The sanitization of words, hands and politics

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During the second World War rumour had it that the German industrial war complex had established ‘corpse factories’ where bodies - particularly those pouring out of the concentration camps - were collected and divested of their fat for soap production on an industrial scale. The idea of creating a cleaning product out of that which was considered impure carries a seed of irony which is amplified when seen within the particular species of totalitarian control which grew within Germany in the first half of the 20th Century. The fascist regime nurtured a culture of inveterate cleanliness which it correlated with racial purity while at the same time using language and a fine-tipped propaganda machine to associate its Jewish victims with disease-carrying vermin in order to render them dangerously ‘other’ and thus make the mass murder taking place at the time consistent with their views. Hitler himself was obsessive about personal hygiene, and the image of the pathological leader repeatedly scrubbing his hands with soap made out of Jewish fat is both mordant and ironic.

The rumour of Nazi human-fat soap has since been debunked by historians, but the image of the dictator washing his hands with the remnants of his perceived enemy is nonetheless instructive. Norbert Francis Attard’s latest series of installation works, Theendworks, takes its cue from the metaphorology that accumulates around this contradictory image, extending the tensions inherent in the obsession with illusory cleanliness into the contemporary Maltese context where, in an atmosphere rife with political corruption, disease and encumbered speech, the idea of sanitisation has acquired dark echoes.

One’s hands are washed at the behest of the desire to scrub out anything unsavoury that might have accumulated there, errant virus cells for example, or the traces of criminal action. Think frontline responders in hospital wards, or Prime Ministers and the convenient disassociation from close friends and trusted collaborators. Pandemics, whether they are political or biological, inspire mass hand washing. Similarly, dirty money undergoes a process of sanitisation when it is laundered and passed through an apparatus of legitimation - Panama-registered shell companies, for example - thereby rendering the hidden owners of these ill-gotten gains credible through the same sleight of hand.

People - journalists and dissenting voices - are also subject to sanitisation. Like germs or unpleasant odours, human beings can be scrubbed out for their words by individuals who are more powerful and more fearful. Within these situations language itself is cleaned out, rendered inept in the mouths of those who use it critically and emptied of its power to resist by an artificially built and doctored mass-consciousness.

Over the last seven years Malta has been pummelled by one horror after another. Whether the Covid-19 pandemic or the political scandals which rocked the country and led to the assassination of a journalist the idea of sanitisation has hovered eerily in the background of each of these moments, sinking deeper into contradictory narratives of obfuscation deployed in the attempted clean-up efforts. Attard’s collection becomes a magnetic centre for reflecting on the deeply felt contradictions which are currently playing out across the Maltese socio-political landscape. With this body of work Attard explores the relationship between what is clean and unclean, legitimate and illegitimate, real and unreal, thus unearthing a troubling narrative of distortion and conceptual slippage, where a refrain of plausible deniability enables the guilty to hide nefarious intent behind a veneer of artificially tranquil smiles which remain frozen on the faces of those in power.

Is this The End of truth, accountability and governance as we know it?