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^ REVIEW

Jennet Thomas: The Unspeakable Freedom Device

4 July – 22 August 2015, Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool

By **Laura Robertson**



“I’m back... and you knew I was coming...” What is a Margaret Thatcher doing in a Blackpool art gallery? On second glance, this is a caricature of the so-called Iron Lady, the ‘Blu Lady’, a central character in Jennet Thomas’s excellent film installation *The Unspeakable Freedom Device*. Played with gusto by specialist impersonator Caroline Bernstein – from the blonde wig and handbag to the delivery dripping with vitriolic scorn – Thatcher’s doppelgänger holds court, spewing soundbites via large video screens amid an array of props and sculptural elements from the film.

But this is not a reenactment of 1980s British politics; Thomas uses the former Conservative prime minister’s era as a loose canvas for a hallucinatory dystopia. In Thomas’s world, voting is banned and citizens are persuaded to follow the Blu Lady, who (we are told) is prophesied to give true spiritual fulfilment. More like a goddess, she offers her followers the ‘Unspeakable Freedom Device’: a technology that ‘feeds’ them feelings of contentment. “These people”, says the Blu narrator, who watches over

proceedings, “crave another kind of meaning.” However, this comes at a price: citizens are required to waive their rights to free speech, democracy and privacy.

If the Blu Lady is the antagonist in Thomas’s film, then Glenda is the protagonist: a cynical peasant, Glenda’s choices have been taken away, and as a consequence she desires a new political spectrum. She meets and decides to accompany anxious fellow peasant Mary, who is on a pilgrimage with her baby to ‘Blupool’ to purchase the Device. Along the way, Glenda weeds out who is and isn’t to be trusted – from surveillance spaceships to sinister party campaigners – by wearing sunglasses that reveal truths; much like Roddy Piper in John Carpenter’s 1988 horror *They Live*. And the 80s pop culture references don’t stop there – low-budget BBC TV series like the 1981 adaptation of *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and *Robin Hood caper Maid Marian and Her Merry Men* (1989–94) spring to mind.

As with Thomas’s previous works *All Suffering SOON TO END!* (2010) and *School of Change* (2012), the film gaily highlights contemporary fears (in this case, of uninspiring politics and our dependency on technology) via wicked satire, as a result planting seeds of doubt – and therefore debate – among the laughs. Thomas avoids slipping into moral instruction by placing the conversation in an irreverent world; the low-budget aesthetic (including the artist’s trademark unsteady special effects and handmade costumes) suits the film’s nod to present-day austerity.

Yes, the messages are delivered through over-the-top acting and a sci-fi narrative, but as with all good satire, serious self-reflection lingers. Confronting the state of contemporary politics, Thomas mocks everything from electioneering to voting systems. It is worth mentioning here that the exhibition worried a jittery local council (which funds this gallery) so much that it was postponed until after the May 2015 general election, amid fears it might influence voters. Make of that what you will.

Climaxing at the evangelical Blupool conference (filmed on location at Winter Gardens Blackpool, where Thatcher made many of her best-remembered speeches), Thomas’s film encourages the characters to break free from existing political structures. By using real Thatcher quotes throughout (including the 1980s epitaph, “There is no such thing as society”), the artist compares Britain’s current political climate with Thatcher’s, and notes the remarkable similarity.

This article was first published in the October 2015 issue.

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