

Flying Through History
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I'm looking down upon a reverse universe, black is white and white black. I'm hunched over a light table at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland while frame after frame of negatives rush past me. I'm cranking the rolls of film at high speed, my eyes on the lookout for the tell-tale topography that automatically triggers my stopping the roll for a closer look. This is the second day of yet another visit to the archives, research I've been doing from time to time for the past six years. I'm reviewing tens of cans of shots taken by the US Army Air Corps flying missions over Nazi Germany during WW II. They've just been recently declassified by the DIA, and I am searching for aerial views of the Ravensbruck and Gross-Rosen concentration camps.

I need these images as sources for the two remaining drawings in my "Fourteen Stations" suite. I previously found photographs of the other twelve "stations", Auschwitz-Birkenau, Babi Yar, Belzec, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Chelmno, Dachau, Maidanek, Mauthausen, Treblinka, Sobibor and Stutthof. My hand converted their images into marks in charcoal. Images of places where so many millions of people were turned to ashes are now, fittingly, drawn with ashes. I work with the violent motion of a tempest, my focus as sharp as a juggler's.

As I stare at the steady succession of frames passing beneath my gaze, reality loses its certainty, I am flying through history. It is 1943 or possibly 1944, and I am glued to the belly of a B24 Bomber flying countless missions over northern Germany. The breaks between frames act like shutters and the images move in a startling and jerky motion. Sometimes I glimpse the white shadow of my plane, and of the other bombers in my formation, skimming over the landscape. I fly over rail yards, towns and airfields, the terrain is pockmarked by white rings of bomb craters. The flat film surface becomes three-dimensional. Billowing white clouds, here seen ominously black, are palpable to my senses as ink stains on the light surface of the land.

The most surreal and disturbing sensation comes when I fly through the pillars of smoke rising from the targets. The black smoke is brilliantly white, a column rising thousands of feet. The pillars of smoke rush by in highly distorted parallax perspective. I see the depth of the image down to the tiny burning vanishing point below. Occasionally a series of shots from another sortie appear, and I feel the motion of the plane. I skirt the Baltic coast, I barrel over rivers and lakes. I can see the currents and white shadows on riverbanks. These negatives are alive. At last, when each roll ends, the rewinding process begins, a replay of the flight at a higher speed, and I don't really know which is the true direction of motion. Then it is over. This animated history becomes a roll of shiny black film to be returned into its beat-up canister. And a new roll is loaded into the reeling mechanism.

History is a circle, or more precisely a pretzel braided and folded over and over upon itself. Fifty years from now someone will view photographs taken from the almost god-like vantage point of an orbiting satellite. Gazing at the white capped reticulated mountains, quilted and patched valleys and winding rivers, they may reflect upon how people fought, suffered and died. And all they will see is the earth, and it will appear beautiful.