

Reviews: National

Susan May Tell

Museum of Art
Fort Lauderdale

A diptych of a barbed-wire fence confronted visitors to "A Requiem: Photographs of Auschwitz" by Susan May



Susan May Tell, no title, 1998, gelatin silver print, 6' x 4'. Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale.

Tell," as if barring penetration of the subject from the outset. The effect was at once emotionally distancing and tantalizing, establishing a dichotomy that persisted throughout this moving show, as viewers strained to connect with the human suffering of the Holocaust across a historical, and at times esthetic, divide. But the absence of life in these black-and-white photographs (all 1998) was intentional, and the inherent limitations of a stolid, deteriorating site underscored the artist's questions about whether such "sacred grounds" should be restored and how one might commemorate the tragedies they have witnessed.

Tell, a photojournalist for the *New York Post*, grasps at pathos with austere compositions that dramatize the infrastructure of destruction. Concrete pillars and hooked posts loom like silent sentinels still guarding the concentration camp's secrets; rainwater snaking through a drainage ditch gets cast as a river of tears. The monumental stature and poetic gravitas telegraphed by Tell's camera angles and framing can feel forced, chilling the impact.

Tell counteracts these stark landscapes with close-ups of the victims' detritus: rusting utensils that inmates used to eat meager rations, valises inscribed with their names and origins. Homing in on the intimate details of impersonal accumulation, she highlights the individuals lost among the masses.

The most resonant image illuminates a drawing on a wall, alongside a row of bunks, that envisions a bucolic scene complete with sailboats, cottage, and medieval tower. The childlike innocence of the foregrounded sketch contrasts with the shadowy sleeping quarters behind it. This picture's poignancy sent a vivid message of hope. —Margery Gordon