

## ARIE GALLES

# Skull

### Drawing the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp from RAF maps

#### 1 December 13, 1993

As I listen to Bach on the tape deck I work on the drawing “Station #5: Bergen-Belsen.” “Konzert für vier Cembali und Orchester a-Moll” conducted by Karl Richter, with the Münchener Bach-Orchester. I listen and draw to the set of tapes I bought nearly seventeen years ago. I occupy myself exclusively with the dark woods and white roads outside of the camp.

After much research and preparatory studies, this is my first full-scale drawing of the *Fourteen Stations/Hey Yud Dalet* suite. The area my charcoal creates allows me to concern myself only with texture and the relative values I am incising upon the paper. The music permeates my head. I enjoy the reverie.

I draw four dots, four tiny black dots on the northwest perimeter of the camp. Suddenly, the reality of what those dots are hits me with the force of a sledgehammer against my heart. These are shadows of guard towers. When this photograph was taken, the towers were manned by the SS. I can feel the camp overflowing with its tortured prisoners.

I break down in tears and am unable to draw anything at all. I call Sara and we go for a walk. She understands. For five years after the war, she herself lived in Bergen-Belsen after the soldiers’ quarters were turned into a displaced persons camp.

#### 2 December 25, 1993

Just completed “Station #5 Bergen-Belsen.” This is probably the most competent drawing I have made in my life. Looking at it, I sense an actual depth of space between me and the concentration camp. I can almost breathe the air rising above it. I believe I could stretch out my hand and feel the wind upon my extended fingers. The camp is so very far below.

It is a strange complex of buildings, straddling a highway and cutting it in half with its barbed wire outline. The white spots are ash pits and mass graves. On the center right of the camp, and just outside the fence, a skull grins at me from a clearing. The skull is the clearing. Three clumps of trees make up its eye sockets and nasal cavity, a glimpse of a secondary road shines through the trees. A white toothy macabre smile!

I saw it immediately as I first set eyes on this old RAF photograph taken on September 13, 1944. The skull is not far from the men’s camp, right past the latrines. Is Nature screaming to heavens the nature of this place? The original photo bears a notation, perhaps by someone from the RAF Air Reconnaissance. It is a small circle enclosing a T junction just to the right of the clearing. Next to the circle, written in white against the dark background, is “X 471664.” I do not include this in the finished work.

People viewing the drawing may ask why I drew a skull there. I can only respond that I didn’t invent it, I drew what I saw in front of my eyes.

**Arie Galles** was born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and lived in Poland and Israel before coming to the U.S. He studied in Rome, Italy, in 1966–67. He received his BFA in 1968 from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and his MFA in 1971 from University of Wisconsin–Madison. He has taught at the University of Wisconsin; Southern Methodist University; School of Visual Arts; University of California, San Diego; and Fairleigh Dickinson University. Currently Galles is professor of painting and drawing at Soka University of America, in Aliso Viejo, California.

## ARIE GALLES

*Fourteen Stations/Hey Yud Dalet suite*  
*Station 5-Bergen-Belsen, 1994*  
Charcoal and white Conté, 47.5 X 75 in

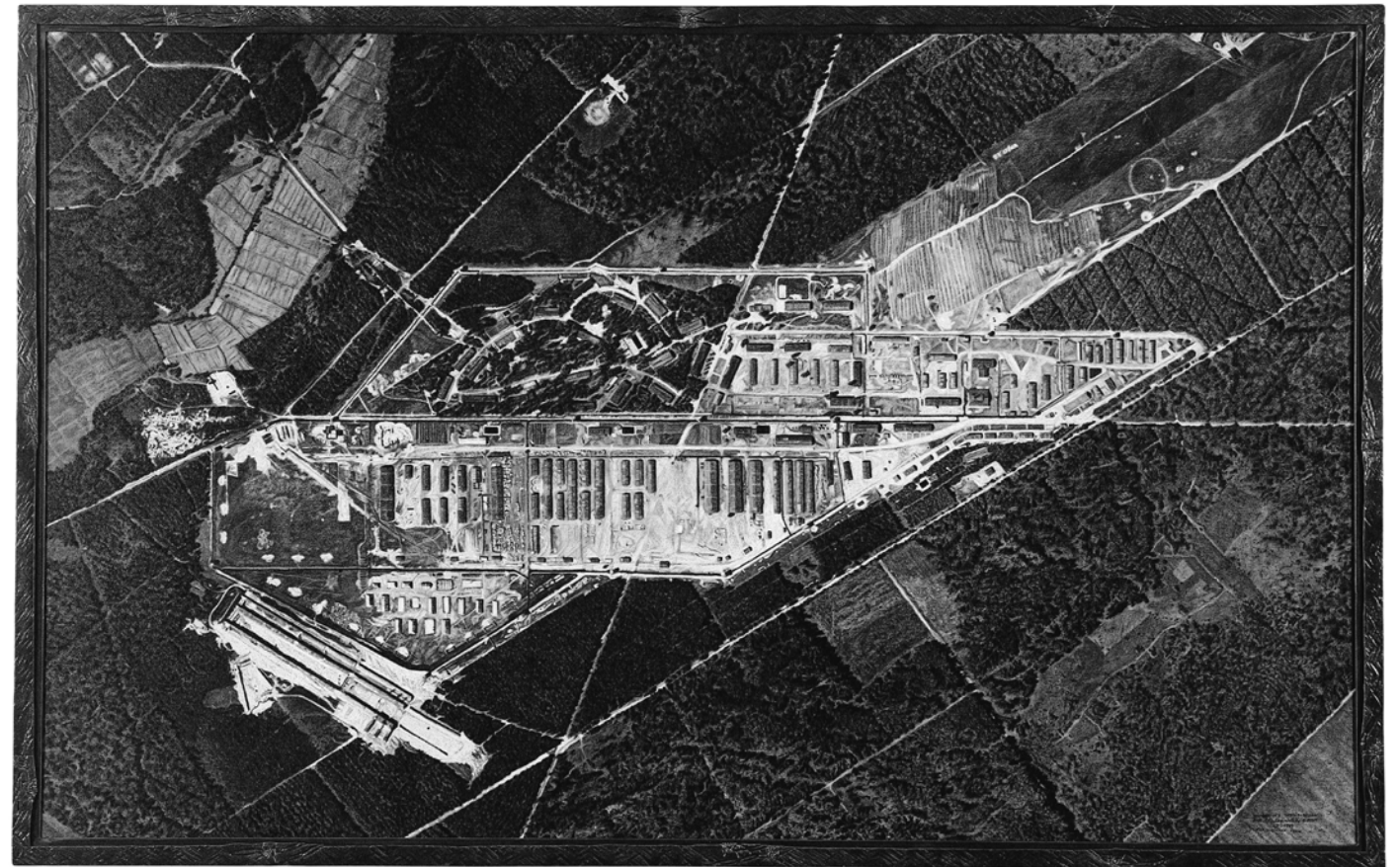


PHOTO: TIM VOLK