

The weight of culpability



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On the third floor of the Riles Building on the Northern Arizona University's north campus — home of the Martin-Springer Institute, visitors are confronted with an unsettling and provocative new art installation. It features rows of silhouetted profiles, a constructed wooden platform, and sculpted shackled hands are not connected to a body and floating. Each cradles a hummingbird.

The work is called “Culpable,” and it was created by Flagstaff artist Shawn Skabelund based on his observations and experiences along the U.S.-Mexico border and, more specifically, in a Tucson Courthouse during a proceeding during the criminal processing of undocumented immigrants as part of Operation Streamline.

The installation is free and open to the public to view, but also will have an artist lecture and reception this Thursday. The lecture takes place in Room 309 in Riles from 3:45 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. The reception is in the common area of the third floor of Riles from 4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Learn more at www.nau.edu/martin-springer/. The installation is up through the semester.

The new work and reception is part of a big week, and a kickoff for a special semester, for the Martin-Springer Institute. Also on Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. in Ardrey Auditorium, the Institute welcomes guest speaker Wendy Lower. She is the author of “Hitler’s Furies,” a National Book Award Finalist in Nonfiction that tells the story of the women involved in the atrocities of the Holocaust. Tickets are \$15 and can be purchased at www.nau.edu/cto.

Lower’s talk is the first of a series of events where the Martin-Springer is commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II and the Liberation of Auschwitz. The NAU institute focuses on Holocaust awareness.

Art and evocation

For the installation that recently opened at Martin-Springer, Skabelund created a site-specific work that was commissioned by the Martin-Springer Institute. It features the several portraits and the hands with their shackles, as well as leg shackles on the constructed floor.

“‘Culpable’ was designed after I visited Operation Streamline at the Tucson Federal Courthouse in 2012 and 2013,” Skabelund shared. “As I sat and witnessed this process, where migrants are sent to prison for between 30 and 180 days, I had an overwhelming feeling of deep sadness and guilt, not so much for the migrants, but for the process, and where this country is going.”

He added, “I am as culpable as they are. Before them, it was me. This nation was built on migration, and its destiny continues to be manifested by a natural human desire and need for familial economic sustainability. Why does our country allow commerce to cross borders while refusing individuals that same right?”

Skabelund explained that he took the portraits that would become the silhouettes in the installation while providing humanitarian effort during a visit to the border this past October. The individuals of the silhouettes are real people, and they add a sense of immediacy and connection to the work. It plays against the way the immigrants are processed and treated at the judicial level.

“We have a knack in this country for inventing expediency, whether it is food prepared fast, cars built on an assembly line, college degrees aimed at getting jobs, whole mountains destroyed and mined for coal, or even the dispensation of justice,” Skabelund said. “Simply put, Operation Streamline is unconstitutional. It is a crime against humanity — a means directed at a population (Latino Americans) on specious grounds without regard to individual guilt on such grounds.”

He asked, “How can thousands of people be prosecuted for doing something that is a natural desire — to provide for and sustain the family economy — to help put bread on the table?”

Another culpability

Also this week with the Martin-Springer Institute is the arrival and presentation of Wendy Lower of Claremont McKenna College, who will give the talk “I Wanted to Prove Myself to the Men: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields.”

Drawing from wartime documents, post-war trials, private letters, diaries and interviews, this lecture focuses on outstanding cases of women who became direct witnesses, accomplices and perpetrators of the Holocaust.

According to the research of Lower, in the colonial outposts of the Nazi East, German women were an integral part of the society of perpetrators. They enjoyed privileges as members of the new ruling elite, and they possessed extreme power over the lives of

Jews and other victims of the Holocaust. What some of these women chose to do with this new-found power during the war and how they distorted their criminal behavior after the war are the main themes of this presentation.

“Before, there had not been a lot of information known about the role of women in the Holocaust,” noted Bjorn Krondorfer, who is the director of Martin-Springer Institute. “Most people did not think they had as much of a role, it was kind of swept under the rug. But it turns out (as shown by Lower’s research) many of them played an active part in the atrocities.”

The talk is the first in a semester-long series by the College of Arts and Letters titled “Commemorating 70 years: The Liberation of Auschwitz and the End of World War II Remembered.”