

CHANT DOWN BABYLON

Genesis 11

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.
And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.
And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly.
And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.
And they said, Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name,
lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men built.
And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language;
and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.
So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.
Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did
the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

Running alongside the seeming directness and simplicity of John Isaacs' work there is a pervasive current of unease and anxiety that identifies our modern way of life and its thinking as somehow warped, disjunctive and off balance. Like the Surrealism of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, much of Isaacs' work seems to suggest that if you scratch at the surface of conventional reality, then a repressed can of worms – a world of ugly and uncomfortable truth – lies just below the thin plastic exterior of our pre-packed modern sanitised world. Playing with the extremities and taboos of the modern day norm, Isaacs' art reveals a number of uncomfortable truths that he believes, we are all, to some extent, conscious of.

In many ways Isaacs is a modern day moralist appealing to our collective sense of guilt about the glaring contrast between the way the world is and the way we would like it to be. We all know that our modern, fast-track, hi-flying, giga-byted, money-making, stock-inflating, Broadway-boogie-woogie world is also a fast-food guzzling, consumer-driven, resource-eating, air-polluting, earth-poisoning, prozac-popping monster that has run out of control. The depressing rate at which the natural world is disintegrating is fed to us every night on the news. Unlike at Belshazaar's feast however, this kind of writing on the wall has somehow lost much of its power to shock and actually become a bizarre and slightly masochistic form of infotainment. We all know that half the world is starving while the other half is on a diet, that each year we produce enough food for everyone and that it costs more to store and destroy it than it does to give it away. We live in an age of such glaring contradiction that we have grown to accept such grotesque unbalance and injustice with a world-weary reluctance. Moral outrage at the current state of the planet only seems to last so long before one becomes accustomed to a sense that mankind as a species is powerless to effect any kind of change on the seeming inevitability of its own self-destructive evolution.

Everybody also knows that it's a crying shame about the rainforests soon being a thing of the past, that the hole in the ozone layer is now the size of Africa, that Africa itself is dying of AIDS, that the world's resources are running out, and that the self-appointed leader of the world is widely thought of as a

retarded ex-alcoholic oil man inflicting his over-zealous evangelical born-again Christian values on the rest of us. But, a collective awareness of the problem is one thing, actively doing something to change it is quite another. For in the end it is you, your very existence as a “First –World” consumer, that lies at the root of the problem. Whatever it is that you do – or think you do – your collusion with and participation in a Northern Hemisphere economy establishes you as one of the evil doers. In the great scheme of things your position is, in the end, merely that of an evil droid working in the mechanics of the great Mammon – an unheroic worker-ant contributing to and helping to perpetuate the self-destructive system that you and everyone around you knows is wrong. In effect you are but one of millions of worker-ants engaged in the construction of a monstrous hubristic fallacy – the building of a modern day Tower of Babel – a self-reflective monument to modern man’s arrogance, greed and stupidity that history and the bible has told us, is doomed to failure and self-destruction.

But you know all this. Everybody knows this. You’ve thought about it from time to time and often enough to know that in the end it’s the kind of thing that’s best not to think about. This is just the nature of the human condition for modern man (or woman) at the end of the dirtiest century in the history of mankind and the beginning of a new millennium. You’re wise enough to know now that one individual can’t change the world and its ways – after all you’re not above or apart from it, you are a part of it.

But, if you want to bury your head in the sand on this issue, or if you say to yourself that in spite of all this you’ll keep some sense of dignity by keeping your own personal dream alive, by not letting go of that wonderful vision of an ideal world that you once had – that naïve and innocent view of life that you forged during your happy childhood. If you want to cling desperately to that seductive Jean-Jacques Rousseauist lie that all men are born equal and essentially good and that all things are possible in this world and that one day everything will work out for the best – then John Isaacs is not going to let you get off that easily.

If you have a shred of guilt or a spark of romantic idealism or utopian longing in your blackened soul then John Isaacs’ work is going to appeal to it. His work is not just a call for another way but it is directly aimed at challenging the viewer into rethinking the way they perceive and understand the world. Part of its power is that it is made in such a way that once seen, it won’t allow you be lazy in your head but instead messes with it and with the things you think you know, slowly coercing you into re-thinking your values. Isaacs’ art doesn’t necessarily tell you anything new, anything that you don’t already know, it just highlights some of the less palatable truths of our world, and, often using humour as its spearhead, pushes at the fault-lines of the everyday conventions and commonplaces that we all use to cover up the cracks in the artifice of how we go about living our contemporary lives.

Isaacs’ art operates in the space between the way the world is and the way we would either like it to be or the way we pretend or delude ourselves it is. When he presents an ostrich with its head in the sand and the viewer is required to look up its arse to see the world in its simple beautiful, blue marble entirety, we know instinctively where he’s coming from long before we begin to think more deeply about the work or the artist’s intention and/or motivation for making it. Much of the power of Isaacs’ work resides in the fact that the first visual shock of recognition, once seen, cannot be erased from the memory. His imagery slips into the matrix of our consciousness and like irritating morsels of brainfood and becomes lodged in between the teeth of our thought.

The reason for this is that Isaacs is not moralising from some lofty high-ground or position of authority, his position is self-evidently the same as that of one of us ordinary mixed-up mortals. He's clearly on our side. His work shares our sense of moral confusion and directly appeals to that collective myth that, he believes we all share. It appeals to that sense of a better, fairer, and more inclusive world, an idea that, he believes, along with most other Romantics in history, is somehow embedded in the fabric of our humanity and in the end, perhaps, our only hope of salvation. This sense of an underlying universal connection between us all, the belief that under the surface of our apparent isolation from one another lies some kind of ideological tectonic plateau connecting us all, or alternatively, at the least the very fact that we are all united by the fact that we are all alone is a common theme running through much of his work and one that lies at the heart of many of his installations from *Dumb planets are round too*, to *Are we not the same you and I*.

“I've been showing objects alongside videos and photographs to create a kind of dynamic where works - often made in a different ways and techniques - might make you look again at your presumptions and ways of thinking. There are threads running through these environments. It's like seeing these isolated things in the work as in the world - America and Africa for example - appear to be isolated and yet underneath the ocean there's this connection between them and yet above sea level they're exposed as these separate entities...it's like that with my work. Many things seem to be disconnected, yet there is always a route. (1)

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You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.

John Lennon (2)

If the gods didn't exist we would have to invent them. We, as a species are too susceptible to the warm comforting lie of an ideology to stay out in the cold wind of uncertainty for any length of time. In the same way that our individual sense of isolation makes us long for a collective understanding, our collective sense of isolation as a people alone in the universe makes us long for the sheltering warmth of some great cosmic approval, for a vindication of our actions, or at least an understanding of them. Like all performers (or artists) we wish to transcend our isolation and to communicate. In the end, as both individuals and as a species, we need an audience. So we settle for an idea, for some fixed point in the heavens around which, we say, all others revolve, and, from this, a line is drawn, an ideology is born, a rule is made and a law enforced. But it is wrong to place our faith in such things, for we must remember that such things are at best an illusion and at worst a lie. Life is rich, varied and complex and ideologies are what Isaacs describes as “ subjective and distilled and therefore very dangerous.”

It is essential therefore that in appealing to our collective sense of an ideal or to possibilities beyond the normal mundane reality of the everyday, that one avoids making an art that is programmatic or subservient to any single point of view or belief. Isaacs wants to extend our blinkered view of life to one that is more inclusive. He believes that one of the highest values of art is that it is perhaps the only way in which such a more inclusive worldview can be attained. At the same time he understands that art immediately ceases to be art if it subordinates itself to a single, comprehensible label or meaning. As the filmmaker Godfrey Reggio asserted when asked about the apparent objectivity of his film *Koyaanisquatsi*, art's “power, its mystery”

resides in the fact that it remains “free” and “has no intrinsic meaning”. Art should, he maintained, “stimulate the viewer to insert their own meaning, their own value. So while I might have this or that intention in creating this film, I realize fully that any meaning or value *Koyaanisquatsi* might have comes exclusively from the beholder. The film’s role is to provoke, to raise questions that only the audience can answer. This is the highest value of any work of art, not predetermined meaning, but meaning gleaned from the experience of the encounter. The encounter is my interest, not the meaning. If meaning is the point, then propaganda and advertising is the form. So in the sense of art, the meaning of *Koyaanisquatsi* is whatever you wish to make of it. This is its power.” (3)

Isaacs takes a very similar viewpoint towards his work. Its importance lies in the encounter and the sense of meaning it provokes in the viewer. If Isaacs is protesting or propagandising in any way it is in his argument for wider understanding for wider acceptance – an inclusive worldview that incorporates opposites and contradiction into itself. It is in this sense that his work follows in the tradition of the Surrealists, for Isaacs’ work proposes a viewpoint that allows for the fact that human imagination consists of both mind and body; a vision that incorporates both the visceral and the synthetic, the real and the imaginary, the rational and the irrational.

“Every view is significant for him who sees it,” Wittgenstein once said, “and in this sense every view is significant.” Isaacs wants his art to incorporate just such an all-embracing and non-hierarchical sense of experience into his work. His view is that even if modern man is heading for self-destruction or collectively engaged in the building of a Tower of Babel, underlying this fruitless exercise there is a common understanding, perhaps even a universal language of thought that we all share, – as indeed there was when the original Tower was built and before God sowed discord amongst the builders. Though it is a language which today is neglected, is perhaps nevertheless still very real and understandable. “What I’m getting at and what I’m really interested in” Isaacs has said, “is that fundamentally there’s this whole side – a complex and difficult side - of what it means to be human which is actually making all these surreal irrational links. Everyone does it, you could be sitting on a bus thinking of something, and you see something and then it makes them think of something else, and you can’t follow this, you can’t map it, you can’t put it in a cat scanner and write up a report. This is what the world is made up of as much as its made up of institutions and schools and jobs and all this. The fact that one in eight people is on prozac in a country like America – the role model of progress – makes you wonder, that as far as you can evolve a technology, create genetically evolved people, have a car with power steering, and fridge bursting with food doesn’t mean that you are actually feeling any better or a better-functioning human being. This is the crux of it, because people are very quick to devalue countries that are so-called “Third World” or underdeveloped. Yet in many ways these societies have evolved things that are far more advanced than the passage of time we’re going through now”.

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We feel that even if all possible scientific questions could be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course, there is then no question left, and just this is the answer. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.

Ludwig Wittgenstein(4)

Modern Science is scientifically proving itself to be unscientific. As it incorporates into itself the concepts of irrationality, chaos, probability and uncertainty, science increasingly reveals itself to be alogical. An observation-

based doctrine, it has – as quantum theory amply demonstrates - now logically proved that the subjectivity of the observer (their very humanness perhaps) actively conditions, determines, and in scientist's minds, distorts the results of all experiments and observations of perceptual phenomena. Like all decaying ideas, science now increasingly demands that its devotees make a leap of faith in its infallibility in order to continue to go about offering blanket explanations for life, the universe and everything. Building on theories such as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle which effectively seems to demonstrate the self-evident platitude that the closer you look at something the more limited your view of it becomes, science is increasingly revealing itself to be merely another dubious ideology. (5) It is however, an ideology that has, alongside man's ever present hubris in his own invention, established an empirical, impractical and limited rational form of thinking that dominates and determines much of our modern way of life. The geometric boxes that we all live in and which constitute the structure of our lives from the computer chip to the electric grid and the tower block are just the outward physical expression of the innate cold rationality that lies behind this limited process of thought. It is an exclusive rather than inclusive way of thinking into which we have collectively placed our faith and increasingly it is showing itself to be flawed. (If you're still not convinced about science's own state of self-indulgent confusion then check out *Quantuum Suicide* as a guide to the relationship between contemporary scientific thinking and practical reality. A written description of the *Quantuum Suicide* scenario reads like description of one of Isaacs' installations). (6)

The folly of placing one's faith entirely in reason and logic has long been understood by both artists and almost anyone else working creatively. Pieter Bruegel provided one of the most potent images of the ultimate failure of rationality in his painting of the Tower of Babel from 1563 when he depicted a strictly rational structure – largely based on the Colosseum in Rome – striving towards the sky but, self-evidently doomed to failure by the seemingly faultless architectural logic of its own construction. Isaacs, who was himself once a science student, became increasingly disenchanted with the purely rational, narrow and one-sided view of reality that scientific disciplines often demanded while a student of Biology at the University of Exeter in the 1980s. Isaacs, whose main interest was in evolution, was primarily interested in developing an overview – something that the practice of science with its inevitable tendency towards specialisation, is not ideally suited to. Growing away from what he increasingly saw as an imperialist tendency amongst scientists of attempting to be the first to label and define and thus reduce the phenomena of life and experience down to an understandable and clearly identifiable formula or equation, Isaacs is critical of such exclusive thinking. Much of his art often parodies or mocks the blinkered nature of scientific theory and practice by highlighting the discipline's inability to deal with the real stuff of life as witnessed by the snogging scientists of his *The Incomplete History of an Unknown Discovery* (scientist) of 1998, his documentary film *Turning Point* – a humorous take on the possible change in behaviour of Fiddler crabs at the turn of the new millennium or his *A Necessary Change of Heart* made for the Spectacular Bodies exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 2000.

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Through the practice of art Isaacs has found and developed a more inclusive language that he feels is more suited to exploring and explaining the profound mysteries that lie at the heart of our existence. Science, logic, rationality and empirical thought all have a role to play in this, but Isaacs sees his task as an

artist of being one of intermingling these abstract scientific disciplines with the very human variables of emotion, humour, and intuition. In addition to these he also often refers to another unknown determinate unique to art; a profound appreciation of beauty or of quality that is experienced through the pure physical pleasure of making.

Although he is keen to point out that he doesn't see himself as a scientist making art, much of Isaacs' work is nevertheless often experimental in a similar way to that of a scientist's. "I'm fascinated by so many aspects of how institutionalised our thinking, our education and language is", he says, and much of his art is aimed at deconstructing the fabric and formulae by which we have come to judge the world around us. "One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that. But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this. It is not a stupid prejudice", Wittgenstein noted in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Isaacs, looks at modern life in a similar way and explores similar prejudices and conventions in our contemporary thinking through the use of often bizarre or surprising juxtapositions. One of the central themes running through his work is his vision of humanity from that of an evolutionary perspective. Often incorporating images and motifs from Natural History Isaacs' work clearly presents a view of mankind as an integral part of the flora and fauna of the Earth rather than, in his biblical role, as the species divinely bequeathed dominion over every living thing. To reinforce this more inclusive view of man as merely a building block in the evolutionary history of the planet, Isaacs often uses a humorous anthropomorphism in which animals and other natural phenomena are used to convey supposedly uniquely human emotions, projections and conventions. From his cosmic ostrich to the victimised scapegoat of *Other People's Lives*, the partial whale fin of *The Incomplete History of Discovery* to the dissected woolly mammoth of *The Diary of a Loner* or the aspiring termites of *Macrocosmographia*, Isaacs' use of animals as physical metaphors of the workings of the human mind is both a powerful and humorous way of undermining man's ego-centric worldview and of exposing his inadequacies.

At the heart of all these works is the glaring contradiction between the analysis, reason and logic of man's scientific approach to life – as typified by such procedures as dissection, identification and classification, – and the visceral all-inclusive myriad miracle of the reality of life itself. Isaacs is arguing that the whole is always greater than the sum of its dissected parts. A whale cannot be understood from only its fin, the history of the past cannot be understood by cutting up a mammoth – even if we had access to one – nor can we shelve our collective responsibility to develop a better way of life and thinking by projecting all our inadequacies onto someone or something else, such as a god, a government, or a poor naked goat.

"There's always this conflict between this very practical normal human thing – a dialectical thing that seems to assert that you need a certain practical outlook or attitude in life in order to function (we do need to eat we need to shit etc) and then there's this other side which (not anger or frustration necessarily) is this emotional being. And I want these two sides, the mind/body, cerebral versus visceral, to come out in my work. Through my interest in evolution however – looking at how acts in the past effect acts in the present or the future – there's an importance of time in all these things and more and more I've been trying to open up this sense of a time scale, a kind of human emotional inheritance in my work".

In the end, Isaacs' work throws this "dialectical" contrast that he sees at the root of all human understanding into sharp focus. The intention behind the biblical story of the Tower of Babel is to show how man's hubris in attempting to aspire to the level of the gods is always destined to failure. It is nevertheless part

of man's nature to reach for the sky. He can't help himself, he is a slave to the idea. Ideas can't be destroyed they can only rise and fall like towers. It is in this sense of man as creature that is a slave to his nature that Isaacs' Tower of Babel in *Macrocosmographia* displays the similarities and the contrasts between mankind and a colony of termites. Implicit within Isaacs' Tower of Babel is the notion that the clever termites who have built this mound have taken a turn-off from their natural path of evolution and have collectively developed an idea – an idea that we all know from experience and despite the beauty of its classical architecture, will result in the collapse of their tower. It is nevertheless a wondrous sight to behold. Something similar could be said for the human insect collectively known as mankind. And it is by displaying these contrasts together, in direct conjunction with one another that Isaacs, in true Nietzschean fashion, hopes his art can act as a bridge, as a means of bringing together the Apollonian rational idealising drive of man with the unconscious Dionysian nature of his instincts and his biological roots as a creature of the Earth. One of the fiercest critics of ideologies in the arts today, Gerhard Richter, has declared art to be the “highest form of hope”. Isaacs too has placed his faith in art as a form of hope because, of all the disciplines and ideologies available to us, it is the least exclusive. Ultimately, it too is like a Tower of Babel. Art may arguably be a pointless activity, it may be nothing more than a castle in the air, but it is also a universal language, something that can speak to all of us and therefore, for a time, can unite us. It is also something that demonstrates and reflects who we are. “It is my view” Isaacs has declared in a recent statement that reiterates this notion of art as a powerful and universal human language, that “we all carry the sum total of an emotional evolution from the cave to the present. In these new works, as in those before, I'm looking at the buried connections that affect us all. I don't think that in the end we are really so different you and I.” (7)

Robert Brown

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NOTES

1. Unless otherwise stated all quotations of John Isaacs in this essay are taken from an interview between Robert Brown and the artist that took place in London in September 2002.

2. John Lennon, *Imagine* © John Lennon. 1971. Lennon Music.

3. Godfrey Reggio interview published in <http://www.koyaanisquatsi.org/films/koyaanisquatsi.php>

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922.

5. Werner Heisenberg's *Uncertainty Principle* written in 1927 proposed that “the more precisely the position (of a subatomic particle) is determined, the less precisely its momentum is known, and vice versa”.

6. A definition of *Quantum suicide* as given by Wikipedia – the free encyclopedia at wikipedia.com; “*Quantum suicide* is a thought experiment which has been independently proposed in 1987 by Hans Moravec, in 1988 by Bruno Marchal and in 1998 by Max Tegmark that attempts to distinguish between the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics and the Everett many-worlds interpretation by means of a variation of the Schrödinger's cat experiment. The experiment essentially involves looking at the Schrödinger's cat experiment from the point of view of the cat. In this experiment, a physicist sits in front of a gun which is triggered or not triggered by radioactive decay. With each run of the experiment there is a 50–50 chance that the gun will be triggered and the physicist will die. If the Copenhagen interpretation is correct, then the gun will eventually be triggered and the physicist will die. If the many-worlds interpretation is correct then at each run of the experiment the physicist will be split into a world in which he lives and one in which he dies. In the worlds where the physicist dies, he will cease to exist. However, from the point of view of the physicist, the experiment will continue running without his ceasing to exist, because at each branch, he will only be able to observe the result in the world in which he survives, and if many-worlds is correct, the physicist will notice that he never seems to die. Unfortunately, the physicist will be

unable to report the results because, from the viewpoint of an outside observer, the probabilities will be the same whether many worlds or Copenhagen is correct. A variation of this thought experiment suggests a controversial outcome known as quantum immortality, which is the argument that if the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics is correct then a conscious observer never can cease to exist.

7. John Isaacs, extract from text from *Other People's Lives*, Galerie 20.21., April 2003.