

your name
Sue Saxon

your name



Acknowledgements

These works are dedicated to my family and to those who did not survive. Special thanks to Sandy Saxon, Dr Helen Light, Sandy Khazam, Natalie King, Louise Zygier, Csoma Zsigmund, Rajki Marcsa, Löwy Lajos, Vera and Kati Ranki.

The Jewish Museum of Australia and the artist gratefully acknowledge the sponsors of this exhibition:

This project has been assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.



Spectra Graphics; and Danny Gluck of Menora Gourmet Products.

This project was supported by the National Association for the Visual Arts with financial assistance from the NSW Government Ministry for the Arts.

This publication accompanies the exhibition 'your name' held at the Jewish Museum of Australia, February 1997.

© Sue Saxon and the Jewish Museum of Australia

26 Alma Road, St Kilda 3182

Ph: (03) 9534 0083

Fax: (03) 9534 0844

ISBN 1 875670 13 0

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing permitted under the Copyright Act no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Publication design: Peter Thorn Design

Cover image - *your name*, installation view, flour, kosher salt, 9m x 9m 1996 Photo by Oete Boe

Introduction

The Jewish Museum of Australia is proud to be able to present these installations by Sue Saxon *Ultima* and *your name* as the inaugural exhibition in a series of contemporary art exhibitions.

Part of the brief of the Jewish Museum of Australia is to define, nurture and encourage an Australian Jewish identity and to share this with the general public. To this end the Museum provides a forum and venue for contemporary art which deals with issues of Australian and Jewish relevance.

Two contemporary art exhibitions are to be scheduled annually and these exhibitions are specifically designed to showcase works by contemporary Jewish artists or contemporary explorations of Jewish themes. Further the Jewish Museum of Australia hopes to provide a venue for cross-cultural exchange among artists from diverse cultural backgrounds about pertinent mutual issues of today.

Sue Saxon was invited to initiate this programme because we believe her show will set a standard for the programme for the future. Sue Saxon first came to the notice of the Museum through her work *Stereotype/other* which was exhibited in the 1994 *Moet et Chandon Travelling Exhibition* and later included in the exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Australia, *Art and Remembrance: Addressing the Holocaust*. The installation *Ultima* was first exhibited in Sydney and there was talk about bringing it to Melbourne audiences through the Jewish Museum of Australia. Since then, the artist has prepared a new work, *your name*, while resident in New York on a Samstag Scholarship.

Both the shows *Ultima* and *your name* deal with issues absolutely relevant to our audiences today - issues of memory, cultural and familial memory as a Jew of Hungarian background, and of loss - which the artist expresses through Hungarian and Jewish imagery and traces. Both these works will be incorporated into the exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Australia.

We thank Sue Saxon for her commitment to this project and her enthusiastic engagement with the Museum.

Dr Helen Light, Director, Jewish Museum of Australia



Memorial Sculpture: Two installations by Sue Saxon

On 10 March 1944 Adolf Eichmann and his principal subordinates met at Mauthausen concentration camp to work out a deportation program for the 750,000 Jews of Hungary. Eight days later, Hitler summoned the Hungarian Regent, Admiral Horthy, to Klessheim Castle, near Salzburg. Horthy agreed to deliver 100,000 'Jewish workers' for the German war effort. At 9.30 that evening his train left Salzburg for Budapest. Forty five minutes later, German troops began moving into Hungary. Sue Saxon's parents survived this invasion.¹

In her work, Saxon negotiates the historical, philosophical and material elements of history. In doing so, she examines common questions - how we remember, how we carry our pasts around with us at every moment, how we maintain a relationship and responsibility to the past? The notion of memory overlays the conflation of two installations - *Ultima* and *your name*. Displayed side by side at the Jewish Museum of Australia, the two bodies of work in fact produce a third complex arrangement. Moreover, there is a seamless transit from one installation to the next. Saxon creates a poignant narrative ambience; a public foray into storytelling enabling the two works to become part of each other. What binds the works is the deployment of raw materials configured to produce a vision of the landscape that is redolent with memories, myths and meanings.

'Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.'² By researching provenance and place, Saxon's material monuments are laden with memories as she composes visual accounts of history. She takes art historical cues from the earthworks and land art of the late sixties but domesticates her sculptural landscapes by siting them indoors.³ Here, the personal and the political take up adjacent residence in a sometimes traumatic marriage.

Psychological and physical journeys have provided Saxon with significant source material to reclaim her heritage. She salvages and assembles fragments of texts, images and places to reconstruct aspects of her own history. The resulting elements are sifted and rearranged to commemorate aspects of art history, personal history and Jewish history. As a daughter of Holocaust survivors, the weight of her history is transformed into an evocative display of recast memories.⁴

Ultima consists of six giant scrolls of translucent drafting film suspended from the ceiling and hovering over a bed of paprika. A personal gesture to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the deportation of the Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, *Ultima* is a visual testimony, an attempt to present the unrepresentable. Like a ritual space, the viewer is required to walk around the installation as if entry is thwarted or forbidden.

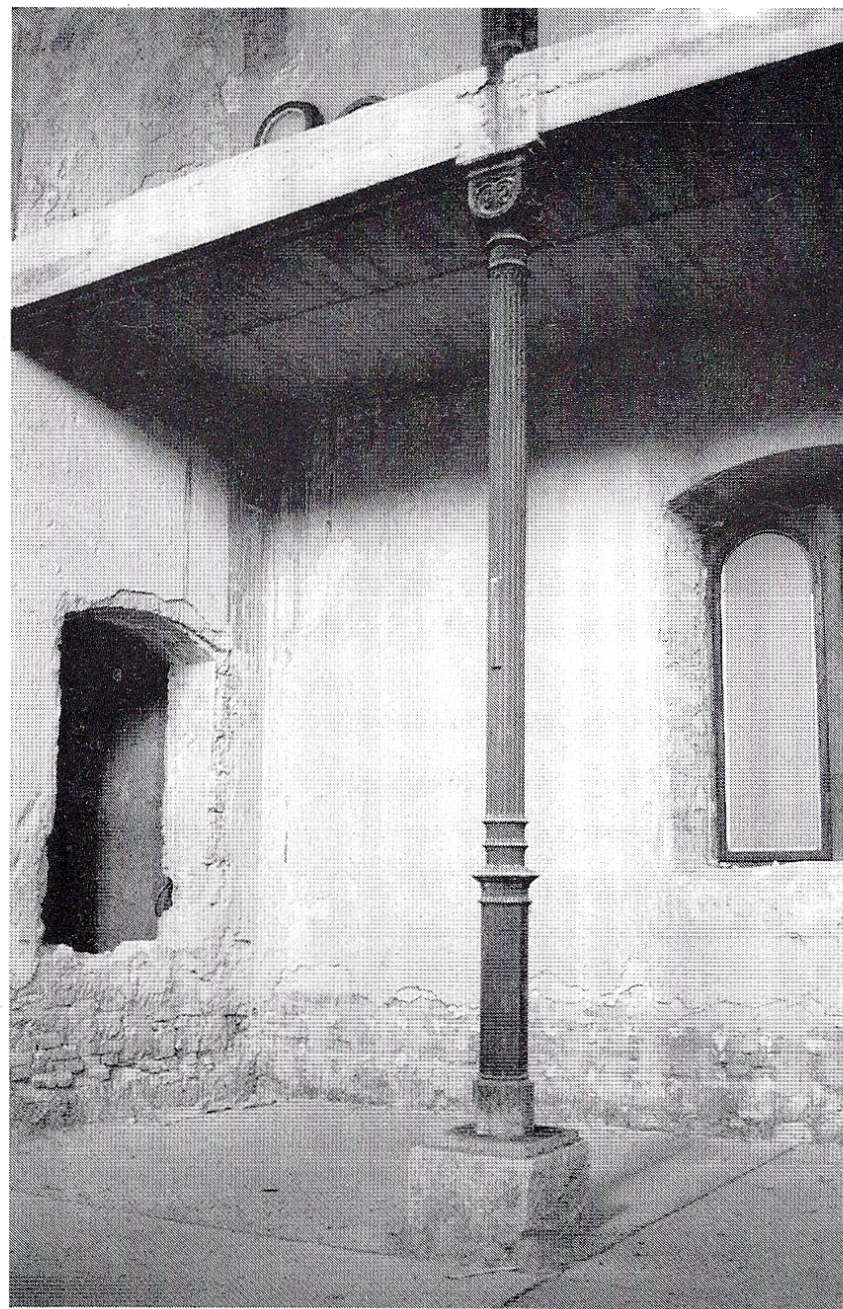
In 1993, Saxon travelled with her sister to Hungary where, by chance, a friend accompanied her to an exhibition of the *History of the Jews of Hungary*. Subsequently, she contacted the exhibition curator who escorted her to Tokaj, a small wine growing village where her father spent his childhood; she also visited her mother's town Nyregyhaza. Saxon describes these expeditions as haunting and fulfilling, an experience akin to discovering 'an amputated limb'. Saxon's installations rehearse the material reality of her parents' past, the work operating in a space where the emotional and cultural are voiced alongside the factual.

The coincidental sequence of events leading her back to Tokaj points to the ways in which chance and synchronicity feature in Saxon's work. The presence of the unpredictable is literally played out in *Ultima* - the title of a Hungarian card game played by Saxon's father every week for as long as she can remember. Devoted to card playing, her father continued this tradition when he migrated to Australia in 1949. Soon after, he wrote to Saxon's mother who had migrated to England, inviting her to join him in Sydney to start a new life.

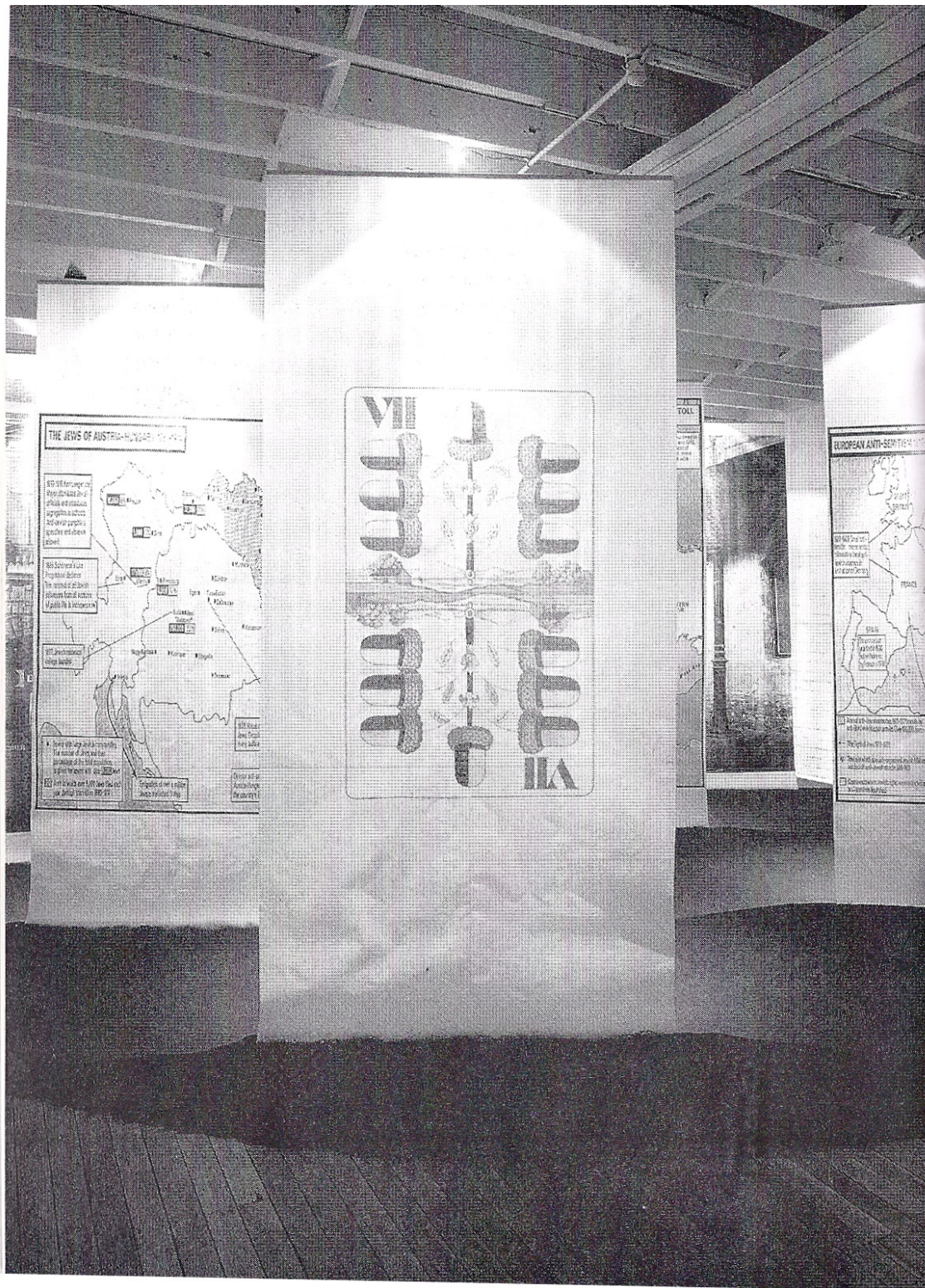
The metaphor of chance and luck is further extended in the depiction of one of thirty-two cards from the game. *Ultima*, the title, also refers to 'the final solution' - the ultimate travesty - and the ways in which fate and survival were inextricably linked. Other images consist of transcribing maps and photographs gathered during her journey to Hungary. Three maps chart the composition of Hungarian Jewry, the rise of European anti-Semitism and the Jewish death toll during WWII.⁵ The final two images relate specifically to place - an exterior view of the family home of Saxon's mother and the section of the Tokaj synagogue where her father's family sat.

Like a visual archive, these suspended images are immersed in a bed of paprika, a red stain that metaphorically represents a valley of blood. This archaeology of suffering is penetrated by light so that fragments of the images are cast onto the paprika. For Saxon, this spice symbolises the importance of cooking in Jewish culture and the expression of love channelled through food.

The second installation, *your name*, records the tension between two different cultural destinations, metaphorically marking the arrival of European memories cast onto the Australian shore. Three Hebrew letters, tentatively etched onto the bed of salt and flour, designate the English translation of the Hebrew word for the Almighty.



Opposite: The section of the Tokaj synagogue where my father's family sat Photo by Sue Saxon, 1993



Paradoxically, naming is concomitant with one's identity and yet we are forbidden to name the one in whose name so many have perished. In some ways, Saxon's impassioned address traces the burden upon first generation Holocaust survivors to wade through the treacherous past and live out the dreams of those who are deceased.

Originally conceived in New York, *your name* is an ephemeral installation laid out on the gallery floor, composed of kosher salt and flour transformed into a landscape of desert and ocean.⁶ Saxon's landscape of essential foodstuff is also reminiscent of the Australian beach and coastline. Subtle ridges resembling sand dunes or waves are created by pressing her fingertips into the flour. Embedded in the white layers are sepulchral images from Jewish grave stones in Eastern Europe. The graves witnessed by Saxon on her journeys take up residence in her memorial sculpture. Grounded in two different landscapes - Australian and European - Saxon's interior geography is quietly commemorative.

In *Ultima* and *your name*, Saxon presents two related geographies. Here, landscape and memory become a visual conduit for questioning the possibility of faith after the Holocaust. Saxon impresses upon us to learn from the past and to make sense of the senseless for '...we are ourselves responsible, we survivors, or more precisely, those among us who have decided to live their condition as survivors in the most simple and least critical way...That sepulchres, 'the urns of the strong', kindle souls to perform lofty deeds, or at least preserve memory...'⁷

Natalie King

The author wishes to dedicate this essay to her grandfather, Lionel Louvain King.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the occupation of Hungary see Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, Fontana Press, Great Britain, 1987, pp. 662-684.
2. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, Fontana Press, Great Britain, 1996, p. 6-7. I am grateful to Sue Saxon for recommending this text.
3. For a discussion of 'site construction' by artists such as Robert Smithson, Richard Serra and Sol LeWitt who have been an important influence on Saxon, see Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 277-290.
4. For a discussion of memorials see *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials*, Prestel & The Jewish Museum, New York, 1994.
5. Budapest was referred to as 'Judapest', signalling the once thriving community.
6. Kosher salt is used in the process of purifying and koshering meat and also in ordinary cooking.
7. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Abacus, Great Britain, 1989, pp. 8-9.

Ultima - installation view; six translucent sheaths each 3m x 1.25m, 30kg paprika, 1994 Photo by Paul Green

Sue Saxon

Born Sydney 1960, lives and works in Sydney

Education

- 1995–96 Master of Arts, New York University, New York
1993 Fine Arts Academy, Budapest, Hungary
1990–92 Graduate Diploma in Professional Studies, Painting major, COFA, UNSW, Sydney
1979–83 Bachelor of Art Education, Alexander Mackie CAE, Sydney

Awards

- 1997 NAVA Marketing Grant Scheme for Artists
1995 NAVA Marketing Grant Scheme for Artists
1994 Samstag International Visual Art Scholarship
Project Grant Visual Arts/Craft Board, Australia Council
1993 Hungarian Government Scholarship to the Budapest Fine Arts Academy

Individual Exhibitions

- 1997 *your name* - Inaugural Exhibition, Contemporary Program, The Jewish Museum, Melbourne
1994 *Ultima* - Rom Gallery, Sydney
1993 *Malom To, Torok Furdo* - Turkish Bathhouse in collaboration with Heimo Wallner, Budapest, Hungary
Foyalmot Galeria - The Danube Water-meter Gallery in collaboration with Sandy Saxon, Budapest, Hungary
1990 *Born and Bread* - in collaboration with Sandy Saxon, Mona Terrace, Sydney

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1996 *Art & Remembrance* - Jewish Museum, Melbourne
Artists for Habitat - Kenneth Winslow, New York
Nostalgic - Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
1995 *Crossing Territories* - Jewish Arts Festival - Powerhouse Museum
1994 *Moet et Chandon Travelling Exhibition* - all State galleries

- 1993 *Tondo* - Jozsefvarosi Galeria, Budapest, Hungary
Fourth Annual Artists Symposium - Shrattenberg, Austria
The National Graduate Show 1993 - PICA, Perth
1992 *Travelling Art Scholarship Exhibition* - COFA Gallery, UNSW, Sydney
Young Dissonants - COFA Gallery, UNSW, Sydney
Graduate Exhibition - COFA, UNSW, Sydney
1991 *Factionation* - Bondi Pavilion, Sydney
Young Dissonants - Dissonance: Aspects of Feminism and Art - Works Gallery, COFA, UNSW
Images of a First Language - Waverley Library, Sydney
1990 *Group Show* - Gallery Cafe, Sydney
1989 *Three Women* - Tikat Gallery, Newcastle

Bibliography

- Booth, Karen, *Exploring 'the Other'*, Australian Jewish News, 20 May 1994
Bures, Susan, *Exploring Australian Jewishness*, Australian Jewish News, 22 March 1991
Fenner, Felicity, *Sparkling Moet goes pop*, The Sydney Morning Herald, 3 June 1994
Hrstic, Atina and Lloyd, Dian, *Factionation* catalogue essay, 1994
Johnston, Jay, *Sue Saxon: Ultima*, Eyeline, Winter 1995
King, Natalie, *your name* catalogue essay, 1997
Kozari, Hilda, *A Torokfurdo Kiallitasai*, Balkon magazine, June-August 1995
Kronenberg, Simeon, *Art and Remembrance* catalogue essay, 1996
Lloyd, Dian, *Cafe Society*, Australian Jewish News, 3 August 1990
Mendelssohn, Joanna, *No Names, Few Shocks*, The Bulletin, 1 March 1994
Moore, Margaret *The Moet opens up*, Art Monthly, March 1994
Morse, Meredith *Ultima* catalogue essay, October 1994
Stanhope, Zara, *Nostalgic* catalogue essay 1996

Collections

- Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Moriah College, Sydney
Gallery Cafe, Sydney
Private collections, Australia, Hungary, England