

# The Washington Post

## 'Narcissism of Minor Differences' shows how fast intolerance turns to violence

By Jessica Dawson  
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BALTIMORE - What [happened in Tucson](#) wasn't a lone gunman's shame, but everyone's.

We say suspect Jared Lee Loughner is mentally ill. We say it, because it helps explain the unexplainable. Yet seeing Loughner as the isolated product of one family's bum gene pool is a mistake.

When we interpret a gun rampage as anomalous, we sidestep more pressing questions. We forget how quickly intolerance can turn to violence and how few are willing to speak out when they detect the potential for brutality in another.

Into this dark political moment steps a, sadly, too-relevant exhibition, "The Narcissism of Minor Differences," on view at the Maryland Institute College of Art here. Part cautionary tale, part history lesson, this 18-artist exhibition includes the renowned (Francisco de Goya, Philip Guston) and the lesser-known (Israeli video artist Roe Rosen) whose works - shown alongside historical objects and photographs - add up to poignant and occasionally grim reminders of how quickly fanaticism can turn to slaughter.

While "The Narcissism of Minor Differences" doesn't offer answers, its title suggests a diagnosis. The violence of narcissistic outbursts isn't the same as garden-variety anger.

Recall Adolf Hitler, the erstwhile art student, whose acts of evil are a touchstone of this exhibition. Artist Jonathan Borofsky, in a series of images titled "Both the fascist and the idealist search for perfection," suggests that the proclivities that lead us toward the best also incline us toward the worst. Here, portraits of Borofsky are paired with pictures of Hitler; a picture of the German leader's father is paired with the artist's father, and so on. Borofsky's installation is an embodiment of the banality of evil.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, historical objects do the talking. A quartet of blurred images smuggled from Auschwitz II-Birkenau leaves much to the imagination, but not enough: Naked bodies litter the ground outside the gas chambers. An electroshock console (used to "convert" homosexuals) is a banal object with wishbone-shaped calipers that administered shocks to countless gays. Nineteenth-century photographs of Native Americans - "before" and "after" being Westernized through cropped haircuts and three-piece suits - hint at how a desperate majority's intolerance of difference led to implementing unseemly measures.

Race figures prominently here, too. Stephen Marc's photomontage combines vintage African American images of escaping slaves with the headline "Drapetomania," resurrecting the dubious term of 19th-century pseudoscience used for "diagnosing" blacks who fled captivity. A Guston charcoal drawing evokes Ku Klux Klansmen and lynching.

But probably the most topical image on view in "Narcissism" is a print from Goya's "Disasters of War." Although the Spanish artist created the series in response to French atrocities in Spain, the 11th print from the series on view here speaks eloquently to America's recent tragedy.

In Goya's print, two soldiers attack and drag a pair of innocent women; a baby lies (presumably dead) on the ground; another figure cowers in the shadows. Although Goya employs only a few actors in this scene, the artist conveys the shock and shambles of an unexpected attack on blameless civilians.

If we could imagine the scene in Tucson on Saturday, it might seem something like the chaos of Goya's print.

And then there are the photographs of Karina Aguilera Skvirsky, which speak to how quickly tragedy is forgotten. Skvirsky photographs sites of 19th- and early 20th-century lynchings, sites that today are located along strip malls and in the back yards of rowhouses. The incidents and their victims are largely forgotten. Generations from now, the Tucson strip mall and its Safeway may be fodder for another artist's work. Time is a dastardly champion of amnesia.

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*The Narcissism of Minor Differences runs through March 13 at the Maryland Institute College of Art, 1303 Mount Royal Ave., Baltimore. 410-225-2300.*

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