

Faust the African Series (2015)



Faust the African: The Explorer

by
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I. Project Description

For 'The Devil Made me do it: Faust the African Series' a solo exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg in 2015 I presented a conceptual body of work focused upon exploring my artistic relationship with a 19th century ceramic bust of Faustus. By combining a number of found objects with the Faustus sculpture I created a series of characters that populated an imaginary world. In this way I viewed the project as a process of opening up imaginary possibilities not only in relation to the object and its signified meanings but, also, in a more self-referential way: these hybrid portraits of Faust serve as much to embody aspects of my own personality, education, history, likes and dislikes as they serve as a form of commentary on contemporary South African culture and politics.

On one hand the quest for earthly knowledge, fame and power looms large: after all Faustus sells his soul to the devil purely out of greed and hubris. But on the other, we must consider that today such superstition might seem largely discredited, and that the excuse, 'the devil made me do it', hardly suffices to absolve one of the consequences of your earthly actions.



At least here Faustus remains steadfast, almost principled in his acceptance of his own disgrace – even as the devil's emissaries come to collect, dismembering his body and carrying his soul off to hell Faust still takes responsibility for his choices. All sculptures in the Faust Series are made predominantly from polyurethane builders foam – a medium that allows for quick almost sketch-like sculptural forms to emerge. However the expanding foam generates oozing bulges and flesh like textures that lend a strong visceral, material component to the body of work. This decidedly material component to the work stands in stark contrast to the otherwise ethereal, spiritual subject matter of the Faustus tale.



Top left, right to bottom:
Faust the African Series: The speaker; Shift & Two fucking typewriters



2. Exhibitions/ Web links and related content

2.1 Exhibitions:

The works from this series have been exhibited on numerous occasions including the following solo and group exhibitions including at:

The Goodman Gallery (2015)

The Johannesburg Art Fair (Kalashnikov Gallery, 2018)

Priest Gallery (2016),

The University of Pretoria (2016)

'Tacit' a touring group exhibition (Pretoria Art Museum, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, NWU Gallery, William Humphrey's Art Museum) (2016)

The head offices of the Pretoria News (2015).

2.2 Weblinks:

<https://johanthom.com/installations/2014-15-faust-the-african-series/>

<https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/johan-thom-the-devil-made-me-do-it/>

<https://artfacts.net/exhibition/johan-thom-the-devil-made-me-do-it/663536>

<http://ex-chamber-memo5.seesaa.net/article/418594066.html>

2.3 Ten minute video documentary of exhibition

'Johan Thom talks about "The devil made me do it" solo at the Goodman Gallery', 7 March 2015.

Available online:

<https://vimeo.com/122443490>



Faust the African Series: The politician

3. Research notes and images: 'Faustus the African', a series of artworks by Johan Thom 2014-2015

(These notes formed the basis of a research lecture I presented at the University of Pretoria about the work in 2015. They are published on my website as well).

*'Approach the brink serenely and accept the risk /of melting into nothingness' (Goethe's Faust, p57)
 'I look upon myself as a reasonable temple of God' (Faustus of Milevis, Numidia, North Africa circa 350-400 AD).*

Almost all the works from this series are direct casts in polyurethane foam drawn from a 19th century French ceramic bust of Faustus and combined with other found objects. I fall in love with this bust of Faustus almost a decade ago. This Faustus is a wall-mounted ceramic in the kitchen my friend Guy Du Toit. Guy tells me that the sculpture has been in his family for as long as he can remember. His mother was frightened by it as child and so too it is with him and with his children. The bogeyman in the hall. But for reasons wholly unclear to me I am drawn to it. This attraction is the starting point for this series of works now known as 'Faust the African'. Two interrelated, immediate questions. First, why am I drawn to this devilish figure? And, then what does this attraction say about A. the artwork (this particular bust of Faustus, its formal and material properties) and B. about me? Of course it is one thing to answer these question by speaking or writing about them and completely another to make series of artworks through which to consider and indeed materially process the answers to these questions. With this caveat in place I turn to a discussion of the working process.

1. Process

Throughout the working process is more or less the same. First I make a silicone mould of the original ceramic Faustus after which I proceed to cast copies thereof in ordinary builders foam. Builders foam

sets in approximately thirty seconds and expands approximately fifteen times its original size. This makes for a rather unpredictable casting process, one in which artistic decisions have to be made in a split second. It is like drawing, or to be more precise like making a quick sketch of a moving figure. If you don't get it exactly right in the moment, catch the gesture, the form or the movement, no amount of work after the fact can ever fix it. I enjoy this game and refuse to tame the material. Each time I cast another copy I add however much of the mixture I feel is appropriate. When I add too much the foam bulges and bubbles out of the formal constraint imposed by the mould. The same gaping hole into which the mixture is poured is also the very same cavity from whence the rapidly expanding foam leaks back into the outside.



Left to right: Faust the African Series: The doctor; The capitalist

2. Frozen moments

The whole process of casting with builders foam is a game in which the process itself is captured as something like frozen three-dimensional moment. Again the builders foam sets in a matter seconds – even as it continues to gurgle and expand it coagulates and stalls seemingly mid-movement. I turn the mould around as I pour the thick gooey mix into it. When I de-mould Faustus' neck and shoulders appear stretched far beyond the limits of ordinary flesh and bone. This Faustus' plasticky foamy porcelain-like body is presented as if in process of being pulled apart, of oozing, of putrefying and/or of reconstitution itself anew. Over and over again. A note in my studio reads: "Is this hell? No, there is no hope after hell. This body is being reanimated, given a new lease on life. Besides, I am not the devil".



Faust the African Series : The healer & The musician

3. On character

Each foam Faustus is unique. Some of the cast heads are smaller, others much larger, clumsy even. But perhaps more to the point, once mounted the different size and shape of each cast lends a particular character to the face of Faustus. This one seems devious, another withdrawn, one more feminine and others meaner, delirious even evil. But as it is in life so it is in art. Each millimetre matters. Nudge a bust forward by only a fraction and loses its balance, it begins to fall. Suddenly the eyes appear drawn into the skull, the shoulders hunched and somewhat unsure. From a self-assured chin raised high to figure huddled in conspiracy in five millimetres. Add a dash of pink and blue and play havoc with Faustus' gender. Each millimetre another gesture, each gesture another world.

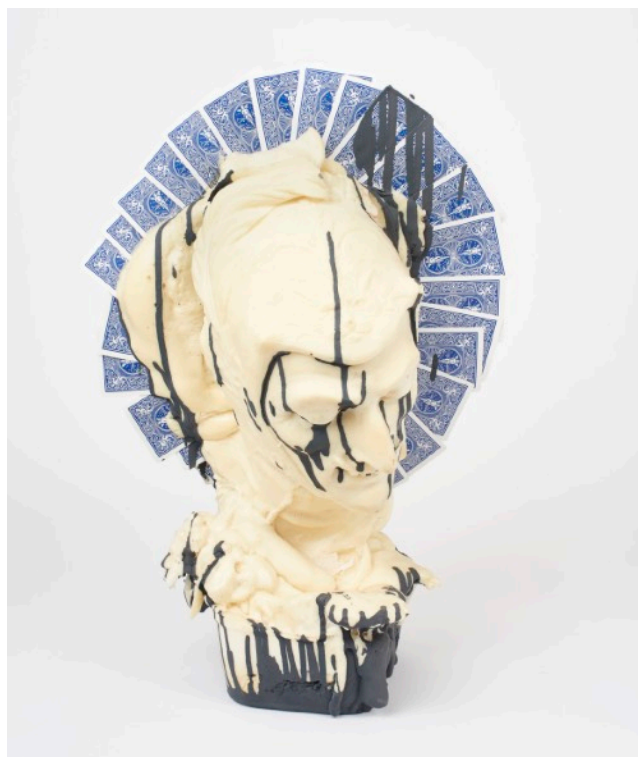
4. Combines

'Whilst playing with a deck of cards I realise that if I combine these foamy Faustusses with other objects the difference between the casts can be explored with even more depth and complexity. In



Faust the African Series: Health and sanitation

this case, I create a Janus-type head that resembles a figure from Victorian English Royalty: the Victorian ruff collar made from a spread of cards, one side Dutch blue and white, on the other, red and black figures (numbers, kings and queens and so forth). I laugh when I mount this obscene two-faced-figure on an ice cream bucket. Presto! The ruff collar is transformed into a sail for a tub. But where to? (The colonies is suspect). A splash of blackboard paint completes the work. There is some space for writing and rewriting history – the game continues. It is as much one of chance as it is of skill. Faustus the great gambler risked everything on one hand.



Faust the African Series: Old two-face

For “Faust the African: Health and Sanitation” the bust is coupled with a wooden toilet, an antique potty trainer. This a tongue in cheek ode to Duchamp’s ‘Fountain’ of 1917 but also to the ‘History of shit’ (1978) by Dominique Laporte, a little known but rather amazing book about the sewers of Paris. To be more specific, Laporte chronicles the history of sewage in Paris and how, after completely rebuilding the city in the nineteenth century as the modern French capital, residents are finally forced to take ownership of their waste.

This game with found objects and meaning seem to me closely analogous to way in which I relate to the objects that populate my material surroundings and how in turn, these surroundings exercise a very real influence on my identity as an individual. Put two or more seemingly disparate elements together – a paintbrush, a speaker and a head cast in foam – and soon other things start to happen. ‘Other’ as something in between them that is really irreducible to any single element or predetermined causal structure. This is some kind of magic, one found in the particular way surfaces rub off on one another. To use a metaphor, we are attracted to our mates because we desperately desire to be close to them. If this is so it is because there is always a fools hope that the magic that so imperceptibly draws us to them may rub off on us. But only if we can get close enough, for long enough. And what of objects? Are we immune to their charms? I think not.

5. Performative relations

My meaningful relationship with the objects included in this body of work is time – and – place specific. That is to say this relationship is indelibly shaped by the experiences, ideas, discrete histories and even the presence of the other objects that I may encounter in a particular moment. During a breakfast at a small restaurant in Queenswood, Pretoria I discover standing beside my chair a wooden potty trainer for sale at the antiques shop next door. Whilst browsing through a second hand bookshop, I read about erstwhile leader of the South African Communist Party Chris Hani’s disgust with the armed struggles’ military training camps during apartheid. In brief, Hani was infuriated by the fact that the exiled comrades and military trainers were living a life of luxury whilst the new recruits were dressed in rags, semi-starving boys with guns. And Faustus? Well let me just say as a product of Afrikaner Calvinism I applaud the man that shunned superstition and chose reason, no matter what the final outcome.

In this way the foam casts of Faustus exist as the very material embodiment of my performative relationship with the original object and its varied meanings. Faustus has a meaningful history and I cannot neatly extrapolate my attraction to the object from those meanings.



Faust the African Series: Punching bag

Still, the object also exists in the here and now, and so it would be utterly foolish to pretend that all I love is its history, the story of Faust if you will. To only love history, received narrative is to be trapped in a loveless relationship that will never be consummated in the here and now. And how could it?

To love a ghost is to fall in love with nostalgia.



Faust the African Series: The carpenter



Faust the African Series (top to bottom): Coalstove; Reading table



Top to bottom: Faust the African Series:: Autoportrait in gold, 206 plates of glass and mixed mediums;
Installation view; The Wegmann report



Top to bottom: Faust the African Series: Selfportrait in copper; On the 7th day he rested; The prospector



Faust the African Series: Law and Order (cast in bronze)

