

# IN Jerusalem

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# Icons of the past revisited

Argentinean artist Marcelo Brodsky casts an eye back half a century, with the other eye on the future

Martin Luther King had a dream and he fought to achieve it.

Ralph Bunche was the first black person ever to win the Peace Nobel Prize. It was in 1950, for his mediation between Arabs and Jews when the State of Israel was created, after the war of 1948.

Abraham Joshua Heschel prayed with his feet. He was a rabbi and a teacher. He combined the Jewish faith with social action.

Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker was a figure in the Human Rights Movement. He later became the Minister of Abyssinian Church in Harlem.

Percy Sutton, probably the first black person to be elected mayor of a NY town was the first black person to be elected mayor in Harlem. He was the legal representative of Malcolm X.

...after a 5 days march from Selma, AL, where local African Americans, the Student non violent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conf...

## COVER

# LOOKING BACK TO THE FUTURE

Marcelo Brodsky's new exhibition provides valuable insights on the watershed year of 1968

• BARRY DAVIS

Nineteen sixty-seven was, of course, a milestone year in the annals of this country, with the effects of the Six Day War still very much with us, for good or for bad. But, for much of the Western world, it was 1968 that proved to be a watershed, on a political and sociopolitical front, as tens of thousands of people, including a significant number of youngsters, took to the streets in major cities across the globe to protest about a slew of issues, from the war in Vietnam to civil rights and downright annoying bureaucracy in the upper echelons of officialdom.

As a teenager at the time, Marcelo Brodsky says, the tumultuous events of the late Sixties caught his youthful imagination and emotional mind-set, and continue to resonate in his life half a century on. The 50-year mark provided the Jewish Argentinean artist with a pretext for unearthing some iconic images of some of the mass public expressions of dissent of yesteryear and breathing new life into them.

The result of that line of thought takes in a bunch of exhibitions of Brodsky's works which are currently on display around the world, including in the United States, Portugal, Lithuania, Italy, Germany and Israel. The local offering, "1968, The Fire of Ideas," curated by Eyal Ben Dov, opens on Friday, October 12, at the Musrara Nagar Multidisciplinary School of Art and Society, running through to December 12.

As any parent who has, or has had, teenaged off-



Marcelo Brodsky: Keenly aware of life's precarious nature. ((latã Cannabrava))

spring can, no doubt, testify, 14 is an age at which one tends to form a well-defined, albeit generally transient take on life, and to soak up the impact of seismic events in a pretty unadulterated manner. That was certainly the case for Brodsky, who, at the age of 14 caught sight

on TV of what was going down on the streets of Paris, Washington and London, and elsewhere across the globe. "It changed very much the way I relate to the world," he states in a telephone conversation from Berlin, where he was busy hanging works for a show at the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights. "It was a big influence in terms of the way I understood freedom, more openness, sexual life, more access to politics and young people in the streets and poetry in the streets. I liked that very much."

GROWING UP in Argentina of the 1960s and 1970s, Brodsky was keenly aware of how the precarious nature of life, the need for freedom of expression, and high corruption at the top of the national pyramid can have devastating effects on individuals. This was a time when the South American country was governed by a cruel military dictatorship, which ruled the roost there from 1974 to 1983. During the course of that decade, a time that came to be known as the Dirty War, around 30,000 people disappeared, including many youngsters and students.

Brodsky was destined to engage in civil rights-related archival material. "My father was vice-president of the association of Jewish families that were victims of the dictatorship in Argentina, and he was invited to the Knesset, and there is a wood, between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. So I am related to Israel," he says. "I also have a work called *I Pray with My Feet*, which is connected to a rabbi, a very important rabbi who came to Buenos



Artistas de teatro na greve contra a censura em 1968 na Baía de Guanabara, RJ. A ditadura censura as obras consideradas "políticas". Arquivo do Jornal do Brasil / RJ 2008 - foto de décadas

In Rio de Janeiro, workers and students take action in the streets and campaign together against military regimes and other governmental structures. (Photos: Marcelo Brodsky)



This March of the Students of Monash University on May day 1968 against the war in Viet Nam and supporting the Viet Cong was photographed by the Australian intelligence service to identify the militants. They are numbered by the Police ①, ②, ③, ④. As in many other moments the US knows participants it has kept in the files.

Students at Melbourne's Monash University in a May Day protest against the war in Vietnam, and in support of the Viet Cong.



Mai 68 est d'abord un mouvement de révolte étudiante et sociale sans précédent, né du malaise latent au sein de l'université et la société française. La révolte étudiante y débouche sur des grèves et une crise sociale généralisée. Photo Marka (M. Lavi). 1968 Le jeu des idées. C/7 Maurice Brodeur

A Parisian demonstration calls for the end to all limits, including on the imagination.



Brodsky links esteemed theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel's active role in the '60s civil rights marches in the US with Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer (pictured speaking), Herschel's student and personal secretary before he moved to Argentina in 1959 and took an active role in criticizing the government there.

Aires from New York, called Marshall Meyer. He took care of my family after my brother disappeared. The piece I made connects Marshall Meyer with Martin Luther King [who was assassinated in 1968], and connects the human rights movement in the US with the human rights movement in Argentina, through the connection between Martin Luther King and [Rabbi] Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was Marshall Meyer's rabbi-teacher."

Brodsky experienced the terrible fallout from the military junta's ironfisted approach from close quarters. "My brother has been missing since that time, as have 110 of my schoolmates," he says.

That also kick-started his creative endeavor. "My first work was when I took a photograph of my class, which is called *Good Memory*, that tells the fate of each one of my classmates." Brodsky took the monochrome print and complemented it with his own input, adding information about each student, and also including some information about where the survivors of those dark times are at today. Brodsky subsequently exhibited an enlarged version of the picture at his alma mater, Colegio Nacional Buenos Aires, and upped the emotional impact by showing photos of students of the day viewing the work in the school hall. It makes for a moving image. "The two kids from my class who went missing were both Jews, like me," he notes. "They are at the center of the piece, and that piece is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and became a very well-known artwork about the people missing in Argentina."

Shortly before his brother's disappearance, Brodsky fled his homeland for a prolonged sojourn in Spain, returning to Argentina only a couple of decades later.

*Good Memory* was created 20 years ago, while *1968, The Fire of Ideas* is a recent venture, and Brodsky firmly believes art in general, and his own work, can help to change the world and people's perspective of the world. He says he put a lot of elbow grease into the current exhibition, digging into archives across the world to come up with images that he felt could serve as a strong foundation for imparting his ideas and the message he wants to convey about the state of the world 50 years ago and where we are at now. "This is a work on images

that I researched for several years. That's my professional specialty. I have run a picture agency for 30 years, in all of Latin America and Spain, so I know sources and the ways in which images are licensed to produce different kinds of projects. In this case it is an artwork. In this case they are not my photographs, but photographs which I intervened with, with writing and color."

Those aesthetic additions make for an intriguing point. We naturally tend to view black-and-white photographs and movies with a nostalgic eye. If they are monochromatic, we automatically surmise, they must hark from bygone times. While that can make the works in question a little more "sexy" in marketing terms, they also tend to draw us into the past and make us relate to the works from a historical standpoint, thereby necessarily making them less pertinent. Nothing could be further from Brodsky's intent, and his colorful and textual augmentation counter the time-lapse element very effectively.

He is also hip to the fact that visual images are all-powerful in the age of the Internet and, if he wants to grab the attention of the under-25 crowd, he has to use a pictorial format. "There is a language issue, a narration issue, in this work. It is related to the fact that history today can only be told to the younger generations with images. If you tell history, if you narrate stories, without images, they won't pay any attention at all. Therefore, the only way you can tell history to younger people, who communicate between themselves more with images than with text, is by working with images."

However, Brodsky has surreptitiously worked textual elements into the *1968, The Fire of Ideas* series. "I had to see how I could tell history with images together with words. And how can text be combined with images, to be appealing to generate the attention of the viewer." The Musrara display incorporates pictures from Paris – the global epicenter of the student uprising in the late Sixties – Mexico and even Bangladesh. "The fact that people today read less is not my fault; it is a reality," Brodsky notes wryly. "I'm not in favor of that. It just happens."

Then again, there are words in the original works, on banners and posters carried by protesters demonstrating against the Vietnam War, social injustice and other

burning issues of the day. "There are, for example, students in these pictures holding signs with words like 'student power' or 'Stop the war in Vietnam.' The text is action. It is not only a plain text. It becomes part of a diversified language in which text and image work together."

Musrara is also a pretty neat part of the world to show Brodsky's work, as the neighborhood gave birth to the Black Panther social protest movement there in the early 1970s.

"I haven't been to Israel for many years, but I understand that Musrara is a very progressive area," says Brodsky. The school, under the guidance of its founder, Avi Sabag, certainly continues to push the social-themed artistic boat out across a range of areas.

"Nineteen sixty-eight was a year of protests across almost the whole of the world," Sabag observes. "This exhibition is a good social fit for us. We are the ultimate research body on the Black Panthers, at least in a visual sense. The Black Panthers started up around 1971-72, but they were influenced by everything that went on in 1968."

The idea of bringing the exhibition to Musrara gradually took shape. "I was in the United States and, by chance, I popped into a gallery which, it transpired, represented Marcelo," says Sabag. Fast-forward a few years, when Sabag attended a major photography event in France. "I saw a large retrospective of Marcelo's body of work, that addressed the protests of 1968, with a strong focus on the student demonstrations. His exhibition [*1968, The Fire of Ideas*] had started to come together at that point." The germ of the Musrara showing had been well and truly planted. "I contacted Marcelo and asked him if we could exhibit the work here at the school, in Jerusalem," Sabag continues. "Marcelo was very enthusiastic about the idea, and sent me materials."

There is more to the Musrara display than just the touched-up archival prints. "There is Internet-based data about the subject, and music from the period," Sabag explains. The school director and chief curator wanted to provide historical and sensorial context for Brodsky's creations. "There is also material from the archives of the Paris police." It seems the latter did good work. "It could have been a bloodbath in Paris then, but the archival material shows that the police went about their work with great sensitivity. I think if the same thing happened today, there would be quite a few fatalities."

Sabag feels that Brodsky's deftly applied texts and hues add much to the original visual substratum. "I think that breathes new life into the photographs," he says. There is, he notes, something of an iconic reference here, too. "If you look at Renaissance paintings, with halos that denote saints, Brodsky delineates his own saints in these photographs. The central figures in his works are always embellished with color."

As a survivor of the late 1960s, Brodsky says there is more than nostalgia to his return to that stormily, and sometimes tragically, fueled era. "Young people then were looking to change older politicians who won the [Second World] War, but the war had been over for 20 years – except, unfortunately, in Israel the wars continued. There were a series of ideas that were beyond politics. It was about music and art, about culture in general. Back then, culture was more open, and the students were in the streets asking for more access to decisions about things that affected them and the way they lived."

At the end of the day, with hindsight of the past half-century, is Brodsky optimistic about the way things are panning out now?

"In 1968," he says, "the future looked better and brighter. That was the general thought in 1968. We thought the movement would make things better. We don't think that today."

Entry to the exhibition is free. For more information: [www.musrara.co.il](http://www.musrara.co.il)