

## Nicola Roos

*Pedestal (Sic semper evellō mortem tyrannis/Thus always I bring death to tyrants)*, 2017

In my previous body of work, I explored the ways in which women's perceptions about themselves have changed over the last five hundred years. I particularly focused on how certain dichotomous female figures from the colonial narrative became the epicentre for this change.

This piece, *Pedestal (Sic semper evellō mortem tyrannis/Thus always I bring death to tyrants)*, takes on a more contemporary stance: the female subject becomes more universal, more anonymous. It speaks to an aggressively masculine outlook that eradicates any sense of autonomy attributed to the female body. The woman becomes "a common household object" – a material possession. However, the furniture element suggests that she still forms an integral part of the familial/societal structure: if a living room had to be devoid of chairs, for example, then several of the functions it normally facilitates would be rendered null and void.

The chair-figure's slightly elongated neck is rooted in the personal adornment/social practices of the Ndebele people of my South African homeland. In previous times, a married Ndebele woman would wear multiple copper, brass and even gold rings (*idzila*) around her arms, legs and neck in order to symbolise the strength and fidelity of her bond to her husband. The practice was only taken up once the married couple's new family home had been constructed. These objects of ritual power were gifted to women by their husbands as an indication of affluence and as a token of good fortune. Wealthy women would come to wear numerous *idzila*, which resulted in the elongation of the neck. Even though it is no longer common practice to wear the neck-rings on a permanent basis, the elongated neck aesthetic is still strongly associated with notions of prosperity, authority and a thriving domestic environment. This is placed in juxtaposition to the degradation of the woman to nothing more than a common household object.

Furthermore, *Pedestal's* serene facial expression and the resting position of the arms suggests that, on some level, the woman's work is already done: even though 'she' appears to be trapped in the gender role assigned to 'her' by the patriarchy, 'she' is aware of 'her' inherent power and is waiting for the tyrants – that have been using 'her' to elevate themselves for centuries – to finally fall. The Latin phrase in the subtitle, *Sic semper evellō mortem tyrannis*, was originally attributed to Marcus Junius Brutus during the murder of Julius Caesar. Brutus has come to symbolise the ultimate traitor and thus this association with his words proposes that, since ancient times, influential women have often been discredited as turncoats, deserters and villains.

The phrase translates as "Thus always I bring death to tyrants" and is also said to have been shouted aloud by John Wilkes Booth, another dichotomous figure in history, the moment before he pulled the trigger to assassinate US President Abraham Lincoln. In this context, in the terms of Luigi Ciuti\*, it advocates that *this is what you get when you attempt to rule over people. This is what anyone gets when they try to rule over people. Tyrants get overthrown. That's the way it has always been and that's the way it'll always be.* It introduces a sense of

hope to the age-old cycle of female oppression by suggesting that this kind of death will inevitably come to despotic rulers... and patriarchal tyrants.

\*Cuiti, Luigi. 2016. *What exactly did John Wilkes Booth mean by "sic semper tyrannis"?* Viewed 16/07/2017, <<https://www.quora.com/What-exactly-did-John-Wilkes-Booth-mean-by-sic-semper-tyrannis>>