

Philipp Bollmann, September 2021

*Today I started loving you again*, Galerie Michael Haas & Kunst Lager Haas, Berlin, Germany

Early 2021, in preparation for his exhibition *Today I started loving you again* at Galerie Michael Haas, John Isaacs was working on a series of new works in the studio in Berlin, pieces whose technique is based on works he had started in Israel in 2019. The latter made use of the high salt content of the Dead Sea and employed crystalline structures as stylistic elements. Because of the Corona pandemic and his resulting inability to travel, the artist recreated the salt-water solution of the Dead Sea in his studio in order to grow salt crystals on textiles there. It took numerous attempts to find the correct balance of water, salt, warmth and time to achieve the desired result.

When I went by his studio again to see him, John showed me the large, shallow tubs in which I was surprised to find a number of variously sized pieces of fabric. These were unmistakably reminiscent of Kazimir Malevich's works, including his *Black Square*.

With that work, the leading protagonist of the Russian avant-garde and founder of Suprematism had radically brought painting to an end point. "It was not an empty square that I exhibited, but rather the perception of non-objectivism", is how Malevich described his work. It was shown for the first time in 1915 at the Dobychina gallery in Petrograd, the city now known as Saint Petersburg. *Black Square*, the first version of which is now considered to be lost, was hung in a prominent position amid other works by the artist. High up in a corner of the room and hung so that its surface was tilted slightly downwards, it occupied a space that was actually reserved for religious icons in every traditional Russian home.

Today, more than a century later, this work has itself advanced to become an icon, and it is venerated by artists, art historians and art lovers in an almost religious manner. And now there was a "copy" of this work in the form of a used rag with a black, embroidered plane (which was not even perfectly geometrical) – lying there in brine, being subjected to an evaporation process.

A sacrilege? No! Instead it is just one of Isaacs's many different artistic practices. At first glance this approach – or, alternatively, the resulting artwork – appears very simplistic and scarcely original: it reveals its complexity only when we situate it within the context of Isaacs's work and the conditions under which contemporary art is produced. Allow me to sketch this thesis here: just as Malevich was striving to write the next chapter in various lines of tradition in Western art, we still harbour the expectation that artists pursue a path which constantly leads to new forms of engagement with art, ourselves and our world. What Isaacs is doing here is no different. He transforms the *Black Square* and removes it from the context of the aesthetic response to this work. The image of an image is decoded and materially and visually denaturalised. This leads to a semantic shift that formulates a new pictorial statement. Malevich insisted that non-objectivity unites the three epistemological paths of religion, art and science and that it inherently involves an independent ontological foundation whose essence had not yet been completely grasped by humankind. Isaacs undermines this conception entrapped within the intellectual. He emotionalises his Black Square. The sparkling salt crystals look like thousands of diamonds or stars in the nocturnal firmament, and they speak to us in a delightfully sensual, alluring manner. The crystals possess a universal beauty. The work celebrates nature as a creative force. Nature's victory over art? Judge for yourself!

Several works at the exhibition *Today I started loving you again* engage with the works of other artists. A pencil drawing on yellowed paper – *What lies behind what lies before* – suggests an old master’s drapery study and appears strangely familiar. Beneath the drapery, we are able to discern a figure we know from another icon of the 20th century. It is the mother crying out in grief and despair from the left side of Picasso’s *Guernica*. The Catalan master created this monumental painting in response to the Basque town’s complete destruction in 1937, when it was bombarded by the German air force’s “Condor Legion” during the Spanish Civil War. By covering the figure, Isaacs has depicted it in an even more abstract manner than Picasso. We can use our imagination to gain a more intimate understanding of her and to empathise with her pain.

In the work *Let the golden age begin* (2010), Isaacs has drawn inspiration from Bruce Nauman, aesthetically referencing his neon work *Human Nature, Life Death, Knows Doesn’t Know* (1983). While the words “Pleasure & Pain, Life & Death, Love & Hate” are juxtaposed with one another and alternately illuminated, Isaacs has replaced them with the statement “in search of someone to lead / follow” in a similar configuration. Here we are confronted with two fundamental themes in Isaacs’s art: On the one hand – with an allusion to Nauman – the work deals with a fundamental scepticism towards a concept of truth that is constituted through language. On the other hand, Isaacs points to a powerfully moving temporal continuum.

Isaacs’s works are always bridges that reinforce what we know and lead to the unknown. He rids himself of all forms of power and magnificence – which were once inherent to art – and reduces them to absurdity, opening up new possibilities for what is worthy of representation.

In spite of a distinct ambiguity, all of Isaacs’s artworks are united by a profoundly humanistic dimension. His explorations, observations and narratives form the point of departure for his works. They are what becomes materialised in extremely diverse ways in his art, and they provide sculptural or pictorial form to those elementary and timeless themes that have always occupied us as human beings.