The Jewish Museum Presents George Segal’s Monumental Sculpture Abraham and Isaac

Sculpture Made as a Memorial to the Tragic Events at Kent State University in 1970

Personas: George Segal’s Abraham and Isaac
July 19, 2019–October 2020

New York, NY, June 24, 2019—The Jewish Museum presents Personas: George Segal’s Abraham and Isaac, an installation of the life-sized plaster sculpture by American artist George Segal (American, 1924–2000), being shown at the Museum for the first time. The artist adapted the biblical story of Abraham, who was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac as proof of his obedience and faith in God, as an allegory for the 1970 tragedy at Kent State University in Ohio. During the incident, National Guardsmen, who were ordered to control an escalated anti-Vietnam protest, shot and killed four students, wounding nine others. The exhibition will be on view from July 19, 2019 through October 2020.

In addition to the sculpture Abraham and Isaac (In Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State University) (1978), the exhibition will include the iconic photograph taken by then Kent State photo journalism student John Paul Filo (American, b. 1948) of Mary Ann Vecchio grieving over the body of college student Jeffrey Glenn Miller, as well as the Newsweek cover from May 18, 1970 that used the same photograph. An excerpt from the Michael Blackwood film, George Segal (1978), where the artist talks about the sculpture while he was working on it, will also be shown.

George Segal is best known for his haunting, direct-cast, life-sized, figurative sculptures. Born in New York to a Jewish couple who emigrated from Eastern Europe, Segal is internationally renowned as a modernist sculptor. He was associated with the Pop Art movement but on occasion dealt with intense emotional and political topics. Abraham and Isaac (In Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State University) is a compelling example of Segal’s engagement in his times.

In approaching an incendiary and divisive event, Segal turned to imagery inspired by the Hebrew Bible. In the biblical story from Genesis (chap. 22), Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish people, is commanded by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah, to demonstrate his faith and obedience. At the crucial moment, the angel of God intercedes and a ram is sacrificed instead. In Segal’s sculpture, Abraham stands on a rock, knife drawn, over the kneeling and bound Isaac. Artists Lucas Samaras and Alexander Tsiaras posed as Abraham and Isaac, respectively.
Through the biblical personas of Abraham and Isaac, Segal crystallized his feelings about the tragedy at Kent State: “Basically, the piece calls on older people who have the power of life and death over their children to exercise love, compassion, and restraint.”

The sculpture was originally commissioned by the Mildred Andrews Fund and offered to Kent State University in 1978 as a memorial to the tragic events on May 4, 1970. When Kent State requested changes to the work, Segal refused, leading to the university’s rejection of the sculpture. In response, the Mildred Andrews Fund approached both the artist and Dr. Fred Licht, director of the Princeton University Art Museum, where Segal had taught. It was decided that a unique bronze cast would be made from the original plaster version and on October 6, 1979, the bronze sculpture was dedicated on the Princeton campus. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the gift of the bronze to Princeton University. The 50th anniversary of the shootings at Kent State University will be on May 4, 2020.

The original plaster group on view in this exhibition was donated to the Jewish Museum by The George and Helen Segal Foundation in 2013. Exhibited at the Museum for the first time, 40 years after its making, the diverse resonances of Segal’s vision remain palpable.

One of seven sections that make up the Jewish Museum’s third floor collection exhibition, Scenes from the Collection, the section Personas highlights portraits from the collection with insight into a range of social, political, and historical circumstances.

About the Jewish Museum
Located on New York City’s famed Museum Mile, the Jewish Museum is a distinctive hub for art and Jewish culture for people of all backgrounds. Founded in 1904, the Museum was the first institution of its kind in the United States and is one of the oldest Jewish museums in the world. Devoted to exploring art and Jewish culture from ancient to contemporary, the Museum offers diverse exhibitions and programs, and maintains a unique collection of nearly 30,000 works of art, ceremonial objects, and media reflecting the global Jewish experience over more than 4,000 years.

Location: 1109 Fifth Avenue at 92nd Street, New York City
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