

ALAN COHEN

American, born Harrisburg, PA, 1943

Now (Auschwitz-Birkenau) 13-2, 1994

Gelatin silver print, 18 7/8 in x 18 1/2 inches

Gift of Ann and Edwin Rothschild, 1995.49.24

Over time, at the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest and most infamous of the Nazis' killing camps, nature consumes human history. Vegetation signifies life, but we face a choice: Allow sites of atrocity to disintegrate and permit nature to conceal genocide? Or pause the destructive effects of time to preserve evidence of humanity's crimes? Attempts to touch the reality of and reach understanding about the Holocaust are impossible. As tourists, what we see and smell is so unlike what prisoners experienced: the air hung with filth and human ash, and in desperate hunger, they ate the grass, flowers, weeds. In specific locations, the grass in Auschwitz-Birkenau was lush and manicured, watered by underground sprinklers. When the new arrivals of Jews and Roma walked unknowingly toward the gas chambers, a camp band was forced to play. Green grass. Music. The promise of a hot shower. As if this were a civilized place. The rumors of Nazi mass murder are false. There is nothing to fear.

This photograph is one from Alan Cohen's series *Now (Auschwitz-Birkenau)*, made in 1994, which depicts seemingly unrecognizable landscapes. Square close-ups of soil, cracked concrete, broken brick, vegetation. The barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau were built of wood; the gas chambers of brick and concrete. Does this photograph show the exterior ruins of one of the four gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau? If so, what is outside and what is inside? With the Allies closing in, the Nazis demolished these buildings before they fled. Evidence was destroyed; genocide denied. In this place, we are both inside and outside at the same time. Near and far. Oxygen and Zyklon B. Understanding and utter bewilderment.

—Danny M. Cohen

Associate Professor of Instruction