

Mikołaj Sobczak

Installation view MIKOŁAJ SOB CZAK, 'Impossible Songs', 2024, Jester, Genk, photo Stef Renard



In March, the Polish artist Mikołaj Sobczak (1989) staged the musical *The Universal Empire* at the Mennonite Church in Amsterdam. For 'Impossible Songs,' his art exhibition at Jester in Genk — the first under its new artistic director, Koi Persyn — Sobczak has translated the musical by recombining elements of the stage set and costumes (including a costume worn by the William Blake character) with filmed and sound recordings of the staged play. *The Universal Empire* tells the fictional story of two members of an Anabaptist commune in Amsterdam and the turmoil they experience when the painter-poet William Blake joins their commune. Playing with the ideas of economics, spirituality and modernity, the three characters represent the Tria Prima, the alchemical properties of Salt, Sulfur and Mercury, whereby the latter refers to Blake.

In the musical, the Blake character — a messiah of sorts — tries to help the commune escape the threats of modernity, such as capitalistic overproduction and the homogenisation of society. However, the Anabaptist commune considers religious persecution the main threat to its survival. Blake terms any process of

conformity the 'universal empire,' since modernity's demand for a shared consciousness engenders oppression and erasure, as in the case of queer history.

To re-stage his play, Sobczak has transformed Jester's brand-new kunsthall into a darkly lit, abandoned living space, whose immersive scenography plunges viewers into a theatre-like catacomb, where three shrines pay homage to heretics. Several wooden cutouts featuring collages of archival materials, photos and drawings thrust viewers into a narrative that spans centuries. The impossibility referred to in the title is the one constantly looming over any historical fact. As Blake himself remarked, 'The history of all times and places is nothing else but improbabilities and impossibilities; what we should say, was impossible if we did not see it always before our eyes'. Paradoxically, the process of restaging anything makes it history. (Sue Spaid)

Mikołaj Sobczak, 'Impossible Songs', through 31 August 2024, Jester, Genk, www.jester.be

KM21, The Hague

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum



The multidisciplinary practice of Botswana native Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum (1980, Botswana) comprises drawing, installation, painting and stop-motion animation. Her timeless landscapes explore the way people's identities are tied to their geographic and cultural past. Having lived in Botswana, Canada, Malawi, the Netherlands, Panama, South America, Sri Lanka, Sudan and the United States, her figurative paintings patch together vivid memories of particular landscapes, as well as references from a vast array of films, literature, theatre and other story-telling forms. Driven by a fascination with ancient mythologies and scientific theories, Sunstrum's artworks muse on the origins of time, geological concepts and ideas about the universe.

The title of the exhibition, 'The Gods and The Underdogs,' is taken from an essay by the influential South African writer Bessie Head (1937–1986) who was exiled in Botswana from 1964 until her premature death. In addition to exhibiting twelve recent paintings (since 2020) and a large-scale drawing, Sunstrum is presenting a new installation featuring the diptych *Exit Permit* (2024) staged with pieces of furniture from Kunstmuseum Den Haag's collection of applied art.

By combining ideas familiar to Afro-mythology with Afrofuturism, Sunstrum's elaborately layered paintings simultaneously reference a distant past, as well as a hopeful future ensuring Africans greater empowerment. Given her use of delicately hatched zones of coloured pencil and crayon in addition to oil and acrylic, some of her paintings resemble school-book illustrations. Hardly portraits of particular people, her paintings and drawings depict ordinary people experiencing everyday situations; as the exhibition brochure puts it, 'a nebulous cast of bodies in constant flux amidst ever-slipping and insufficient notions of selfhood and belonging.' For example, women in their Sunday best wait on benches, a knitter proudly displays a skein of orange yarn, uniformed schoolgirls chat on their way to school, ancestors appear as ghostly apparitions and extinct species reappear. (Sue Spaid)

'The Gods and the Underdogs', through 20 October 2024, KM21, The Hague, www.km21.nl

PAMELA PHATSIMO SUNSTRUM, *The Knitter*, 2020, pencil, oil and acrylic on wood panel, 122 x 91 cm