

*Commissioned with the University of Salford Art Collection, this text was produced in response to the work of artist Jeffrey Knopf presented as part of the exhibition **40 Years of the Future: Where Should We Be Now?** at Castlefield Gallery in 2024.*

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## **Jeffrey Knopf, *The Closest I Got to Freud's Desk*, 2024**

Essay by Clare O'Dowd

What does this strange, ephemeral, shimmering object have to do with the desk of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis? This question is not necessarily important to considerations of the object as sculpture. Its abstracted form resembles a mountain range, or a wave about to break. Its surface is captivating; the peaks and troughs rendered as though they were shot silk, not quite transparent but not quite solid. It stands on a glass table, its reflection becoming a landscape by a lake, the terrain doubled and uncanny. It is wholly unfamiliar.

This artwork is about layers. Layers of meaning, layers of history, layers of narrative, layers of process. Layers created by the gradual accretion of 3D printing polymer as it builds, bit by bit and part by part. Working back through these layers is a process akin to archaeology, wherein both the techniques used to create the artwork and the multiple references behind it must be gradually excavated and brought into the light.

Digging down into the object and its past reveals numerous layers and stories. The tools used to create it may be very new, but the stories are very old. The first story begins centuries ago in a disputed location somewhere in the Middle East, when Moses spent 40 days and nights on Mount Sinai and returned with his stone tablets: The Decalogue. Carved into their surface by God himself were the Ten Commandments, the fundamental principles by which all followers of the Abrahamic religions must abide.

The second story begins in Iran, shortly before the First World War, when a young and enterprising Iranian Jew set off from Persia in 1912 and made his way to Manchester to seek

his fortune in the textile business. Yaghoub Achoury Youssef, or Jeff Joseph as he was later known, owned two plaques of enameled silver representing Moses holding the two stone tablets. These plaques are now in the care of the Manchester Jewish Museum, acknowledging Yaghoub's historically important position in the Persian Jewish community as the first member of it to settle in Manchester. Three generations and more than a century later, Yaghoub's grandson made a 3D scan of those plaques, cast them in pewter and placed them in an art gallery in Manchester, near to an abstract sculpture in a room that smelled of cigars and dust. Meanwhile, Manchester's Persian Jewish community had all but disappeared.

The final story begins some 25 years later in Vienna. An atheist of Jewish descent is wrestling with the story of Moses and the origins of religion. Jackboots are marching across Austria in search of Jewish blood. As our protagonist frantically tries to complete his manuscript he realizes that he must pack up his office, his desk and the sculptures that stand along its edge and flee to the safety of England before the jackboots arrive. His atheism is neither here nor there: it is the blood that matters. Freud arrived in London in 1938 and reassembled his desk in what is now the Freud Museum. The statues that had watched over him and provoked him, his 'grubby gods', remain in their places, the assembled deities of assorted cultures standing like a line of sentries. The book he was writing, *Moses and Monotheism*, was completed shortly before his death from cancer in 1939.

None of these stories has an ending. Freud's work on psychoanalysis sought to explain the function of the unconscious, peeling back the layers to explain the roots of human behaviour and belief. Why do we believe certain stories? Why do I believe the story about the young man travelling from Persia, but not the story about the old man on the mountain with his stone tablets? Freud would tell me: it is a matter of faith, and faith is a product of the human mind. Belief is not the same as faith. I believe in the existence of Yaghoub because the evidence is before my eyes, in the shape of the tall man with colourful spectacles – his grandson – who is telling me all about it. Yaghoub's grandson has faith in spades, but he is also worried: fearful that the same dark impulses that saw Freud driven from Austria are rearing their ugly head in contemporary England, and that history might repeat itself. Yaghoub's grandson feels the echoes of these old stories as they ripple through time and layer themselves around him.

Why had Yaghoub's grandson sought out the desk of the psychoanalyst?

Freud was fascinated by the figure of Moses, and equally fascinated by the figure of Michelangelo, whose representation of Moses was the subject of a lengthy analysis. Freud describes the emotional state of Moses as represented by Michelangelo; captured, Freud believed, at the moment he descended the mountain to find his people worshipping the Golden Calf. Overcoming his desire for vengeance, keeping his anger in check, frozen in an expression of wrath and contempt: Freud's description of the sculpture is the very definition of repressed anger and violence.

Michelangelo depicts Moses with his traditional horns, to add demonic to the list of potential interpretations of his character and person. The horns have been an attribute of Moses since the first Latin translation of the Book of Exodus, in which the Hebrew word *qāran* (which can mean both 'horned' and 'shining') was translated as the Latin *cornuta* (which directly translates as 'horned'). The original Hebrew text is now interpreted as describing Moses' face glowing with light after talking to God, but the damage was done back in the fourth century and Michelangelo set it in stone. Yaghoub's grandson remembers a tutor asking where his horns were. It was many years before he understood the true implication of that question.

Not being a god himself, Moses does not feature amongst the statues lining Freud's desk. Many other gods do. Thoth, Eros, Athena, Hathor, Anubis: all take their place in the massed ranks of miniature deities. The belief systems that accommodated and worshipped them are long gone, remnants of histories and cultures that no longer exist. Freud interpreted them much as he interpreted dreams, as purveyors of obscure and hidden messages that could only be revealed through analysis and speculation. Freud described his work as archaeology, a precise metaphor for the practice of digging through the layers of the human mind, but it was also a product of pure imagination. The gods were his muses.

Freud's desk remains exactly as it did during his lifetime, preserved for curious pilgrims and open to imaginative analysis as if it were some impenetrable dream. Yaghoub's grandson visited the desk, to see the gods that had stood between Freud and his patients and to get some sense of the man who had tried to find the roots of his faith. He also visited it to capture it, making a 3D scan of its form while nobody was looking.

Guerrilla scanning operations produce unpredictable results. Sometimes they are uncannily accurate and render a tiny floating model of a place or object, rotating in space and correct to the last detail. Sometimes they are not. Sometimes, if you then print those scans out using a 3D printer, details are lost and edges become fuzzy. And sometimes, if you scan the 3D

printed objects and print them out again, they become stranger and more abstracted, and the layers of processing and reprocessing create an object that is so removed from the original that it becomes something else entirely. It is a human impulse to seek resemblance, to identify and categorise and to search for neat explanations. We look to the past to find answers and stability, much as the Abrahamic religions look to the Ten Commandments for unwavering answers, set in stone. The layers of processing remove that stability, until the original object no longer looks back at us and can no longer speak in a language we understand.

It might become a mountain range, or a wave about to break. It may appear to be made of shot silk and its faceted surface may shimmer in the light. It may cease to be recognizable in any way whatsoever, and simply become a beautiful and abstract sculpture. But Yaghoub's grandson will always know what it was, and where it came from, just as he knows what he himself is, and where he came from.

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