



**JOSSI RÜCKER, *Die Kinder der Orama / The Children of Orama***  
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*Jossi Rücker in conversation with Frederiek Weda*

What leaves its mark upon us? The artist Jossi Rücker (born 1970 in Berlin) deals with the life stories of others up close. In her current exhibition, *The Children of Orama* in GALERIE BERNAU, she traces the story of the "Children of Orama": 17 children of Jewish descent who landed in the port of Melbourne in July 1939 without their parents, on the only children's transport Australia has ever allowed. On 23 July 1939, the passenger ship *Orama* docked at Port Phillip Bay. Almost 80 years later, Jossi Rücker set out in search of the "Children of Orama". Jossi Rücker spoke to Frederiek Weda, director of the GALERIE BERNAU, about the project and her exhibition.

**FW** People and their stories are the subject of your work, both in your debut film *Wilhelm der Schäfer* (2014), in the photo series *Brandenburger Portraits* (2011) as well as in your current exhibition *Die Kinder der Orama*. What brings you to examine people's biographies?

**JR** During my photography training at Dia-Direkt in Munich I became acquainted with the work of the German photographer August Sander (1867-1964). He put his plate camera on the back of his bicycle, rode through his home country and took portraits of the people who lived there. He earned his money taking passport photographs, which were especially sought-after by young men before they went off to the First World War. Sander created a distinctive portrait of his time. My portraits digress a little further into the biographical. I see a unique story in every person and am curious about it. And through being confronted by the lives of others, something happens to me as well.

**FW** How did you come to investigate the fate of the "Children of Orama"?

**JR** I wanted to fill in a gap, to understand what everyday Jewish life in Germany looked like in the 1930s. When I asked my grandparents or did research in my home town I drew a blank, receiving just a shrug of the shoulders. That is recent German history for you. I had to travel to the other side of the globe to discover more about Jewish life that had begun in Germany. Everything seemed more understandable in Australia than here. I also wondered if I had Jewish roots. But, as far as I could see that is unfortunately not the case. Instead, my grandparents seemed to have rather adored the fascists: marrying a man in uniform was seen as a big deal. That's the truth, even if it hurts. And another truth: when I was in Australia, I felt an inexplicable connection with the continent, and, especially in Sydney on the beach, with the people I met there. I met the "Children of Orama", their children and their grandchildren, at an emotional low point in my life. Getting to know these people there - their spirit, their esprit, their endless hospitality, their creativity- was and is a great gift. Even in Ellen Shafer's silence, or Marion Paul's reproach. I think that the topics that one discusses and that which is remembered is always related to the one asking the questions, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is the same with work on camera. The "point of view", for me, means "How do I see things?"



These biographies and lives actually all belong here in Germany. On the other hand however, the fact that they escaped to Australia meant that these people were given the chance to build a life in the first place.

**FW** You are a trained camerawoman and have graduated from the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB). In this exhibition you decided to examine the biographies of the "Children of Orama" in painterly interventions in the form of photographs, collages, and spatial installations instead of in moving pictures. How did this come about?

**JR** I deliberately went to Australia with an analogue medium format camera, without additional lighting and with a sound recording device. During my research, I realized that very few of the contemporary witnesses still alive really wanted to talk to me. There was enormous skepticism about the project from everyone except the Dreyfus family. They opened unbelievable doors to me without hesitation and in many places. In any case, I couldn't have imagined showing up there with extensive film equipment. It would have overwhelmed us all. I like the 6x6 medium format shots. It's more of a subdued format, which the content makes exciting, or indeed quiet. Even the sound recorder was sometimes too much, for example, when I was invited to the Seder, the traditional meal with family and friends during Passover week. If I had installed any kind of technology there, it would have disturbed the atmosphere. I just wanted to be a witness and was allowed to do so. I wrote down the impressions I got the following night. The artistic processing came through reflection upon the experiences.

**FW** Family trees, tree trunks: the tree is a recurring motif in the exhibition, especially the birch tree. What is it all about?

**JR** I have fond memories of the birch forest in front of my grandma's house in Biesenthal. There are no birches in Australia and one or two people there said that they could remember the birches from their childhood in Germany. For me, the birch has something naive and protective about it. It has a shallow root, meaning that it's the first to fall in a strong storm. It is said that the roots of the birch trees are also connected underground, so that the trees can communicate, even over long distances.

**FW** One of your role models is the artist Ella Dreyfuss, whose portrait is also shown in the exhibition. Why?

**JR** When Ella and I first met, we had both already been working in our respective fields for some time. Ella is a professor of fine art and has a chair at the National Art School (NAS) in Sydney. We discovered that we work in a similar way. She was familiar with black and white portrait photography. I was just discovering the artist in myself and Ella had found her way to photography after having worked with different media for some time. We are connected in a certain way.

**FW** You are working on a book "The Children of Orama". How does it relate to the exhibition?

**JR** The three weeks I spent in Australia were for both research and production. Three years ago, a renowned publisher offered me a writing fee for a non-fiction book about the "Children of Orama". After I had finished the manuscript however, I realized that the initial concept for the



book had evolved, and that the publisher and I wanted different things. A purely non-fiction book would never have come out of the material I had gathered. During the full twenty days of my trip, there was only a day or two where I had no appointments. I enjoyed those days in Sydney, the city I came to cherish so deeply. At the Jewish museum in Sydney I came to understand a lot about how the situation must have been in my homeland: I found the routes of prisoners' death marches that passed from big cities via Oranienburg to rural areas, like where Sachsenhausen was located. The locals here in the area must have seen something. It is impossible that someone who lived at that time did not notice these death marches passing. In order to fully understand this, I needed this rather brutal picture from Sydney. I had to find another way of presenting the biographies of the "Children of the Orama". Working on this exhibition has motivated me to get back to the book again. It is an exciting experience to write everything by hand or typewriter. It internalizes the texts in a completely different way and I can correct them much better. I believe that if you copy the biography of someone you are interested in by hand, it becomes a part of yourself.

FW You describe your work as peace work. Do you think art can take on this function?

JR Absolutely. I think if we look at the biographies of those who experienced traumatic things in Germany and were not allowed to stay here, we can avoid judgment, instead being able to look and feel. I do not insist that visitors read everything in detail. The children of that time; their lives, the lives of their children and children's children should take up space here. My work is intended as a positive offering, rather than a negative accusation.

JOSSI RÜCKER (born 1970, DE) lives and works in Wandlitz. She grew up in Biesenthal and fled with her mother and younger sister to Berlin-West in June 1989. After completing a vocational baccalaureate, she trained as a photographer at Dia-Direkt in Munich. Afterwards, Jossi Rücker worked as a material and camera assistant for Bayerischer Rundfunk and TV Munich among others. In 2004, she made her debut as a filmmaker with the documentary *Wilhelm der Schäfer*. The film gained international attention and was shown in Leipzig, Duisburg, Cologne, Wismar, Moscow and Paris. It was awarded the *Förderpreis* of the city of Duisburg and the directing prize in Kaufbeuren. In 2006, Jossi Rücker completed her studies as a graduate camerawoman at the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin. Other documentaries followed at home and abroad, including *Über das Regie führen* (2006), *Das Wiedersehen der Theodor Herzl Schüler* (2006), and *750 Jahre Biesenthal* (2009). Solo exhibitions of her black and white photographs took place at the Biesenthal Town Hall (2011) and at the Biesenthal Cultural Station (2017). Jossi Rücker was an active member of the Barnim artist group *KombinArt*. In 2017 she travelled to Australia and New York to meet the contemporary witnesses who fled Germany as children with the passenger ship "Orama".