

Mikołaj Sobczak

Installation view MIKOŁAJ SOBCZAK, '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