

COFA 2 : DR J THOM

Description:

Two creative outputs, large scale site-specific installation and a smaller accompanying sculpture produced for A Place in Time, The Annual Winter Sculpture Fair at Nirox Foundation, curated by Helen Phelby and Mary-Jane Darrol, 7 May -31 July 2016



Title: Hanging Garden

Medium: Site-specific sculpture at Nirox Foundation

Dimensions: 450 x 350 x 350 cm (approx.)

Exhibited: A Place in Time, The Annual Winter Sculpture Fair at Nirox Foundation, curated by Helen Phelby and Mary-Jane Darrol, 7 May -31 July 2016



“...Johan Thom’s *Hanging Garden*, 2016: two bronze feet set atop a glass vitrine on a wooden terrace covered in an off-white polyurethane sludge, its drained, white figure speaking to the changeable politics raging outside the park” (Sean O’ Toole, Artforum: <https://www.artforum.com/picks/nirox-foundation-sculpture-park-60507>)

Annotation:

A contemporary sculpture in lush garden.

The famed hanging gardens of Babylon serve as first reference. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world, an ideal garden bequeathed to us by the very same civilisation that also gave us a mythical tower, and a name: Babylon, cacophonous place of sin and confusion. Today the name conjures up beauty and unease in equal measure.

Our utopian dreams of the garden as space persist but are here perversely rendered in three dimensional form as a messy, material affair. A nightmarish garden inside the ideal space of the Nirox Sculpture park. But this garden is small and consists of weeds kept inside a massive glass vitrine; a pair of feet (the artists’) cast in bronze placed atop the glass box; a modernist inspired terrace made from wood and mixed media; and, finally, a large mass of polyurethane foam exploding, bulging, oozing and dripping all over the entire structure and its surrounds.

The artist is present throughout the work: the glass vitrine’s dimensions are drawn directly from my body, as is the total weight of the polyurethane foam and bronze feet combined (103 kg). Closer inspection reveals a peculiar, personal detail: at the time of making the mould of my feet I was



wearing my favourite household shoes - flip flops (or 'Crocs' to use the common brand name).

A modernist inspired terrace serves as the base upon which the drama is played out. Le Corbusier in pine and saligna: clean horizontal and vertical lines, the entire form literally hangs from a central core of four wooden pillars, with modular sections that can easily be fitted, modified and moved. But this is Africa and the structure immediately reminds of the familiar appendages of homes, lodges and hotels the continent over: the 'deck' that extend the home into the untamed space of the veld – a space reserved primarily for luxury, leisure and looking (breakfast, sundowners, bring your binoculars, you might see something wild out there).

The glass vitrine is the ever present sparring partner of the museum visitor. The cool air of detachment and disembodiment surrounds its very presence. A foil hidden in plain sight: protect and (pre)serve. This will last you will not. It is made with surgical precision and contained in a crisp polished stainless steel outer frame.

And the polyurethane foam? It is a synthetic material predominantly used in the building industry to plug gaps and to keep structures such as wooden walls in place. If not exposed to direct sunlight it has a lifetime of seventy years (or longer). It is fire retardant, and sealed here with a layer of UV protection. Nothing can disguise the fact that this industrial material, that it will not last as long as glass, bronze. This material is the very antitheses of the relative, though persistent, wholesomeness and naturalness of the garden and the ideals that underpin it.

To end, a question. Can something not be both celebration and critique? Is it not possible to love the complex mess we are part of and to still harbour serious reservations about it too?

In this moment in this country.



COFA 4 : DR J THOM

Title: The Cleaner

Medium: Polyurethane foam, Material One, Found Objects, Saligna wood & Cast of Human Skull

Dimensions: 105 x 65 x 135 cm (approx.)

Exhibited:

A place in Time, The Annual Winter Sculpture Fair at Nirox Foundation, Curated by Helen Phelby and Mary-Jane Darrol, 7 May -31 July 2016

Critical Discharge, group exhibition at Priest Gallery, 60-20 October 2016, curated by Wayne Matthews and Alison Shaw.

Annotation:

This is an accompanying piece to 'The Hanging Garden' (shown in COFA3) and was simultaneously exhibited at the Nirox Foundation during the Winter Sculpture Fair 2016.

'The Cleaner' was shown elsewhere on site during the Winter Sculpture fair and was meant to act as a kind of footnote to 'The Hanging Garden'. Broadly the artwork was meant to suggest something about the human cost of the work - not only in monetary terms but also in terms of health and other socio-cultural forms of human capital and meaning. The human skull seems to bubble out from the overflowing mess in the broken bucket shape, with the mandible clearly visible on the edge. In this way the cleaning bucket and mop suggest a paradox - the 'mess' is produced by the very tools required to clean it.

Working with Polyurethane foam on these scale that I was for the Hanging Garden, also constitutes a real threat to the environment and human health. In simple terms the foam releases toxic gas when the components are mixed and chemically react. One has to wear a gas mask during the process.

The question of cleaning 'The Hanging Garden' was also a problem for me - I knew the work would not sell as it was simply not a commercial artwork. It was actually one of the motivating reasons why I was awarded a grant by the Claire Eduardo Villa Trust to produce such an impractical a large-scale sculpture.

I knew that would have to come clean what would effectively be a giant mess at the end of the exhibition. This practical problem thus also underpins the making of 'The Cleaner' as a companion piece: it suggests that if one is working on artworks without considering any commercial imperative, one is often stuck with the work too. (One of my old lecturers in the UK actually hired a skip on permanent basis so she could discard her work as it returned from exhibitions all over the world. I have since started doing the same once my artworks are documented).

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

URLS:

<https://www.artdependence.com/articles/the-aestheticized-interview-with-johan-thom-south-africa/>

<https://artthrob.co.za/2016/05/19/a-place-in-time-interview-with-helen-pheby/>

<https://www.artforum.com/picks/nirox-foundation-sculpture-park-60507>

ACCOMPANYING PUBLICATIONS

Sassen, R 2016. 'Johan Thom', IN: Claire and Eduardo Villa Trust. Sculpture Grants for A Place in Time, Nirox Sculpture Park 2016, p13. Eduardo Villa Trust: South Africa

Willemse, E. 2016. Johan Thom, pp 23-26 IN: A place in Time. Sassen, R (ed). Kromdraai: Nirox Foundation