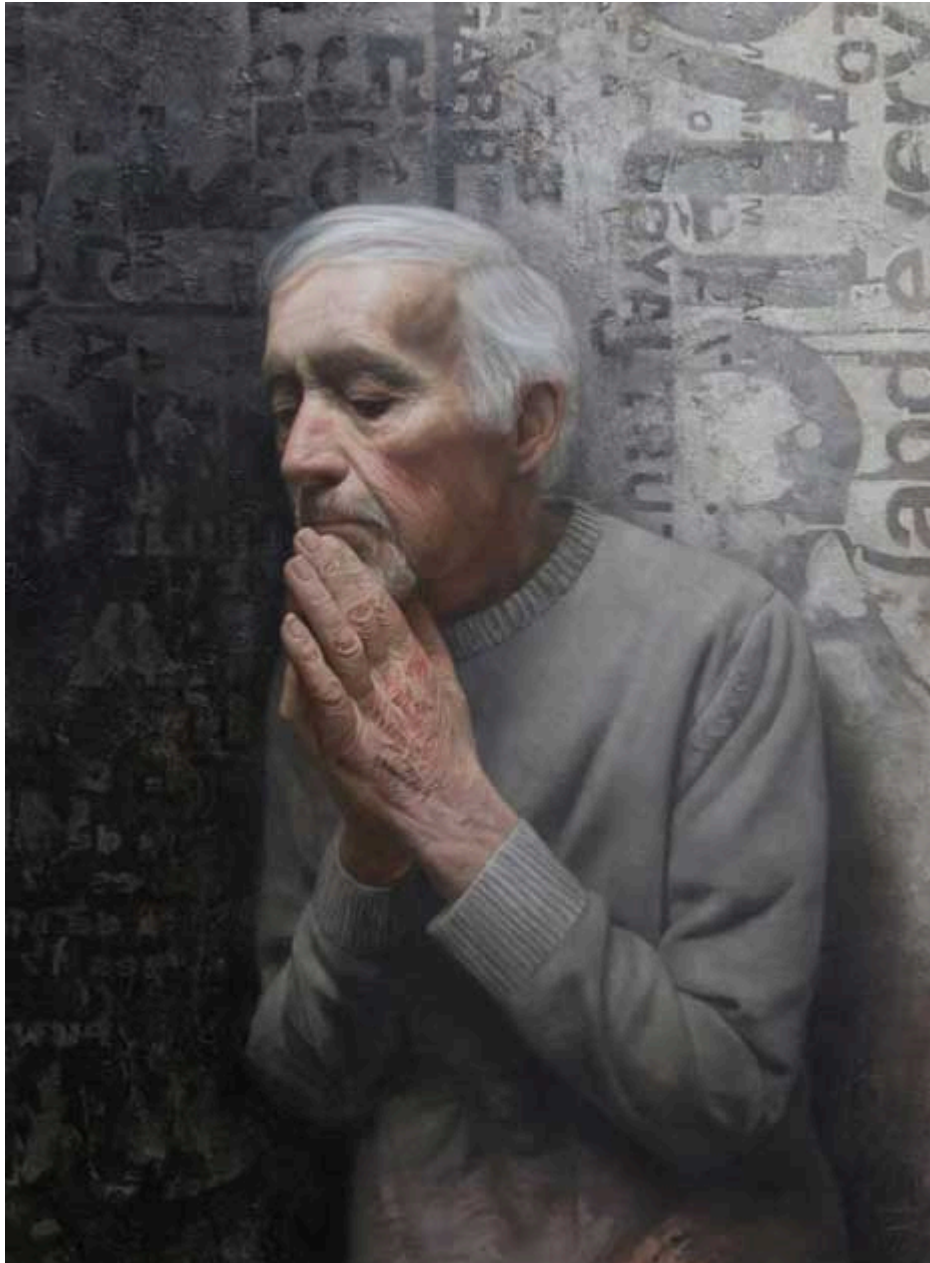
A: I think that my years studying at the Art Students League were tremendously helpful with my development. I was able to have serious, long time in front of the model—two weeks, sometimes three weeks, with single poses—that helped in my understanding of the technical aspects of painting that have become more and more intuitive over the years, making it possible for the more creative passionate side of my brain to take over while painting, hopefully bringing me closer to giving life to the work.

*Q: Who is your favorite artist?*

A: Right now, I'm really into the work of Jerome Witkin, Rembrandt, and Nicholas Uribe. My tastes change frequently.

*Q: If you could work with any artist (past or present) who would it be?*

A: I would love to work with the young Rembrandt; there is something so luminous and living in his work. His figures breathe.



Solemn/Barron / By David Kassan

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