

A Conversation with Ariel Schlesinger

By Robert Franciosi - 06/23/2022 11:00 AM  232  0



Ways to Say Goodbye at Meijer Gardens. (DVIR Gallery)

Artist of *Ways to Say Goodbye* shares his creative ideas and processes for Holocaust memorial.

April is the cruelest month,” T.S. Eliot famously wrote. The line came to me on a cold, rainy Friday when I walked the site where [Ariel Schlesinger’s sculpture, *Ways to Say Goodbye*](#), is to be situated. The achingly slow Michigan spring presented a landscape that was muddy and colorless, which seemed appropriate to the disaster *Ways to Say Goodbye* would commemorate.

These morose thoughts, however, soon yielded to others fueled by the still-lingering warmth of my encounter with the artist.

Clad in a bright crimson coat — far too thin, I thought, for tromping the site at Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids — Ariel Schlesinger seemed, at first glance, the typical New York artist. He had even just moved to Brooklyn to live among other artists and writers, which I told him seemed like requiring new college students to live on campus.



Sculptures by Ariel Schlesinger at the entrance to the Frankfurt Jewish Museum

DVIR Gallery

These surface impressions soon gave way, revealing a man both engaging and gentle, interested in talking about his work, but not in a way that sucks all the oxygen out of the room.

I so enjoyed our conversation it seemed worthwhile to continue it. We started with a back-and-forth email exchange, but finally settled on a Zoom discussion. What follows draws on the two exchanges and, I hope, offers an interesting prelude to the upcoming dedication of *Ways to Say Goodbye* on June 30.

RF: Your work for Meijer Gardens evokes your trees at the entrance to the Frankfurt Jewish Museum. Why trees? And why trees without leaves?

AS: Trees are people, and people are trees. We all live in a forest and socialize; it's part of our nature. It was only obvious to me that a natural element like a tree will be a center that draws people together and starts a discussion around our past and future, together.

The reason not to sculpt the leaves is a choice both visual and practical, keeping the overall elements in the object as minimal as possible.



Trees grow tall in the ruins of many Jewish synagogues in Eastern Europe.

Rob Franciosi

RF: What kinds of discussion do you envision *Ways to Say Goodbye* fostering at the gardens?

AS: I see a discussion as open-ended, a start of a journey really. I can say something about how it stands straight and tall but holds in its hands and fingers sharp shattered glass, memories and ideas that seem to reflect pain on it.

Another person can respond with their interpretation. I can't control what they see in it. I think that's the beauty of it. But I might learn something from them and maybe see it as well. We might even change each other's perspective and hopefully learn something from the other. I think that's the great power of looking and hearing.



An empty space memorial

Rob Franciosi

RF: Just as your joining of two trees outside the Frankfurt Jewish Museum was a provocative gesture, the entangling of glass in the Meijer Gardens tree seems equally compelling, particularly in a lush outdoor setting.

AS: That's very much a sculptural kind of decision. I always approach my work from two directions: one is the conceptual, but the other is very much about the material. I put as much importance into each of them. I'm not somebody whose ideas overcome the form because I also very much enjoy experiencing art through the materials, through the human, physical connection that it makes.

A lot of times I feel that one can say the material overtakes the concept; but sometimes those two worlds come together and actually help each other and make the experience of the sculpture stronger and bigger.

I feel that happens with the combination of the glass and the tree. The tree is made out of aluminum and, therefore, nothing is actually alive or flexible or dynamic about it, other than the shape. And since it took almost the exact shape of the fig tree, with the surface and shape, maybe that's when the movement happens.

It's so similar to a real tree one almost loses the recognition that it's a dead object. The glass, then, the way it is trapped in the branches, also brings questions: What came first, was it in the tree from the start? Or was it glass that fell into the tree?

Once you see this tree up close, you will find that the joints between the glass and the aluminum cast are perfectly made. It almost feels as if the glass is cut into the branches. Or that over the years the tree grew around it, the way trees surround obstacles, such as a fence.

RF: We have a tree in our yard that has grown around a metal post. I've thought about trying to pull it out but realize I can't. The two have become one object.

AS: That's the reason, maybe, why this piece makes me think about memories and about experiences, and about catastrophes or even intentionally inflicted harm the tree may have felt in the past. And, as we discussed earlier, those human pasts. That's why I think this sculpture can function as a memorial very well because it's a tree that is there, it's standing, but it doesn't try to hide. It tries to live together with the catastrophe that it went through or the problem that it encountered.

Even though it's very intimidating, because the glass is suspended in a very fragile way over our heads, it can also be optimistic because the tree stands with a lot of pride.



Schlesinger's pieces on Krystallnacht.

RF: Trees also figure prominently in certain Holocaust memorials where a lost community is represented by one that has been cut down. I have also seen photographs of trees growing through ruins of synagogues in Eastern Europe, images that temper the optimism of growth with an abject sense of loss and abandonment. And I have already heard some comments regarding the glass in *Ways to Say Goodbye* as perhaps representing Kristallnacht.

AS: Yes, working with glass actually started with me, interestingly enough, through a series of works based on Kristallnacht. I think that's why I arrived at using glass a few years earlier before making this particular sculpture.

I was working a lot with shattered windows, breaking them, gluing them together and then photographing them. This was a response to art history in a way, being about the object and then the representation of the object. The way I worked was that after breaking the glass, putting it back together, and then installing it back in the window, I photographed the window — but the focus was not on what the window showed, inside or outside, but on the glass. Then, when I printed the photograph, I framed it using the broken glass. Finally, you have the object, and you are viewing the documentation of the object through that object.

This was also a reference to the Charlie Chaplin movie, *The Kid*, in which he teams up with an orphan kid who runs who around the neighborhood throwing rocks at windows. Chaplin then shows up to repair the glass. That was another reference to the gallery or art world, where we are selling these broken windows. So, I was breaking the windows of the gallery space, reframing them and then selling them.

But through that fascination with the broken, shattered glass, I actually did a series on Kristallnacht. Very similar, as I broke a mirror and then re-glued and reframed it, but I used found photos from Kristallnacht. In that series, I introduced another element, which was the mirror. In some of those shattered pieces you could actually see the reflection of yourself. So, it was not any more the object and the representation of the object, but more involving the viewer in the work, to become part of the work. You see your reflection, as well as the mess of the Kristallnacht in a very blurry, black and white snapshot.

By working with shattered glass, I discovered *how* to work with it — and that's how I could use it in the tree.



Stolpersteine in Europe

RF: Because I have an interest in the *Stolpersteine* project in Europe, I was intrigued to discover your work with the form. The whole point of a stolpersteine [a brass nameplate set in pavement marking the last known address for a Nazi victim – there are more than 45,000 so far] is to inscribe a person's name and tie it to a specific place, yet you do something quite different, using blank stones and moving them to various sites, including an art museum in Münster, Germany. Why?

AS: It started because I had been to Berlin and I'm Jewish, so my attention was naturally drawn to that memorial. And I immediately liked it very much because I found it in a way very nonintrusive, but at the same time very present. I like things in the street because as an artist I was always collecting things in the street, so I was very aware of the public environment. I also liked that it was kind of an empty space memorial, comparable to the one dedicated to the burned books in Berlin, a sort of anti-space.

Since that was in my mind, after a few years I began to become very curious about what was underneath in the ground. I did more research and discovered it is actually a cobblestone, a cube. I found that cube to be beautiful in itself, at least the combination of the material, and it led me to the idea of reproducing that block.

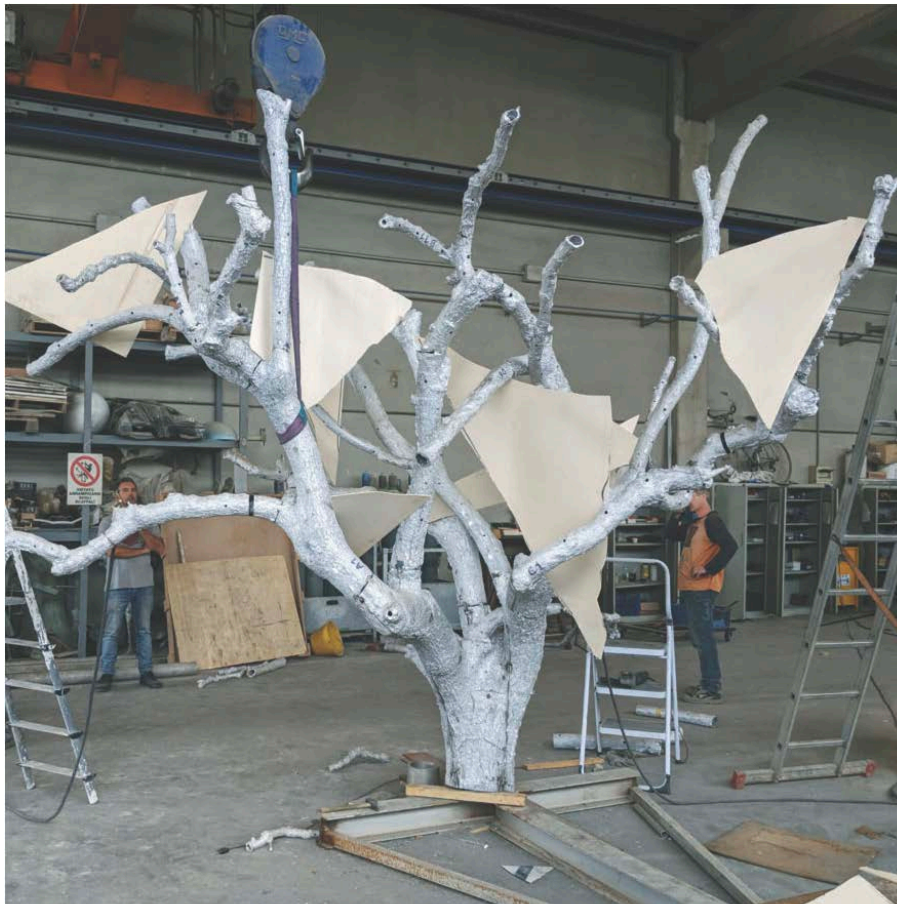
What I wanted to show was that this can happen anywhere, this can happen to anybody, especially in thinking about living in Europe, thinking about migration and the forced displacement of people.

RF: Your piece outside the Frankfurt museum is in a city where Jews are less than 1% of the population, much like Grand Rapids. Most who visit Meijer Gardens and see your piece will not be Jewish. What do you hope they take away from the encounter?

AS: I hope they will see a work of art by the grandchild of a survivor and perhaps through accompanying text will see how that person experienced and translated the stories of his family and of his community. Of how he created his art and lived his life with those memories and with those stories. For me, it's a very personal process and maybe they can read it through me. I cannot teach them or say "this is how it happened" because I was not there, and they weren't, but I hope the sculpture will open a sort of dialogue to enrich their knowledge and their opinions.

RF: The title *Ways to Say Goodbye* raises all sorts of questions about the idea of saying goodbye to the past. Mourning is not about being focused strictly on the past, but on being able to move beyond it; not to forget, but not to be trapped by it. In that respect, a tree, though wounded in the past, promises growth in the future.

AS: Just like the stolpersteine, we are offering an idea, a way of thought. I think it is much more effective to offer it rather than to point it out. I feel there are so many references within the piece: what trees represent in Judaism, the shattered glass of *Kristallnacht*, those memories, the title, who I am as an artist, the story of the Pestka family who sponsored the work. There are so many elements I hope will create a space for discussion.



Prepping the sculpture for installation

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RF: The Meijer Gardens site also brings the advantage of the four seasons. How did you use the site?

AS: We tried to define that space using a concrete path, but the hilltop still encloses the piece, allowing it to blend in. While the plaza provides a place to sit down, to hang out, so you are close to it, under it, you are also away from it at the same time. I think it's true the tree will live there among nature more than if it had been situated on cement, as in Frankfurt.

RF: Tell us more about the sculpture.

AS: The piece weighs 2 to 3 tons, but that's because of the inside structure of the stainless steel, a very massive pipe. The aluminum itself is very light. And the glass weighs a lot as well. Structurally, aluminum cannot bear much weight, so they have to use proper steel piping for which they know the strength exactly, because the aluminum enclosure has no structural properties.

RF: Are sculptors also engineers?

AS: These days an artist just outsources that work. There are very good fabricators, but, of course, you need to know what you ask of them and how to ask it. Sometimes what I'm interested in is maybe extending the possibilities, stretching what's possible. Often it's those companies that take drawings from artists to build the piece. Today the artist's life can be more one of directing, but I am really interested in the construction of things. For a lot of my more complicated works, I start by doing prototypes to try to see if they work, and then maybe outsourcing them to a fabricator. In this case, we did a lot of testing with a combination of aluminum and glass so that it felt right with the material and how it is held together.