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Once upon a time...

Olivie Keck at Commune.1

By Thea Ferreira

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Olivie Keck

Installation view: *The After Party & Over My Dead Body*, 2014. Linen, silk and embroidery cotton & Linen and embroidery cotton Each: 120 x 145 cm .

Through the ages people all over the world have been telling stories to each other. Some stories are told to make sense of the world we live in, to explain the things we do not understand. The artworks on display in the solo exhibition, 'False Priest: A Tale of Immortality', can be interpreted as an attempt by the Cape Town based artist, Olivie Keck, to share her understanding of the world by telling a few stories of her own – stories about life, death and meaning.



Olivie Keck

Installation view of *False Priest*
2014
Photograph

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These stories barely veil the terrifying possibility, or maybe even the reality, that there is no absolute truth, that the world is fragmented and chaotic and no matter how many stories we tell – not a single one will ever make sense of the world. The only certainty in our existence is death, which ironically is also the ultimate unknown and something we mostly do not have control over. The ultimate aim of the exhibition is however, not to reject these false narratives as useless, but rather to knowingly

embrace them for the fiction they are. This results in an uncomfortable tension that underlies the whole exhibition – an eerie silence in anticipation of the proverbial storm. Although she acknowledges this tension, Keck chooses to find meaning by lingering in the comfortable illusions the stories offer her, lovingly exploring and elaborating them further while specifically investigating their relation to memory, dreams, meditation and sleep. Through her work she is consciously marvelling in the exquisite fragility and unique beauty of the random stories that for her, mark human existence.

The influences of Keck's background in printmaking are evident throughout the exhibition. The works were made using a variety of techniques for printing on fabric which she combined with embroidery and quilting. She does not limit herself to a specific medium or style however: rather the style, materials and

art events calendar

Wednesday, November 12

11:00am [Walkabout: Rembrandt in South Africa](#)

5:00pm [Open Studios @ Assemblage](#)

6:00pm [Fortunes Remixed @ ASA Galle](#)

Thursday, November 13

9:00am [THE TRUTH BOOTH @ Iziko S](#)

5:30pm [From African Earth @ Iziko Slav](#)

6:30pm [Lecture: Thembinkosi Goniwe @ Iziko S](#)

Friday, November 14

3:00pm [Sammy's Fundraising Concert & Auction](#)

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processes used for the creation of each of the individual works is guided by the unique story that they allude to. The work *Shutter* (2014) for example, is made with ink and embroidery on a background of cork, while *L'Inconnu I - VI* (2014) consists of a grouping of porcelain masks. Equally important as the careful selection of materials are the processes of making the works – these time-consuming acts becoming a form of meditation themselves.



Olivie Keck
Living with the Living, and Dying with the Dead
2014
Quilt made with poly-cotton and embroidery thread
214 x 146 cm
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The use of coloured embroidered lines to create a gradient effect in *Over my Dead Body* (2014); the solid black embroidered lines used in *The Big Sleep* (2014) and *The After Party* (2014); as well as the way Keck names, signs and dates these artworks are all reminiscent of techniques employed in printmaking. Before feminism and the new craft movements of the 1960s and 1970s, needlework and quilt-making were seen as women's crafts and the objects made were not considered 'fine art'. Instead they were viewed as less intellectually involved, serving utilitarian purposes in the household. They were not traditionally signed, and in doing so explicitly, Keck is making a clear statement about the status of the works she creates and herself as a woman and an artist. In the context of the exhibition this can be interpreted as a general rejection of the narratives of Modernism that described the world as reasonable and structured, thereby creating a false sense of security.

Despite this, Keck draws on the domestic associations attached to needlework and quilting using it to create a sense of familiarity and a feeling of safety. The quilts *Living with the Living, and Dying with the Dead* (2014) and *Bless You* (2012) are both of a size that one can easily imagine being wrapped around a sleeping body. *Living with the Living, and Dying with the Dead*, is made out of poly cotton squares, with human shapes in different shades of dark turquoise printed on them. The aimlessly floating figures merge together to form a dreamlike landscape, highlighted by evenly spaced white and red embroidered outlines of the same human shapes. Although the whimsical artwork comments on the aimlessness and fragmented nature of the world as the artist perceives it, the work does not invoke fear but rather a resigned acceptance and peacefulness.



Olivie Keck
Lost in the Light III
2014
Silk, relief printing ink and embroidery cotton
24 x 32 cm
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Working once again in a different, more expressive style, the artworks *Lost in the Light I, II, III and IV* (2014) each depict a female figure. The rugged black lines of the human forms are printed on a background of silk, with embroidered stitches adding colour. The figures occupy a transitional space, moving from the light and ultimately surrendering to the darkness, pointing to the escape that sleep or even death brings. The pattern of the stitches in peach, pale yellow and brown, together with the rugged outlines of the figures combine to create an uncanny dream world where nothing is clearly defined.

'False Priest: A Tale of Immortality' is a personal and introspective exhibition, giving only small glimpses of the bigger picture the artist envisions. Complex and varied, every work was carefully considered and meticulously created, each one only hinting at the stories that lay hidden within it. Visitors are invited to draw on their personal memories and dreams to make sense of the artworks in their own unique way – the possibilities for interpretation becoming endless.

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The Looming Presence of Olivie Keck

Anna Stielau

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