

# Obama, Trump and the woes of the doppelgänger



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were those who died in office (Roosevelt and Kennedy).

Add to that historical pattern the bald facts of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and religious bigotry across the US.

Obama is black and he supported a woman as his successor. For the close to 63-million people who voted for Trump, only a rabidly white and rabidly male new president would rectify that imbalance. Obama preached tolerance and equality. Trump, touting intolerance and inequality, promised a return to an ugly US

## HOLES AND STAINS HAVE BEEN BURNED INTO THE PAPER BY THE SPARKS: THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN THE TWO MAY BE ALLEGORISED AGAIN

of the past.

Could Obama be held responsible on these grounds? Not really. As The Guardian newspaper's Gary Younge recently argued, however, there is blame to be laid at his door – and it dates to the early years of his presidency.

In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, Obama chose to bail out the banks, “preserving the financial industry as it was” rather than “embracing far-reaching reforms that would have served



**Silver suit:** In Doppelgänger, Angolan artist Pedro Pires has created semi-human forms out of everyday detritus. /Supplied

the interests of those who voted for him”.

Younge suggests that despite an increase in jobs and on-paper economic growth, there was an increasing sense of alienation among many people within “the Obama coalition – black and young and poor”, and when they did not vote in

November 2016, Trump’s victory was made possible.

Trump, by this logic, is Obama’s inevitable evil counterpart, his dark half, his demonic double.

In a word: his doppelgänger. The doppelgänger, as with most clever German loanwords that have no proper English

equivalent, is a concept that has been put to effective use in a variety of contexts: by writers and artists, psychologists, enthusiasts of the paranormal and even marketing gurus.

Its latest South African instantiation is Doppelgänger, a collection of works produced by Angolan artist Pedro Pires during a residency in Johannesburg (exhibited at Gallery MOMO, Parktown North, until January 29).

Pires has created two intersecting series of doppelgängers. First, there are sculptures of semi-human forms constructed out of repurposed objects and materials – plastic containers, grass brooms, corrugated steel; the everyday detritus out of which lives are built.

In the gallery space, these somewhat comical figures become stand-ins for the artist himself.

Then there are works described as “fire on paper”: holes and stains have been burned into the paper by the flammable sparks produced in grinding the steel. A stencil has been used to shape the fire marks into human silhouettes in various poses.

With this in mind, the dynamic between Obama and Trump may be allegorised once more. There is Obama the fun guy, the president with a cheeky sense of humour and a “common touch”, like Pires’s quirky sculptures.

There is Obama the dignified statesman, whose gravitas is also occasionally inflected by a quiet sorrow, like those sombre rust-brown figures.

But linking these two, there is violence and spectacle, blades and blowtorches. Trump, the showman and con artist, setting everything aflame

**B**arring a last-minute legal intervention, a tsunami engulfing landlocked Washington DC, or a Dimitri Tsafendas-style assassination – the latter, some would say along with Hamlet, is “a consummation devoutly to be wished” – Donald Trump will be inaugurated as the 45th president of the US on Friday.

Barack Obama will be in attendance, affirming his conviction that one of the hallmarks of US democracy is the peaceful transfer of power after an election.

Obama will no doubt smile benevolently, if somewhat a little wryly. He will keep his regrets, his despair and his fury to himself. Again, a line from Shakespeare’s Danish prince comes to mind:

“Break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.”

The contrast between the two men could not be more stark. As Hamlet would say, if you’ll indulge a final quotation, it’s like comparing “Hyperion to a satyr”.

In Greek mythology, Hyperion was a Titan, associated with the sun and the moon; satyrs were those bawdy, lecherous, treacherous man-goats who acted exactly as Trump has allegedly acted with Miss America contestants and Russian prostitutes.

And yet, it seems fair to say – even though it sounds astonishing – if it weren’t for Obama then the US, and the world, wouldn’t have to face the prospect of Trump.

On the one hand, this can be attributed to the annoyingly predictable pendulum swing of US voting patterns. The only modern presidents from the Democratic Party to be followed by another Democrat