

# INTERVIEW

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*Didi Bozzini & John Isaacs*

*You have titled this exhibition “The hand that rocks the cradle”. It suggests a sweet gesture of paternity, but what is its link to your work? Or, in other words, is the hand that of the father or the artist, and who lies in the cradle, a baby or a sculpture?*

A cradle is a baby’s bed, but it’s also the word used in describing origins, as in the ‘cradle’ of civilization, the birthplace of civilization. So the title implies various beginnings – one of the life of an individual, the other of a civilization. I’m not using it solely in the paternal terms of parent and child, it’s more an open armed implication of present, past and future. It denotes connection, responsibilities, the implications of our actions in the present to the future, but also interestingly in the second interpretation of the word cradle, the implications of the past on the present.

I needed an opening like this, a wide ‘backdrop’ to the exhibition itself, as there is such a diverse mixture of work present, much of which appears to be more cultural artefact than a contemporary work of art, therefore I wanted something to tie it all together with a wider notion of time and continuum. In English the title is almost a perfect loop, and I’m pretty sure that most languages take the same form of this expression.

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*Your works are connoted by a great stylistic and physical diversity. There is no “hallmark”. As if your art was much more inclined to let itself be pervaded by the world around it than to leave its own, unmistakable signature. I should even say that you are more concerned about the content of art than about its form. Does it mean that the focus of your work is life and not art itself?*

Form and content are completely linked, sculpture, if it is anything, is the spatial relationship of the human body to its surroundings. The act of inhabiting space is itself a form of communication with the environment one is in – it’s not possible for me to separate one from the other.

Of course life is our first hand experience, art is a reproduction of life, an imitation, a parallel universe and often it’s one which can be a little confused and hard to interpret, because we are looking at the world through someone else’s eyes, but when it’s working there is the chance of understanding. The conscious mind works in a binary way, but the deeper undercurrent is much more akin to surrealism, a waking dream of unsolicited connections. In our need for stability we are programmed to search for a logical framework to place onto a world which is both externally and internally much more mercurial in nature. There are patterns, which repeat,

and these are the axioms that in themselves bring some kind of comfort, but essentially life is pure in its creativity. Art is a staged reproduction, a re-contextualized observance in which as an artist one tries to tune out the white noise and focus in on not just that which is present, but that which is felt. In terms of the works diversity, my feeling is, that it's far more interesting to look at what connects things together, rather than what separates them. An artwork is part of a larger landscape, in which we see only the summit, the tip of the iceberg. To simply stake a claim to one 'style' and endlessly repeat this territorial mantra is not at all of interest to me and simply returns us back to a dialectical world view, in which one 'style' confronts another irrespective of doctrine, so yes in this sense, content is of more interest than form, but the form is integral to the process, it's the door to pass through, and not the relic to worship.

Also linked to the issue of a "hallmark", or an artistic style, is a very deep-rooted cultural notion of integrity, of worth, which I totally distrust. It's a problem of reception, which I sometimes encounter with my work, mostly from specialists, who themselves are apprehensive of the work's diversity as though it shows a lack of sincerity, whereas it's quite the opposite. This is for me just another reminder of how prejudiced academia is to the very notion of inter-communication and far more interested in putting things tidily away into boxes, naming them, institutionalizing them. I feel the need to confront both my own and the viewers expectations and prejudices, it's a conscious decision in which I can destabilize the conditioned monolithic image of an artist and therefore increase the chance of returning back to life – of leaving the gallery. It's essential to me the way in which diversity, both stylistic and physical, evoke a kind of cubistic perspective within space and time, so that the space between works is as important as the actual pieces themselves. It's possible as an artist to bring many conflicting historical 'moments' together so that the resonance sheds a new light, brings life into the inanimate world of our collective amnesia. I do believe that by combining many outwardly disparate positions larger questions are arrived at, and that though it takes longer to reach an understanding, that it may even be impossible to reach an understanding, that this is of course the point – there are many versions of a truth, and one perspective is simply just not enough and should be avoided.

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*Life is a limited lapse of time and when the only promise is the end, it is the future that dies. This conviction that the future is impossible means that in your work the very substance of the present is made of memories and so it is always the past that provides the raw material from which your sculptures take shape. Images of what can no longer be, moods of a world with no tomorrow, spelling out a poetry of disenchantment that bears a close affinity to the themes of punk culture, but with a decidedly different tone, since your works eschew all shouting, spectacle and slogans. They are much more similar to the painful quavering of Sid Vicious's voice as he spits out "My Way" than the emphatic "No Future" on Johnny Rotten's t-shirts. Do you think that "punk" is too tight to define your aesthetic?*

Yes too tight, I would be uncomfortable with that, I like to think that any definition would be too tight. Of course there is something seductive about the anti-establishment stance of Sid Vicious, but in the end you could also look back and see that the Sex Pistols were one of the

first 'manufactured' boy bands. I'm much more of a loner than that, I'm not a punk, anarchist, nihilist, I'm nothing, just me. All of us are disenchanted at some point or other in life and feel the need to tell the world to fuck right off, as after all it's not built the way we were told it would be, so it's only natural it rubs us up the wrong way. All these feelings of disenfranchisement, are in themselves a kind of nostalgia, either for something previously experienced or something imagined, but that is not present but absent. Like puppets dangling on the strings of time, all of us operate from our past, even as we take our first steps and learn our first words, it's the repetition of something that went before. We learn to walk, talk and think in the very shadow of our past. The present moment is so intangible that it barely exists, the future is the territory of vague hopes and science fiction speculations, the construction of gleaming utopias built upon the shaky foundations of the past. With each passing second the present moves into the past and we become our own history, we shape our own history, but it is the actions of our forefathers that have already mapped out our landscape. It is this notion of continuity that rears its head very often in my work, there is after all an unbroken emotional continuity from the early cave dwellers to the present. An emotional continuity, evolved through our ancestors, akin to the Darwinistic model of evolution, but instead of the physical trail mapped out in bones, mutations, and natural selection, we must look at the emotional evolution of humanity. This is where art is so important to us, to me, it is through art that we can touch and be touched by our past, can better understand the shadows through which we walk.

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*I feel justified in suggesting that there is a continuity of thought, a leitmotiv, that runs through the history of English art, from Hogarth to the rise of the Young British Artists. It is a powerful, anti-academic impulse that sees art-making as a way of life, caught between autobiographical introspection and social criticism, crude and sometimes cruel, always radically opposed to the notion of art as an exercise in form, or an intellectual trapeze act. It is an aesthetic peopled by nightmares and demons, familiar with the hell of the streets and the purgatory of the psyche, fuelled by private obsessions and public horrors. A conception of art that belongs to a world where God may be dead, but the Devil is still in fine fettle. Do you feel that your work is part of this stream?*

Yes to some degree it is, I'm certainly constructed that way, but again I would shy away from ethnological definition, as although I feel close to the satire of Hogarth, I am more drawn to the dark trauma of Goya. Universal themes transcend cultural, linguistic differences. I feel that even through all our progress that we are now much closer to the middle ages than to modernity, not in terms of technology, but in the general mood and colour of our lives. It's as though we are again outside of ourselves, our gleaming dream of modernity has abandoned us, we are unable to grasp it, we have lost faith in progress, we are just surviving, and worst of all we begin to realise we were never in control. The accompanying sense of decline, decay, strain on resources, conflicts, makes for a pretty dark landscape, but the genie is out of the bottle. I'm certainly influenced by British culture though I'm cautious to overemphasize the darkness which outwardly permeates my work as being particularly British, besides I see my own work as fairly optimistic, redemptive.

Often what you see before you in my work is more a symbolic representation of what may well be absent, so that for example a bloody flayed figure could represent not the actual horror of corrupted flesh but our attitude towards the body, towards anatomy, to re-emotionalize the landscape to which the map is already drawn, full of love and hate, and of course borders.

It's borders that really fascinate me, the point when we stop and create lines we will not cross, both intellectual and physical. This bloody figure is as much about love as it is about anatomy, and love after all, "knows no bounds". I often come back to the fact that I'm dealing with borders, with the places where one way of thinking confronts another. I have to accept my own, and being English is of course a definition, a border, but it's possible to transcend even that too, to transcend being British. As to academia, in itself, academia for its own sake is pretty morbid, pompous and bloodless. I find myself drawn to doubt rather than conviction, drawn towards the magical possibility that weakness creates openings, cracks in the homogenous walls of our institutions. It's pointless when people are simply walking encyclopaedias full of facts but with no desire to spread them beyond a specialised academic peer group, as what is the use of all this knowledge if it gathers dust in libraries. Real intelligence is all about communication, not intellectual bodybuilding. It's possible that this is a British temperament, to want to shape and fashion everything towards a function, and then to laugh out loud at such stupidity. As a nation we do hate pretentiousness, are even afraid of it, like a disease.

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*If art making is an existential path, love could be its landscape. Your sculptures often allude to love or to a specific love story. But, here again, I get the clear impression that everything has happened before and nothing can ever change. They have the bitter, cloying taste of distance, disappointment, the lingering tang of black bile, of melancholy. As if you were measuring the pain of absence. I am reminded of Beckett's decrepit Krapp, hoarsely muttering into his tape recorder: "I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on, and she agreed, without opening her eyes. I asked her to look at me and after a few moments – after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. Let me in. We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem!" Do you think that art and love are both losing games?*

Life itself is a search for love, empathy, belief, and the daily chance to reach out to one another. Joseph Beuys apparently said everything is art when it is done with love, and even if he didn't say it exactly that way then I would. Art is a gift, not a sacred cow. No matter how fucked up it may appear from the outside, my work stems from a desire to elevate our humanity, to bring the underdog into the spotlight, to remind myself of the naive dreams that are so easily forgotten.

It's only possible to lose in love if you are playing to win. It's probably just a question of terminology – we are all of us trained to win, it's the way we are educated, it fits completely to our human animalistic impulses, it fits with pretty much everything we have evolved to be, it even fits perfectly to capitalism. If we can transcend this "problem" of our composition then it may well be possible that we could be free of all the bullshit which really fucks us up. Love is generosity, it's very simple, it's a gift given for nothing in return, and yet we shape ourselves

into tribes and draw lines in the sand which cannot be crossed. This is fear, fear and prejudice, fear of the unknown, fear even of fear itself. Of course we can lose in love but let's ask ourselves how that is really possible, ask ourselves what kind of love that is and what is really behind it, and importantly is losing in love just another form of self-betrayal?

The pain of absence describes that perfectly. Alfred Hitchcock always used this tension in his direction, he would withhold visual information so that its absence loomed larger in the mind, so that it could become more personalised, felt, rather than seen – imagined. My work is just that, a piece of something, its incompleteness is to be reminded of the whole, to imagine what is absent. The earlier works dealing more directly with anatomy are far more literal than the more recent works but essentially the inherent melancholia stems from a longing, from loss. We all of us physically travel through time in one direction, our bodies move through the days and are affected in time and by time, but our memories kind of wander around in any direction like lost souls, sometimes deserting us altogether and at other times overwhelming us.

What appears as melancholia in my work is a kind of nostalgia caused by this rupture between body and memory. There is only darkness because of light, there is only a shadow because of an object, it's not possible to remove one from the other, one denotes the other. Personally it's a notion of embracing all things, of not trying to reduce the world to components but to go below the surface and follow the path to the very source, and if not there then at least to point in that direction.

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*One of your recent pieces is a mask with a grotesque grimace and an erect penis where we might expect a nose. Inside the mask there is a clock and, underneath its chin hangs a golden carrot and pendulum. If I were joking I would just ask you if it is a self-portrait, but more seriously, I would like to know why are you seeking for your identity behind, and maybe beyond, a tragicomic mask made of comedy, passion and nostalgia?*

Yes it's my cock, but I see it as more universal than a self-portrait, a grotesque caricature of nature, confusion, conflict, and embarrassment. I hope that this piece, titled *Past errors of judgment made real in the future lives affected* (2013) exists on many levels of interpretation, despite the initial confrontational shock. The clock has no 'face', it is merely representing time, with the metronome like ticking of the clock mechanism, itself driven by the weight of a golden carrot. The erect penis could be offensive, ridiculous or even erotic, depending on the viewer. I think the piece is fairly universal, even with the cock it's more a mirror than a self-portrait. The golden carrot refers to the iconic image of a donkey with a carrot suspended in front of it, a metaphor for motivation.

It's difficult to say precisely why all these elements are so combined, the starting point was the mask and cock combination, physically based on a traditional Japanese Tengu mask. The time element came into it later, followed by the possibility of using a carrot to physically drive the mechanism. Masks themselves are of course all about transformation, or at the very least, the concealment of identity. And yet this one has the very part of human anatomy which should be concealed right at its center. I just pushed it further with the facial expression, to emphasise

that we cannot hide from our emotions or conceal them from others. There is a high degree of shame and revelation, but at the same time it could be that this mask more closely represents us than the images in the glossy magazines of movie stars, or at least asks the question of which kinds of heroes are the true role models. The title suggests a continuation, deeds and their consequences. I suppose in the end the mask is hubris, hubris with a hard on, now *that* is something for the future.

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*“Another heavenly day!” exclaims Beckett’s Winnie, the protagonist of “Happy Days”, who is buried up to her neck in a mound of earth. “Another heavenly day?” seem to ask most of the self-portraits, in caricature or mask form, that dot your work. Akin to Ensor’s self-portraits, depicting himself proudly decked out in elegant garb, but with a skull where his face ought to be, or standing out against a carousel of masks, almost lost among them. Are you really wondering if art is – under the mask, under the makeup, even under the very skin – like this “heavenly day” in which one can finally define one’s being? The intense desire to find yourself within your work, which is something separate from you, but without which it would be impossible to grasp the meaning of your own existence, is this the bulwark of your entire oeuvre?*

To this day I have never really accepted the title of ‘artist’, as it’s so loaded with ‘cultural’ miss-conceptions that repel me, but I accepted long ago that I have to ‘work’ in the way that I do. It’s not always the case, but often my starting point of enquiry is myself, my own history, and not from vanity, but because of the very opposite, as like any one else I am full of conviction and doubt, and besides I don’t want to put words into other peoples mouths. I’m often uncomfortable with my own work, it doesn’t fit to me so well, I know it’s not always what people want to see, many times its not exactly what I want to see either. Yet it is like a psychic punching bag, a worthy opponent, in which I can thrash out my dreams and fears without hurting another soul. I don’t stand next to it with pride, I don’t claim it as mine, as a portrait of myself, I’m often baffled by its abilities to touch myself and other people in a way that I can’t, and for this it is central to grasping the meaning of my own existence. Yes, I find myself in my work, in every way, and yet it truly does exist outside of me, it is separated and yet connected, both in space and time.

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*I’ve been told that the motto “Nec spe nec metu” (Without hope without fear) was engraved on the blade of Caravaggio’s knife, with which he killed Ranuccio, in a dispute over a lover. Your silent gold megaphone is titled “Are you like me full of hope and full of fear” symbolising a silenced shout, is this a piece that shows how precious hope and fear could be to avoid violence and protect human frailty through empathy?*

Yes I think so, in my mind it is reminiscent of the holy grail. Gold has been important throughout history, most obviously for symbolising wealth and power, but also faith. I use gold quite often for these reasons, as in the gold plated carrot, and the gold plated hands in previous works. Gold plated, the megaphones utilitarian value is exchanged for something else, as though it should not just be used, but worshipped. In its form the megaphone itself

resembles not just an inverted vessel, but a kind of weapon, it has the same grip and trigger as a pistol, it is for firing words, words that are often as dangerous as bullets. This piece is certainly about the implications of our actions, political power, resistance, leadership, however it is not a relic of the past, it's an invitation to the future.

Years ago I visited the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, one of the exhibits that really struck me was a display cabinet that contained a Stradivarius Violin. This violin had become a victim of its own status, it is now so valuable in itself that it's no longer possible to use it, to hear its famous tone, and it sits there mutely to be admired simply as an object. Museums are full of such display cabinets, which are themselves full of such objects, and I wanted to re-create this scenario with the very notion of language, using the megaphone as the stand in for our hopes and fears. Like the violin the megaphone sits mutely in its display cabinet, but unlike the violin it asks for your words. I feel that as a physical embodiment of conscience, of the implications of our actions, or inactions, it becomes an open question about dialogue, perspective, leadership, resistance, opinion, and again difference. It's a holy grail all right, a dream, a precious hope for empathy and the understanding of the deeds that linger within ourselves.

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*You have a feverish sensitivity to everything that is delicate, laughable and agonizing, because it is so human and your works are keenly focused on emotions (both your own and those of others). All aesthetic considerations aside, this seems to be unquestionably the essential characteristic of your work – a deep, earnest humanity. Aren't you afraid that it could be wounded by showing it? Afraid that each of your works could be immersed in the chaos of images?*

I'm not really concerned about that, as to even contemplate trying to compete with this 'chaos of images' would be the end. Though I can remember that when I was younger it felt really important, urgent to be seen, as though otherwise you would simply vanish into it. Now I see that the work is living its own life, it transcends this chaos, it's kind of still. In fact it's the total opposite, I'm not afraid of the work being lost, of vanishing, and I enjoy that realisation, that the work is out there making it's own way.

Something I notice which I find interesting in the context of this question, is that young people really respond to the work, are touched by it and say so, young people who have grown up in the tsunami of images, of virtual reality, that are probably drawn to the work precisely because it is so incomplete, vulnerable and must represent to them something they are looking for, or more likely, something that is absent in a world full of confident posturing. Anyway what's the point of us hiding from our emotions, our humanity, of presenting only strength? We need to constantly keep putting emotions, our own vulnerability, back into the fore, so as to feel our pain and joy is shared. I love the image of Alice in Wonderland crying that huge puddle of tears and then having to swim in them. Let's swim in our tears, oceans of salty tears, return back to the sea and then step back onto land, cleansed, as though for the first time. Let the golden age begin. However I'm sure that soon enough there would be something to cry about, and if so, then we should practice.