

John ISAACS - Only words

Sept 9 – Oct 15, 2016

In keeping with the polymorphic character of John Isaacs' work, "Only Words" is a title that invites multiple readings. It might suggest that words are relatively useless for understanding the visual arts. Paradoxically, words indeed occupy an important place for Isaacs, whose works often play on the ambiguous relationship between title and visual incarnation – and this exhibition features several pieces built specifically around words or phrases.

This paradox is one of passkeys into the artist's universe, and also applies to our global society of which he is a diligent observer: as he underscores, words seem powerless to cure the madness that's gripped the modern world while, equally, they can act as weapons of mass destruction in the hands of fanatics. Finally, "Only Words" also refers to all the broken promises, state lies, endless empty declarations and other unimplemented protocols that are the lot of international diplomacy, and which make any progress at the global level largely a matter of chance.

John Isaacs likes to play with old references, archaeological even, to better examine both the present and the future. Several works comment upon our desire to manage this present, and our (in)capacity to do so. The Child's Life Jacket, carved from Carrara marble, evokes in the form of a monument or mausoleum, the thousands of refugees trying to reach European shores while oftentimes losing their own lives and those of family members in the process. They are pushed to flee by war – whether economic or military – but the road to peace seems at best uncertain, as suggested by the tattered white flag ("Let the golden age begin"). "The Cyclical Development of Stasis" follows the same train of thought: this hand – like that of an ancient monumental statue, with its pointing, authoritarian finger – is presented alone within a glass display box, and isolated from its historical and symbolic context. The title evokes a condition of immobility (stasis) that in many respects engulfs our world of today (and is referred to, as well, in the neon "Blood and Tears", a circle that nothing seems able to break). A veritable illusionist when he launches into a sculpture, John Isaacs gives the hand made from ceramic the appearance of an old classic relic from the sea, a constant in his work, which we again come across in his huge Meat Key (yet to be titled) from wax, seemingly carved from a single side of beef. To the fascination that one experiences when faced with this technical mastery, is added a vague feeling of repulsion, an unsettling quality inherent to John Isaacs' works, where nothing is really as it seems.

Many of these pieces, owing to their title or form, deal with the relationships between individuals in a society that, though permanently 'connected', generates solitude more than ever before. The neon piece "Inconsolus" (When you talk about love you make me feel invisible), "Untitled" (From a distance you look smaller but I know that you are there), "Cast from light and dark your shadow is not different than mine", or "Are We not the Same, You and I ?" are all cases in point. This last-named work, whose form evokes two goblets connected by a thread, harks back to the world of childhood – a Golden Age? – a reference that we explicitly again find in two colored wall hangings: "Votes for the Children". But an antique cart filled with colored Murano-glass balloons serves to remind us of the fragility and transience of this now far-away world.

The uniqueness of John Isaacs' work within the panorama of contemporary art chiefly, but not exclusively, resides in this artist's capacity to blur borders: each work is a fragment of a gigantic visual puzzle, at once poetical and political. And as Isaacs himself says, ideally the artist is less in the business of producing objects, and more concerned with posing questions (to viewers, too) as to what in art is essential and what superfluous. A question he succinctly summarizes in these terms: Am I doing too much, or too little?