

MIXED MEDIA

DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

Martin Kemp, September 2020

I started to list the ‘things’ (real and fabricated in three dimensions) in John Isaacs’s work, and began roughly to classify them:

words (metal, neon, and various media);

3-D geometry, boxes (various materials), museum-type vitrines;

gold rope, gilded shovel of a digger, gilded unicorn (narwhal) horn, other things gilded, and things with patinated surfaces;

models of grossly adipose men (life size), skulls, skin, hair, eyelashes (the artist’s), muscle, detached arms and legs (fleshy and/or bloody), wooden feet (severed), life-size wax anatomies, a long haired man hanging by one hand (not real), child’s head (ditto), pile of bones, chunks of flesh, (often bloody and fatty), pointing hand (various media and scales), gilded hand holding peanuts,

various textiles, trousers, hat, folded cloth in marble draped over objects;

sausage, egg;

ostrich, elephant’s foot, marble horse skull, cubic bits of whales, shark’s fin, chimp with a syringe, ostrich, woolly mammoth (‘life’ size); birds, butterflies (dead), flowers, brass pipe, water taps (both ordinary and very shiny), drain, bottles, megaphones (both gilded and very battered);

tattered flag, balloons, plastic bag;

tripods, chairs (upright and fallen, plain and ornamental), stools;

wires, lamps, bulbs, televisions, mirrors;

pumping oil rigs, cars (disabled and bits of), a cart, wheels, tyres....

But I rather ran out of steam. I had learnt that bodies and body parts, explicit and very often implicit, play a significant role, as was already evident. But I was struggling to bring some coherence to the lists. There seemed to be no content that fell within a neat classificatory template of a standard type.

Perhaps I could classify by medium. Any such attempt was quickly frustrated when I encountered *The Incomplete History of Unknown Discovery*, the mixed media of which are recorded as ‘microcrystalline wax, acrylic paint, expanding foam, resin, latex, stage blood and polyurethane, to say nothing of the background filmed down the axis of a London underground carriage, which also exists as a separate video. At least the list of media suggests that there is a great deal of concern with the materials and craftsmanship involved in creating objects that are wholly convincing in their facture as ‘real’ things. This is born out in by cubic blocks of cut-up whale which are of astonishing verisimilitude, especially the block with the eye.

Maybe the titles would help, even though they seemed very enigmatic and elliptical – philosophical but not obviously logical. Then I found that the same title of *The Incomplete History of Unknown Discovery* had been accorded to a photographic image of the artist dressed as a clown standing before a tumbling cliff of metallic debris, which seemed to share little in common with the cubes of whale in the foreground of the underground carriage [1]. It also became apparent that the title was also that of an exhibition in 1999 at the 20:21

Gallery in Essen, Germany. There were multiple instances of the same tantalising title being assigned to rather divergent works and exhibitions. The title, *The Architecture of Empathy* most famously attached to the brilliant marble sculpture of Michelangelo's *Pietà* shrouded by a mighty cloth, was the title of exhibitions in Madrid and Brescia. Indeed this phrase is recurrent, not least in interviews. It will be worth bearing this in mind as we seek some way of making words do a coherent job in the face of the collected images. There are other recurrent titles that refuse to be attached in a descriptive way to single items.

Examples are: *Tears welling up inside*, *Let the Golden Age begin*, *A prefect soul*, *You said you would always be there*, *Are you like me full of hope and full of fear*, *If not now then when*, *Past errors of judgement made real in the future lives affected*, *Everyone's talking about Jesus*, *If your dreams are not your own how can you claim to own them*... They are like ear worms that well up unbidden and initiate a search for deep meaning. They speak in general terms of high ambition.

In any event, it is clear that something else is needed than neat academic and art-world typologies, media and titles. It is also clear that the orthodox chronology of development from one thing to the next is not the most effective key. The variousness and the recurrences work against a neat year-by-year or decade-by-decade stylistic progress, although we will see some underlying tendencies. Where to begin? Not too far from the beginning. In fact 7 years after his debut as an exhibiting artist.

In 2000 John Isaac's work featured in the exhibition, *Spectacular Bodies. The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*, co-curated by Marina Wallace and myself at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 2000. One contribution was a video called *The Cyclical Development of Stasis*, [2] a title that was to reappear, most recently in 2105 in a somewhat gruesome sculpture of a large pointing hand. The video showed a penumbral, spiralling view of the five vertiginous terraces circling around the dissecting table at the lowest level – like Dante's *Inferno* – filmed in the first of all the world's anatomy theatres in Padua, dating back to 1594. It is juxtaposed with a modern 'clinical' version in Essen, which ends threateningly in comparable gloom. The 'theatre' comes exactly that, climaxing in a stage of dark death [2a].

The other exhibit, *A Necessary Change of Heart*, was a superbly crafted wax anatomy, a violent 'self-portrait', inspired by the astonishingly naturalistic wax anatomies created in the late 18th century by Clemente Susini for display in La Specola in Florence. The difference is that the 'Venuses' and 'gladiators' of the early waxes, with their exposed entrails, adopt elegant and heroic poses, bearing no obvious witness to the violence of the acts of dissection. By contrast. John's body is literally dismembered and drips a puddle of blood. There is no aesthetic sanitisation of the act of dissection [3].

I recall the young son of a friend spontaneously telling his mother which item in the show he 'liked **worst**' (actually a flayed version of a crucified Christ from the Royal Academy). Aristotle and catharsis in just two words!

The element of shock or surprise, which Isaacs exploits to rouse the spectator into heightened engagement, was one of the reasons for his work being shown with the 1996 show of Y(oung) B(British) A(rt) at the Saatchi Gallery in London. One of his exhibits, *In advance of the institution*, [4] was a neatly white-shirted man in dark trousers sitting on a white plinth whose head had metamorphosed into a giant and compellingly realistic potato. To be

approved by Charles Saatchi was an important accolade but Isaacs resisted being classified as a YBA (or anything else for that matter, as will become apparent).

Until our recent conversation I had not taken on board that like me, John Isaacs had been trained as a biologist. There are profound dimensions of science in his instincts, more obvious earlier but never quite suppressed. This is apparent in another 'early' work, *The Turning Point*. [5] This documents a research project based in Tobago to observe closely whether the behaviour of fiddler crabs (the species with one really big claw) was affected positively by the run-up to the millennium and shortly thereafter. The local West Indians, stereotypically characterised by their steel bands, observed the 'mad' scientist - their 'crabman' - with bemused curiosity. Isaacs, incongruously bedecked in his white lab coat to conduct his month of fieldwork with due authority, becomes a fit study for anthropological investigation in his own right. He did of course find the desired effect, but his voice-over has to admit that it was '*human behaviour that I was really looking at*'. The conclusion of the study was that his project was a monument to anthropomorphism.

Again the work seemed to fit with contemporary trends, in this case the fashion for art-and-science projects, in which the making of art was related directly to scientific endeavours, often involving collaboration between scientists and artists. The tendency was fostered in Britain by the Wellcome Institute's well-funded sci-art programme. Again, John resisted definition as a sci-art person. Where the project does fit is with his enduring concern with the human reaction as communicable to the spectator. The laughter with which his findings were received by actual scientists in London and by the amused scepticism of the cheery West Indians lay at the core of the artwork. It is this human reaction of the viewers, who complete the work of art, that is central to John Isaac's work.

The way he achieves this is as a grandson of Surrealism. We may recall that the Surrealists greatly admired the 19th-century poetry of the Comte de Lautréamont (the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse), who famously wrote in his *Les Chants de Maldoror* in 1869 of a young boy being as 'fair ... as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella'. This was the inspiration for Man Ray's brilliant sculpture, *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* in 1920 in which we are invited to envisage what assemblage of objects lies concealed – adding another layer of imaginative projection [6.] In the best Surrealist work the spectator is invited to bridge the chasms of recognition between objects that do not normally belong together. As Max Ernst said, the aspiration was to link 'two realities that by all appearances have nothing to link them, in a setting that by all appearances does not fit them'.

The role of the cognitive and emotional game is to make familiar things look unfamiliar, and to make unfamiliar things that somehow have a familiar look to them. Such juxtapositions bring out aspects of the items that are taken for granted but suddenly become freshly evident in an open-ended search for significance. The viewer has a great deal of work to do. John Isaacs is insistent about the incompleteness of meaning in his aggregate objects. We may recall his title for his composition with the carcass of an underground carriage and chunks of juicy whale, *The Incomplete History of Unknown Discovery*.

There is an old master dimension to such assemblages that rely upon the spectators' persistence and imaginative agility. I am thinking of allegories in which recognisable objects and symbols are brought together to convey meanings that are not always obvious. The *Hauptgericht* or *pièce de résistance* of such 'puzzle' images is the great engraving of *Melencolia I* by Albrecht Dürer in 1514, the interpretation of which is still being debated

[7]. The great melancholic angel (too heavy for her wings?) is burdened with dark thoughts in the face of a weighty plethora of ‘things’ - philosophical, scientific and manual. The cherub, on a discarded mill wheel, is overcome by lethargy, as is the emaciated dog, who has long lost motivation to eat. The abstractions of geometry and arithmetic do not hold the key to mental release. Nor do the practical utilities of the carpenter’s tools. The geometrical body is an asymmetrically truncated cube rather than a satisfying Platonic solid. The glaring light is rendered in a febrile manner, while the titular bat is demonic in mien. Each object or set of objects would mean something else in different company. The woodworking tools would act quite differently in an image of St. Joseph. The sphere could sit in the benign hand of a *Salvator Mundi*. The geometrical dividers in the angel’s right hand could denote the profession of architect. A better-fed dog could signify fidelity. It is quite an easy game for an iconographer to play. What about the bell and the scales?

In any event, the melancholy of Dürer’s brooding angel resonates with the mood that seems to permeate a number of Isaac’s works.

If we accept that Isaac’s assemblages are allegories that for the most part do not exploit conventional symbols, we can understand that their meaning remains more open than even the Dürer engraving. The meanings and communicative potentials are open in a non-prescribed way. There seems to be no content that can be demonstrated conclusively to be ‘right’. There is a story that the great Argentinian man of letters, Borges, offered an enigmatic reply to the many students who sent their interpretations of his mysterious writings. He said, ‘thank you for enriching my work’. Isaac’s work is visually rich to an extraordinary degree. Its content is waiting our enrichment in the light of our personalised engagement with it. It will be helpful to look at two ‘typical’ works.

The first looks at the apparently simpler one, *The Lie* from 2013 [8]. Its elaborate media - microcrystalline wax, oil paint, polystyrene, steel, bronze, ceramic, latex, stage blood (an Isaac’s staple) – are handled with meticulous skill. The tiled platform is as immaculate as that in a deluxe sauna. On top of it is a wedge of meaty fat (*of a whale?*) like a slice of cheese infused with red wine. Near the top of the wedge is an inset drain of the sort that is set into a pavement or road surface, We may imagine it is connected to the tap, but to function well it should be at the bottom of the slope, and the tap has nothing other than the boarded gallery floor on which to pour its fluid. Does the ‘Lie’ reside in such illogicalities? I wonder in a rather tenuous manner if the lie is that purveyed by the Japanese government to justify their annual slaughter of whales, the corpses of which are used for ‘scientific research’. For my part, the tapping of liquid from the block of flesh resonates with the bulbous seroma fluid that was a residue of my recent operation to rectify spinal stenosis and which was drained with a syringe.

At least I can be confident that this is one interpretation that was not in Isaac’s mind. Or am I using the wrong sense of ‘to lie’, which can refer to the physical state of lying down on a surface? I begin to think that both senses are ambiguously ‘right’. Will the artist himself tell me that I am way off target? Or is it impossible to be off target?

The second was made 3 years earlier. Its title is the *Pool of Narcissus Weeping* [9], referring to the story in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* about the beautiful youth who fatally fell in love with his own reflection. The mythological theme is sustained by the very long and slender unicorn’s horn (the extended tooth of a narwhal), made from silver-plated bronze. In the Renaissance, ‘unicorns’ were inordinately prized, both as curiosities and for the unlimited

medical powers of powdered horn. The specimen owned by the Medici in the 15th century was very much more expensive than the Botticelli's and other artworks. The watery associations of the narwhal are reinforced by the mammalian flipper. Does the violence of the oddly coloured 'blood' signal some kind of primal maritime conflict of monstrous sea creatures, like that in Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*.

Elsewhere, in *If your dreams are not your own how can you claim to own them*, a comparably spiral horn has garnered a drooping pair of the artist's empty jeans [10]. We may recall other works that are gilded, or less usually silvered as here. Often the gilding is somewhat abraded, which conveys a sense of decayed luxury, underlying the patina of time that is present in many of Isaacs's inventions, for time is a regular presence in his assemblages. We notice along the way that the wooden table that bravely supports the white block has twisted barley-sugar legs from an earlier era of design.

For a historian, the apparently incongruous assemblage of the Narcissus piece carries echoes of the *wunderkammern*, cabinets of curiosities, the Renaissance and Baroque forerunners of our museums, in which items were displayed according to taxonomies very different from our own. Indeed, the classificatory bases of the proto-museums much differed, one from the other. A classic illustration shows the Danish *wunderkammer* of Ole Worm in 1665, with a fine horn on the third shelf from the bottom on the end wall, associated with other spiral products of a maritime nature and some metallic objects [11]. That the logic is not immediately obvious to us does not mean that the assemblages are arbitrary. It is just that we come to Worm's museum with our more rigid sets of scientific categories and associations. Presumably there is some reason why, on the right, a statuette of Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabine Woman* shares its shelf with watery organisms, including crustaceans.

I am not suggesting that John Isaacs has been inspired by the *wunderkammern* – though I should not be surprised if he knows them. Rather I am recognising continuities in ways of juxtaposing things, and encouraging objects to speak to each other and us in ways that their makers did not envisage or their origins did not signal. John Isaacs is providing new kinds of curiosities for our age, as megaphones of the cacophonous plurality of the crazy world we have created.

Where, in conclusion, might we place an artist who openly resists classification with his peers? We might see him best as a kind of inadvertent Nominalist, advocating the Mediaeval philosophy that rejected the reality of universals over particulars. The universals, the general categories under which we group things, are regarded in Nominalism as structures of the mind that may function usefully for us but are not privileged realities 'out there'. Blue dogs and a blue cats can be distinguished as dogs and cats, but also as blue things along with other blue items. Each of Isaacs's works is such a cursed particular that it resists being anything other than itself. The titles might seem to act as universals, but they are applied to things that appear to be very different, and they remain particular to the mental states of the artist and his viewers, even when the titles are apparently at their most descriptive. This does not make life easy for him, since the institutions of art (including critics and historians) like to put things into packages.

Our job, as spectators, is not to worry about our niggling categories but to take each work openly as it comes, in all its visual wonder and ambiguous magic.

