



COFA 4 : DR J THOM

Title: Promises, Promises (2016)

Artist: Johan Thom

Medium: Site specific installation at the Old Merensky Library, University of Pretoria (Found object, pine wood, polyurethane foam and mixed media)

Dimensions: 50 x 15 x 20cm.

Exhibited:

Tempo, The UP staff show held at the Old Merensky Library, & The Eduardo Villa Museum University of Pretoria, 2016

Annotation:

‘Promises Promises’ is a continuation of the Faust the African Series I began in 2014 and exhibited at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg for a solo exhibition by the same name in 2015.

This artwork was conceived as a site-specific installation in the Old Merensky building of the University of Pretoria specifically for the staff exhibition. It is a work that is deeply self-reflexive and personal, commenting upon my own place and position in the national student protests that began the year 2015 in South Africa.

The sign (Study=Freedom) comes from the student protest at the Union Buildings in Pretoria for which I made it in October of 2015. I felt it was important to participate in the protests and show my support to the students, even though I could not agree with the manner in which some of their actions escalated into senseless violence and even censorship of artworks. The road to liberation is a difficult one - being fundamentally a democratic quest. In principle at least this should translate into a culture of democratic political process and action. But what are we to do when seemingly democratic institutions repeatedly behave in undemocratic even brutal ways, making unfulfilled promises and refusing to engage in productive, transparent dialogue and policy making?

I have seen the power of education in my life, of how it can fundamentally alter ones socio-economic and cultural expectations and circumstances. My earliest memories were shaped in large by seeing my parents study after hours and in the case of my mother, of making artworks for her studies as well. However, it would take me years to begin to even grasp the complexity of postcolonial politics, of the deeply biased nature of western education and the various institutions that support it. In the case of South Africa, it is indeed true that our very nation exists owing to the colonial forces of ‘God, Gold and Glory’ (to paraphrase a by now common phrase drawn from a collection of texts regarding British Imperialism edited by Winks in 1963).

Returning to the artwork, the original sign reads ‘Study=Freedom’. But in the artwork the ‘equals’ sign is no longer visible, hidden as it is behind the decidedly devilish likeness of Faust. In turn Faust’s face is covered with 23 carat gold leaf and the entire sign is placed upon a crucifix.

Finally the artwork was installed in front of a lead and stained glass window in the Old Merensky Library, a window such as might be found in a church (although located in an institution of higher

learning in this case). This serves for a confrontational experience on the part of the viewer: the light flooding in from the window seems to suggest the possibility of transcendence. But here symbols are jumbled, they jostle for our attention and commonplace meaning becomes loosened from its seeming stable anchors in the registers of salvation, learning, discovery and hope.