

Artwork Production in Response to Specific Historical Research in West Africa

Joe Turpin

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From January to March 2020, I was invited to be Artist in Residence with RAW Material Company, Centre for Art, Knowledge and Society in Dakar, Senegal. I produced a body of artworks in response to a recently uncovered history of the Holocaust in what was then known as French West Africa. The French Colonial Regime, once France was defeated by Germany during the Second World War in Europe and the Vichy puppet government was set up, began to implement anti-Semitic laws in West Africa. In addition to specifically anti-Jewish laws, a concentration camp was established in the town of Sebikotane, where prisoners of wars and Jews who contravened the discriminatory laws were sent for hard labour. My research included speaking with and reading the papers of the professors who uncovered this history recently; visiting the Université Cheikh Anta Diop and the Senegalese National Archives in Dakar; site visits to the former camp grounds in Sebikotane; reaching out to and engaging with people who have a knowledge of this past; including an author and historian of the town; and after producing and presenting the artworks at RAW Material Company, through their VOX Artis artist presentation series, I was in conversation with an art critic about the work itself. Producing artworks in response to a sensitive history and past, one that is an entanglement of the holocaust and colonialism in Africa, has not been an easy undertaking, and I approached it with a sensibility of awareness regarding representation of bodies, power structures, narrative direction and poetic license. I returned to South Africa a few days before the pandemic induced Lockdowns, but after some months I presented the artworks to 9th Street, a Jewish Artist Group in Johannesburg. This eventually led to the work being exhibited in 2021 at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, where yet another artwork was made. A walkabout took place, and literature that related to the history was on display for further engagement of the viewers.

After some further research in the archives of Yivo and the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, the latest artwork was produced, which extends the history into the First World War, where Jewish and Senegalese points of contact were artistically documented in Europe. This project is an evolving and continuing one, that illuminates history through the archives and artworks made in response to them. At the time of writing there are nine individual artworks: paintings, drawings, installations and a video work, that comprise this project. It interrogates the margins of totalitarianism, the complexity and entanglement of the position of Jewish people in Colonial Africa, and questions the current need to highlight such histories in a post-Colonial context.

Biographical Note

Joe Turpin (b.1995 in Johannesburg) is a visual artist whose research practice focuses on historically charged narratives and semiotics as expansions of painting. Joe makes mixed-media installations grounded in painting about identity, memory, and history.

Turpin graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 2018 with a BA in Fine Art.

Further Resources about this work

<https://www.jhbholocaust.co.za/remembrance/online-resources/>

https://www.jhbholocaust.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Joe_Turpin_online_exhibition.pdf

http://search2.cjh.org:1701/permalink/f/1o7aamh/CJH_ALEPH005564865

<http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/3338>

Some examples of the Artwork

