



Stu Spence

“You hope that a chair like that could take you to freedom.”

To artist Silke Raetze, flying is the ultimate freedom. So it is no surprise that her latest venture is big on wings and strongly opposed to the denial of liberty.

The 34-year-old Sydney artist explains that the bold statement for freedom of speech in her work is born of a new passion for the cause. “To be honest I didn’t know a great deal about PEN before being invited to do this,” she confesses with a laugh. “Perhaps if more artists knew about PEN, it would have struck a chord with them too, but as soon as I heard about it I thought, this is something I want to be involved in.”

As an artist, freedom of expression is core, she says, a privilege she now realises is taken for granted. “The forefront of my career choice is my desire to express what I want to say. Trying to imagine what it might be like to not have the freedom to express yourself, to have it blocked, it’s inconceivable really.”

Her fervour is obvious as she rails against the injustice of persecuting writers and journalists for the very act she has built her career on. “It seems like a basic right to be able to express yourself and if you’re not free to do so, then that’s one of your basic rights taken away.”

With this in mind she decided to give her chair - and the imprisoned writers it symbolises - the means to set their words free.

“My chair has a pair of wings on the back of it, so the idea is that you sit in the chair and it takes flight, maybe to freedom. The wings are made up of written word, so every single feather I have created is made of written text.”

The text is all her own penmanship and the wings themselves are a motif that runs through much of the work she exhibits at the Michael Reid Gallery in Sydney.

“I wanted to focus more on the freedom aspect rather than confinement or imprisonment - to approach the

positive side because that’s what they’re fighting for, freedom,” she explains.

She recalls with relish the initial task of selecting a chair to work on. “I spent hours in an auction house and as I went around, I kept pulling out all the chairs that appealed to me and lining them up. I just couldn’t get past this little child’s chair. It’s yellow and white, and it was obvious that it has a history. It’s quite an unassuming chair, bright and cheerful. It had an innocence that appealed to me.”

The innocence of childhood was an obvious link for the project and another theme common to her own artwork. “When I found the child’s chair, I liked the idea that children don’t tend to have that much restriction. They don’t have a great awareness of what they should and shouldn’t say, and so they’ve got a lot more freedom than adults. Then thinking of the writers that are imprisoned, you look at the chair and think, wouldn’t it be great if they can sit on the chair and be magically transported out of there?”

While she works in various mediums including painting, paper sculpture and needlepoint, painting a chair is not a concept she would normally have come up with, so she decided to tackle it sculpturally.

“It didn’t make a great deal of sense to me to paint all over the chair with motifs. I wanted something that would transport you; to represent the idea of imagining where it can take you - a symbol of hope,” she says. “It’s the idea of sitting down to write something, and you hope that a chair like that could take you to freedom.”

Her hope is that the chairs project will raise awareness of the plight of imprisoned writers. Her wish is that her own winged chair could pick up those writers and fly them out of their incarceration, into the realm of freedom to which creativity belongs.

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