JOHN ISAACS

- Ten Tracks -

Intro

The idea that an artwork should or can be understood remains to be proven. And if by "understand", we mean the ability to single out, with reasonable certainty, the factors that turn an object into an artwork, or fathom the impulses that generated it, the doubt becomes even stronger. The twentieth century and its avant-garde movements have confused matters all the more in this regard, at least from a formal standpoint, by demolishing the boundary markers of style, the categories of genre, and even the distinctions between different media. Still, people talk about art more than ever nowadays, because the frenzied society of consumption has methodically taken over the sphere, opening up new channels of distribution, hence of mass distribution, and necessarily, of information. We thus find ourselves discussing and writing about it at length, to explain, catalogue, justify, and ultimately encourage access (material access, of course) to what artists create. But for the most part, this flurry of words and images does not even touch on the essence of the relationship that is forged between viewer and work: the absolutely private, utterly emotional bond that an art lover forms with an artist's oeuvre. It is an entirely mental affair, made up of thought and sensation, reverie and reflection, memory and imagination. Something we can try to describe only in a confessional tone, haphazardly, guilelessly, chaotically, attempting a difficult phenomenology of our own gaze to convey its ideas, allusions, dreams and feelings.

What compelled me toward the work of John Isaacs? What can I say about it? The fact is that from the very first, I was drawn to its great stylistic and physical diversity. It had no "hallmark". To me, this was the sign of a poetic vision much more inclined to let itself be pervaded by the world around it than to leave its own unmistakeable signature on the universe. I felt a delicate invitation to let my thoughts roam through those works, to recreate and share their mood, rather than the sense of a recognizable image being firmly, arrogantly forced upon my eyes. As if they were suggestions, hints of a path that could be traced in the open, complicit sphere of a common sentiment. I accepted that invitation, surrendering to the pull of their aura, their vague but insistent call, accompanied by my digressions into other cherished twin universes next door. These works murmured to me of William Hogarth's fascinating, truculent England, of the bleak absurdity in Samuel Beckett's marooned lives, of James Ensor's biting yet playful irony, of Amy

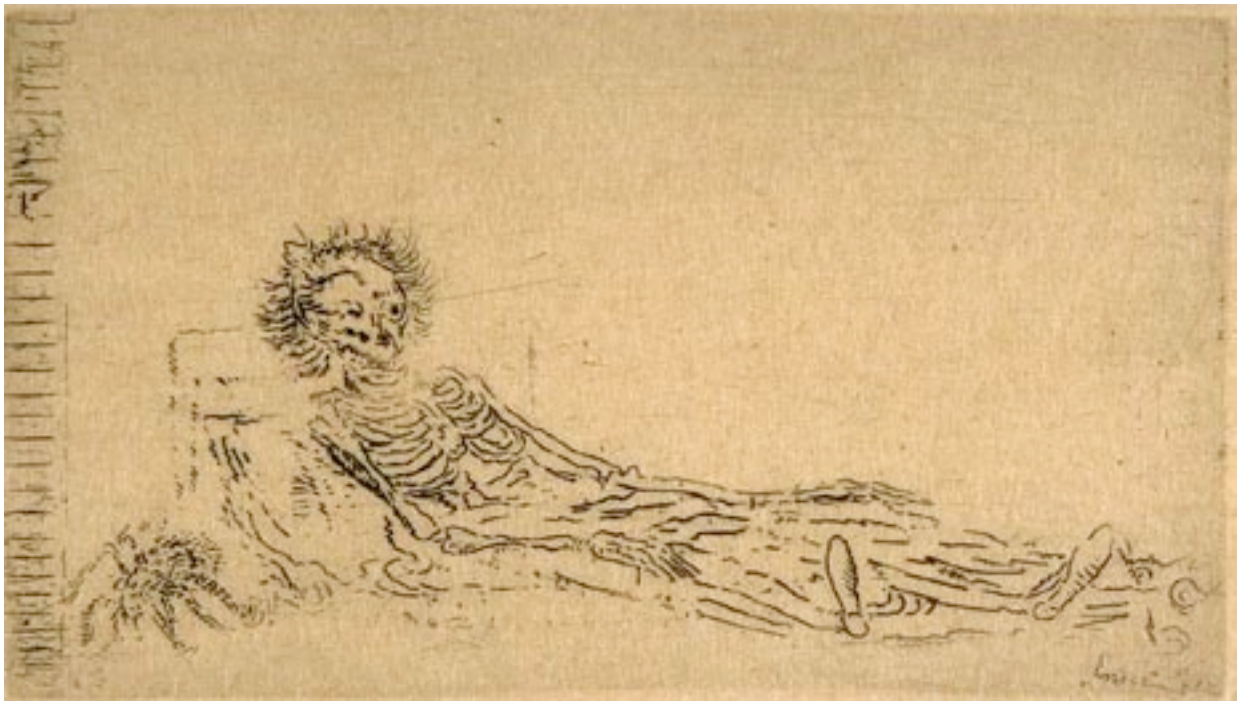
Winehouse's aching, broken-hearted voice. At the same time, I heard them tell a lucid, subdued story of small existences bearing deep wounds, of beloved people and forgotten loves, of crushed hopes, of happy illusions turned into surprising realities, of fear and of enthusiasm. In a word, they spoke of life, and spoke great truth. That may be the key: John Isaacs' work is never about itself, it is about life, only life; his own, and probably ours as well. And in the end, now that the twentieth century's formalist jag of self-absorption has finally worn off, is this not the very role that art should be reclaiming? Not smugly, but fervidly. Amused, though not giggling. With no pointless show of brutality, yet with firmness. Authenticity.

LOVE IS A LOSING GAME

Toward the beginning of En attendant Godot, Estragon suggests, "Et si on se pendait?" and Vladimir replies, "Ce serait un moyen de bander." "On bande?" Estragon exults, his gaze lighting up at the notion, as he heads for the single, scrawny tree that is the whole of the set. Hanging yourself for the sake of a hard-on, with a smile of satisfaction in your eyes and a hole in your heart, in the midst of a wasteland, devoid of interest and of any apparent drama. That's the world of Samuel Beckett.

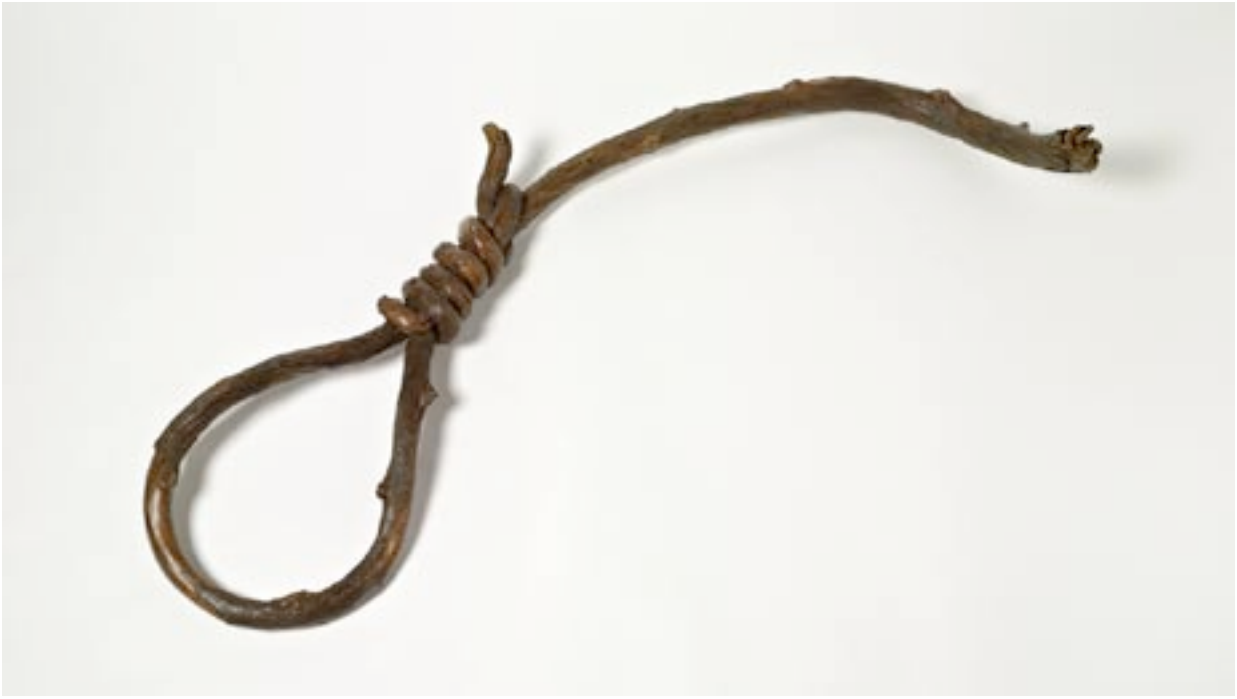
Looking at *Self-Portrait as an Uninhabited City*, I get the impression that John Isaacs would feel at home in that world. A large glass showcase holds the remains of the artist's body, scattered on a shapeless bed of soil like features in a desolate

Self portrait as an uninhabited city, 2001, wax, resin, plaster, oil paint, soil, bones, insects, 50 x 50 x 50 cm



James Ensor, *My Portrait in 1960, Etching printed on simili-Japan paper, 15.8 x 24.6 cm (sheet)*

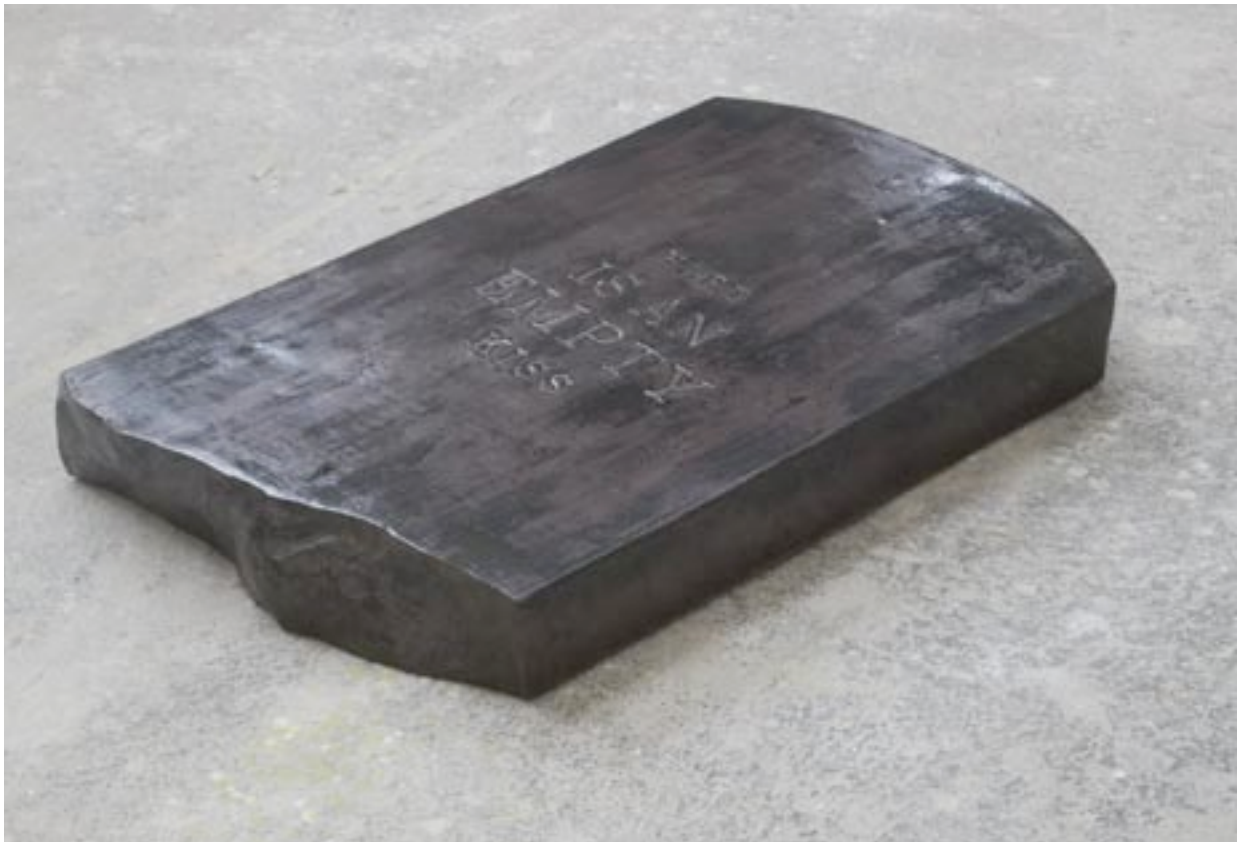
landscape. These are carefully chosen remains, modelled in wax like icons: his skull, his eye, his fingers, his tongue, his erect penis, and half of his foot (suggesting that he stepped into that uninhabited city with some reluctance). They are fragments of a melancholy tale that begins only after the end of history, when all resistance has been overcome by time and the energy of the present has irredeemably fizzled out. When the defeat of art and the artist is already a fact. Unsanctified relics, debris. Remnants that are displayed with detachment, for the sole purpose of bearing witness to an existence: the thoughts, glances, words, gestures, feelings and passions of a life that is now rotting away. Their mocking, tragicomic, corruptible intensity. Even that garish, expensive-looking silver prick, a miserable monument to defunct passions, which towers in a state of imperious, grotesque erection amid a mass of putrescence, seems intended to remind us that we may end up hanging ourselves as a way of killing time. And yet, time will strangle us all the same, even when our enthusiasm leads us to believe we've gotten the better of it. This is a disenchanted, anti-romantic vanitas, in which any starry-eyed aspiration towards the Eternal, the Sublime, the magic, redemptive power of Art or Love, gives way to a subtle, amused, listless nostalgia. The absurd and precarious cheer of catastrophe. It is a self-portrait in reverse that pokes fun at the image one will leave for posterity, because Isaacs – perhaps inspired by Ensor's Mon portrait en 1960, which depicts the artist as a



From a Distance You Look Smaller...But I Know That You Are There, 2005, bronze, 150 x 1180 x 490 mm, Edition of 3 + 2 AP

bedraggled skeleton – is aware that it is much wiser to remember the nullity we will be rather than the little we have been. Indeed, Godot never shows up, or if he does, it makes little difference; what matters is that the wait always comes to nothing, as do the hopes that animated it. All that remains is the bitter memory of that time you thought about hanging yourself for the sake of a hard-on.

Another snapshot from this realm of buried feelings, an image that floats up to the surface of memory like a sepia photo, is *From a Distance You Look Smaller... But I Know That You Are There*. A bronze sculpture of a noose that has been made from a flexible tree limb. Branch and noose: the landscape is still the one where Estragon and Vladimir watch life passing by. The symbols, too. The broken branch is an unmistakable metaphor for transience, and the noose necessarily inspires a sense of imminent suffocation. The title of the work, enigmatic as it may be, alludes to a person no longer in one's life, whose presence is now purely mental, whose absence is stifling. Here again, I get the clear impression that everything has happened before and nothing can ever change. Perhaps because when the only promise is the end, it is the future that dies. The image is cruel, but it does not seem to speak of violence, let alone with violence. Rather, it has the bitter, cloying taste of distance, disappointment, the lingering tang of black bile, of melancholy. Who executed himself with that noose? What love story was put to death? How do you measure the pain



Here is an Empty Kiss, 2009, glazed ceramic, 100 x 70 x 25 cm

of absence? "Memories mar my mind, / Love is a fate resigned / Over futile odds, / And laughed at by the Gods / And now the final frame, / Love is a losing game." The simple, sincere words of Amy Winehouse come floating back in answer to my questions: a melody devoid of hope, to be sung with a lump in one's throat, tight as a metal noose. And I am also 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!"

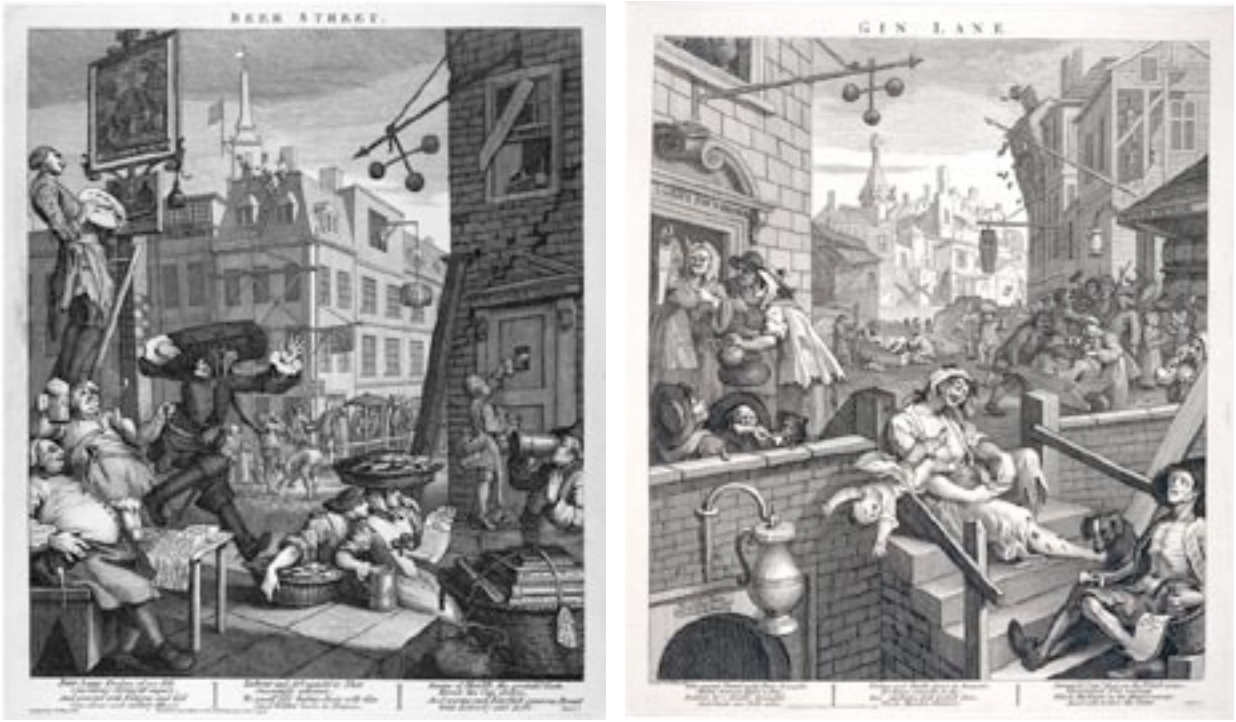
This conviction that the future is impossible means that in the work of John Isaacs, the very substance of the present is made of memories, sometimes cherished with nostalgic tenderness, sometimes jeered at, even scorned. And so, whether cast in the soft hardness of bronze, moulded in the fleshlike wax, or stiff and shiny as ceramic, it is always the past that provides the raw material from which his sculptures take shape. Images of what can no longer be, moods and fears 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 his keenly sensitive 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.

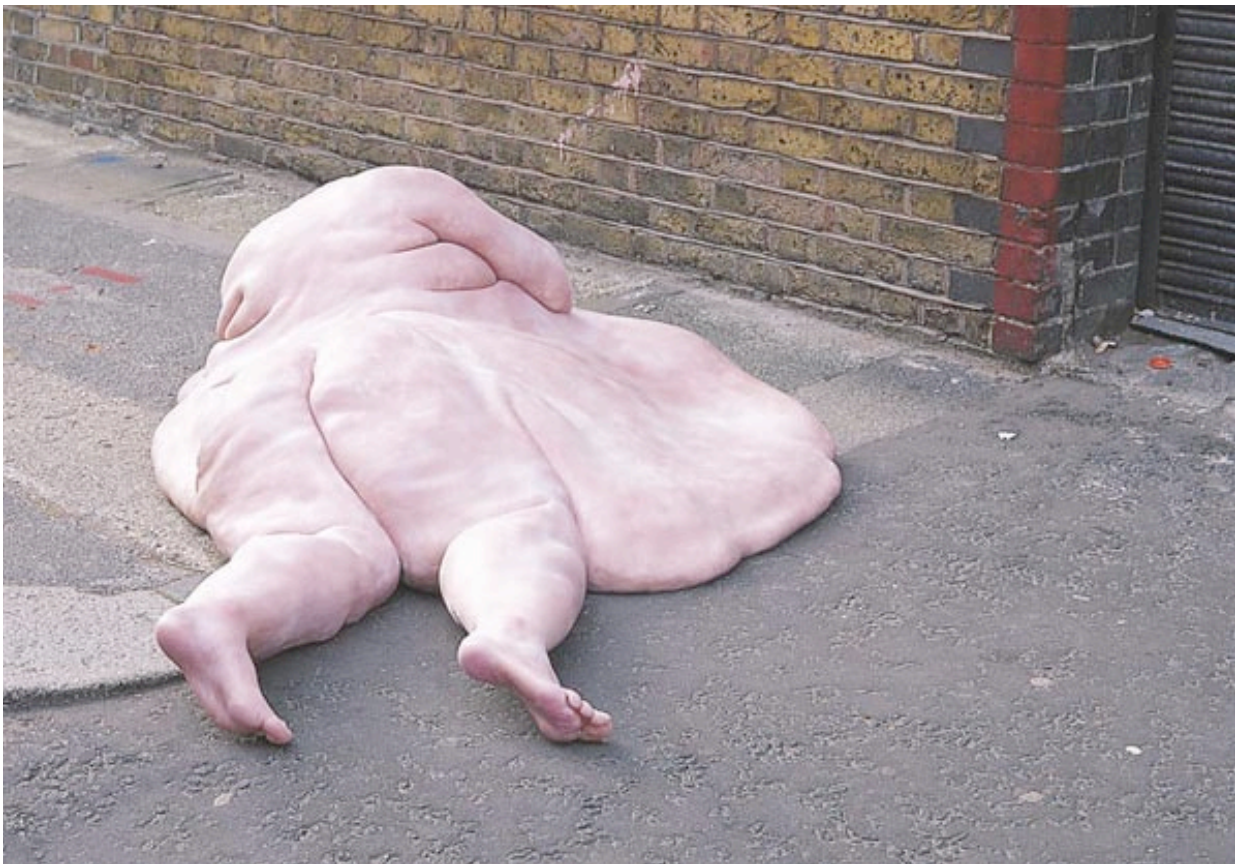
In this sense, I think that the slate-grey ceramic tombstone *Here is an Empty Kiss*, engraved with the title words, is one of the works that best show the paradigm of John Isaacs' aesthetic, with greater discretion and equal clarity. A grave marker, broken at the base, extirpated from the symbolic tomb that holds the remains of a hollow gesture. A multiplication of absences, in an utterly rapt silence: we know nothing about the lovers, their futile effusions; the sepulchre has vanished, the dates and places been forgotten. All that is left is this uprooted relic, lost in time, fragile and immutable, of a memory that is now remote, but has left an indelible mark. Like life, like all lives.

REHAB (GIN LANE AND BEER STREET)

It is no coincidence that in English, as in many other languages with different roots, the word "spirit" means both soul and alcohol. Nor is it any coincidence that the word "essence" can imply either a liquor, or the heart of any given existence. Even



William Hogarth, *Beer street and Gin Lane,* 1751, each print 383 x 325 mm



The Matrix of Amnesia, 1997, mixed media, 200 x 160 x 60 cm

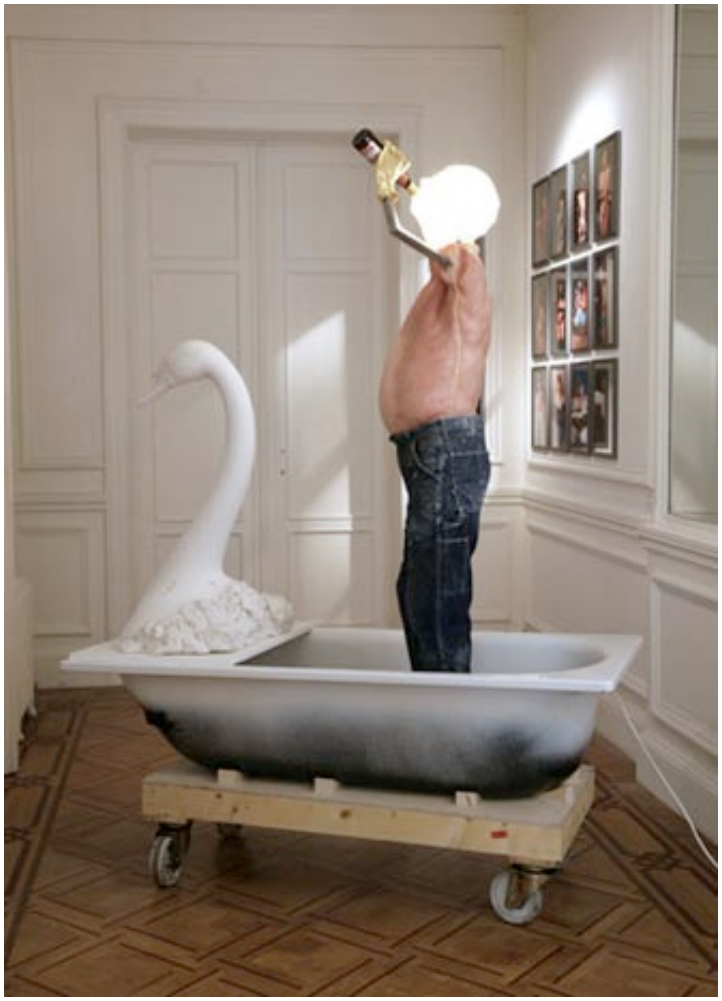
that titan of modern poetry, Guillaume Apollinaire, titled his first collection of verse Alcools, in the sense of a "distillate of life that inflames the heart".

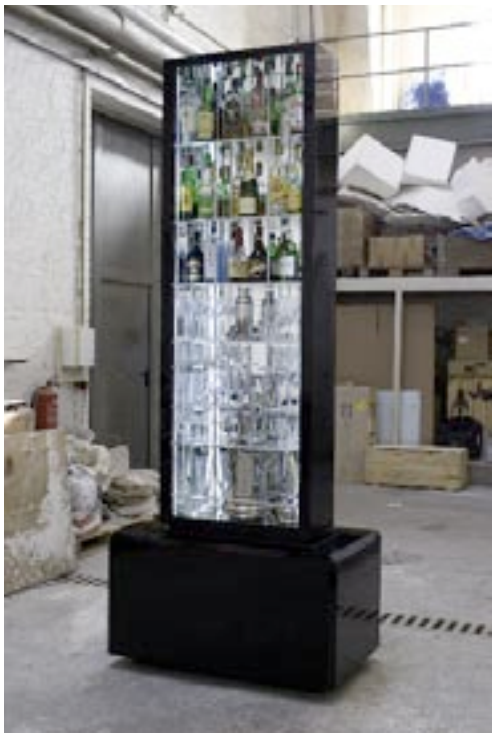
And so it comes as no surprise that work like John Isaacs' – so rich in heart and soul, so spiritual and vital – contains a sea of alcohol.

Some of his enormous wax figures seem lifted straight out of Gin Lane, the famous engraving in which William Hogarth criticized the evils of alcoholism. This is certainly true of the obese man stretched on the ground in *The Matrix of Amnesia*: stark naked, unconscious, his belly spilling out on the floor like a puddle of lard, he appears to have collapsed under the effect of a massive bender. So much drink in his veins that his immense body seems bent on becoming a liquid, too exhausted by the battle against the bottle to retain any semblance of solidity. "That liquid Fire contains / Which madness to the heart conveys, / And rolls it thro' the veins" read the verses by Townley at the bottom of Hogarth's print. And I like to think that John Isaacs had them in mind when he chose the title of his piece, drawing a parallel between madness and amnesia and pointing to their shared matrix of intoxication. What seems certain, in any case, is that while this pitiful body tells the story of a man marginalized by the enormity of his physique – vanquished, overcome, driven mad by his quest to forget – he is also a figure whose larger-than-

life form has become comically grotesque, too swollen with humours not to be humorous. In this sense, he is a direct descendant of Hogarth's caustic drawing, immersed in that atmosphere that teeters between tragedy and comedy, pervaded by that keen, coarse wit that is the great engraver's most generous legacy to the English art of our era.

"Drunk for a penny – Dead drunk for twopence – Clean straw for nothing" reads the inscription over the tavern door in Gin Lane. And while there can be no doubt that the fat man has paid tuppence, there is another character in Isaacs' gallery of booze who has probably limited himself to a penny. Or rather, who never even rubbed elbows with the desperate inhabitants of that infamous street in Bloomsbury, and instead stopped off further south, in the prosperous Beer Street, to buy a pint and enjoy it later, in comfort, at home. This is the central figure of *Let the Golden Age Begin* (reverie). Standing in his bathtub, shirtless and in a pair of old jeans, he guzzles a bottle of beer. It might seem like a realistically depicted scene of ordinary domestic drunkenness. Except that his head is lit up from the inside and as translucent as the globe of a lamp, the arm holding the bottle to his mouth is a skeletal, mechanical prosthesis, and the neck of a pure white swan rises over the edge of the tub. Indeed, the work suggests that with the aid of a more appropriate liquor, one can climb out of the darkness of oblivion and embark on the shining path of dreams, toward the envisioned glory of an industrious golden age. Once again, the parallel with Hogarth's work appears inevitable. Albeit with a touch of irony, the tipsiness caused by beer is seen here as a blissful condition, harbinger of inventions and prosperity, conducive to creation, just as in the Beer Street of 1751. Underneath the latter, Townley appended these lines: "Beer, happy produce of our Isle / Can sinewy strength impart / and wearied with fatigue and toil / Can cheer each manly heart / Labour and Art upheld by thee – Successfully advance". And Hogarth included his own self-portrait in the guise of a sign-painter, right in the middle of the page, as if to emphasize that this was a place where an artist could work with joy. John Isaacs has also chosen to lend his own features to the drinker's face and to include a white swan whose neck faithfully mimics the curve of Hogarth's famous "Line of Beauty", an element that is surreal and incongruous at first glance, but can be easily interpreted as symbolizing the sublimation of the creative act. The kinship between such disparate images arises first and foremost from the daydreams of the viewer, of course, and certainly not from any explicit philological intention of the artist, who is alien to any sterile citationism. Nevertheless, I feel justified in suggesting that the affinities between these two universes stem from a continuity of thought, a leitmotiv that runs through the his-





Left *Let the Golden Age Begin,* 2005, steel, wax, fabric, glass, resin, plaster, ceramic, gold plating, electric fixture, 220 x 190 x 75 cm, **Right** *Give Birth to Your Own God and Bury Your Own Demons,* 2009, fiberglass resin, mirror, chromed steel, mixed media, 120 x 75 x 290 cm

tory of English art, from the revolutionary observations of the Analysis of Beauty 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.

This is the mood of *Give Birth to Your Own God and Bury Your Own Demons*, a piece that looks as chilly and impenetrable as a monolith, but is as brimming with white-hot substance as the belly of a volcano. It is a large glass and

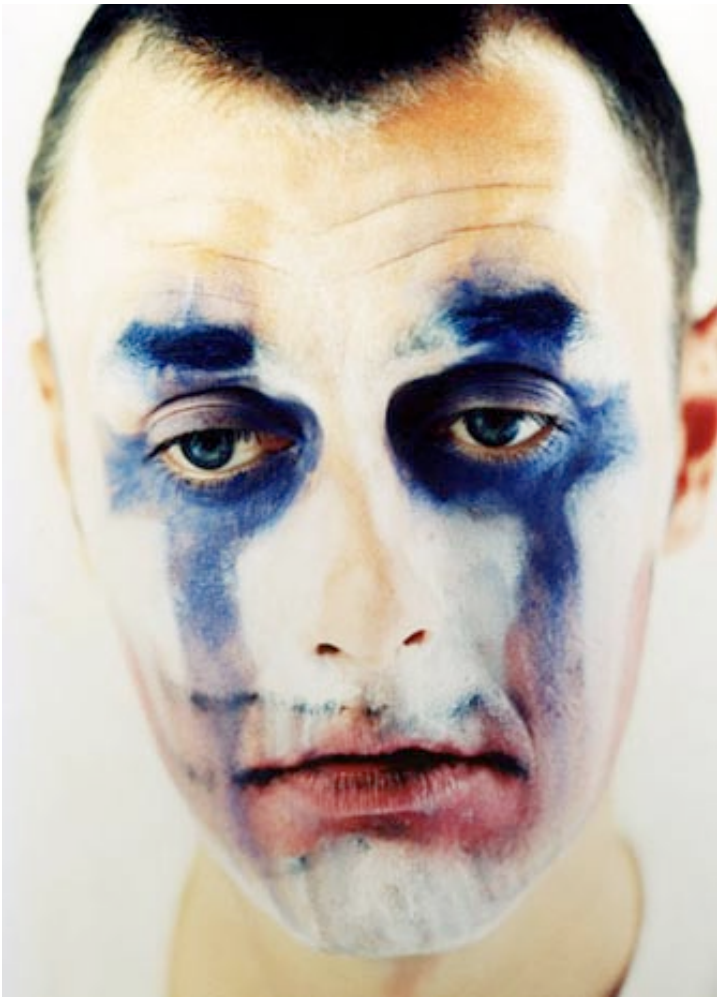
metal cabinet, placed on a pedestal to form a sort of funerary stele, or perhaps a large tabernacle; the upper shelves house bottles of all kinds of liquor, while the lower ones hold glasses, flutes and shakers. The wall behind them is a mirror in which viewers are obliged to see their own image reflected and refracted by the various crystalline silhouettes, as if in a kaleidoscope. The bottles are half full and the glasses all empty, sparkling and pristine. Where are the nascent god and the expiring demons evoked by the title? On the upper shelves, where Heaven is usually found, or on the ones below, where Hell is thought to lie? In the alcohol that's gone, or in the alcohol that's left? In the fact that the glasses have not been used, or that they're ready for use? Or in the fragmented effigy of the viewer, who sees in his own reflection in the same gaze as all that booze? And is the monolith a totem or a taboo, a cradle or a coffin? These are the questions the work poses to anyone who comes into its presence, like the first interview at a rehab clinic. One has to wonder what the artist's answers might be, and whether art can really wean itself off of that "distillate of life that inflames the heart".

"They tried to make me go to rehab, but I said no, no, no" is the insistent refrain sung by Winehouse (not a stage name), because "I'm gonna lose my baby so I always keep a bottle near". And that may be the answer.

TEARS DRY ON THEIR OWN

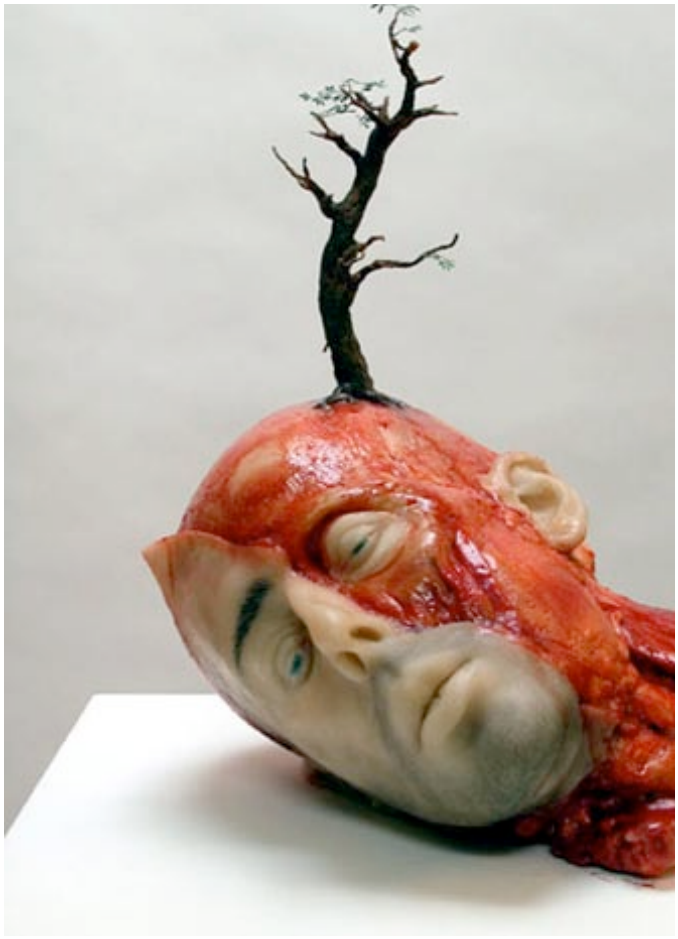
"Another heavenly day!" exclaims Beckett's Winnie, the protagonist of Happy Days, who is buried up to her neck in a mound of earth. Only her head emerges, bearing a broad, fixed smile. She chatters away, telling stories, making comments, confessing thoughts, recalling anecdotes. But her prattle is a monotonous, meaningless soundtrack. The drama is not really played out in her words, but rather in the expression on her face. It is as if that face, abstracted from the body and cut off from the dialogue like a mask, were actually painting its own self-portrait, and everything else were just the frame. Her hairdo, her makeup, her wrinkles, a grimace, a twitch of her lips, a gleam or blink of her eyes, the arch of her brow: so many brushstrokes in a wordless painting, the mute, pitiless mirror of a soul.

"Another heavenly day?" seems to ask the incredulous face of John Isaacs in the large colour photograph Self-Portrait. His features are besmirched with ruined clown makeup. Long black drip marks furrow his cheeks where many tears



Untitled, 2001, C-Print, 156 x 106 cm, framed, Edition of 6 + 2 AP

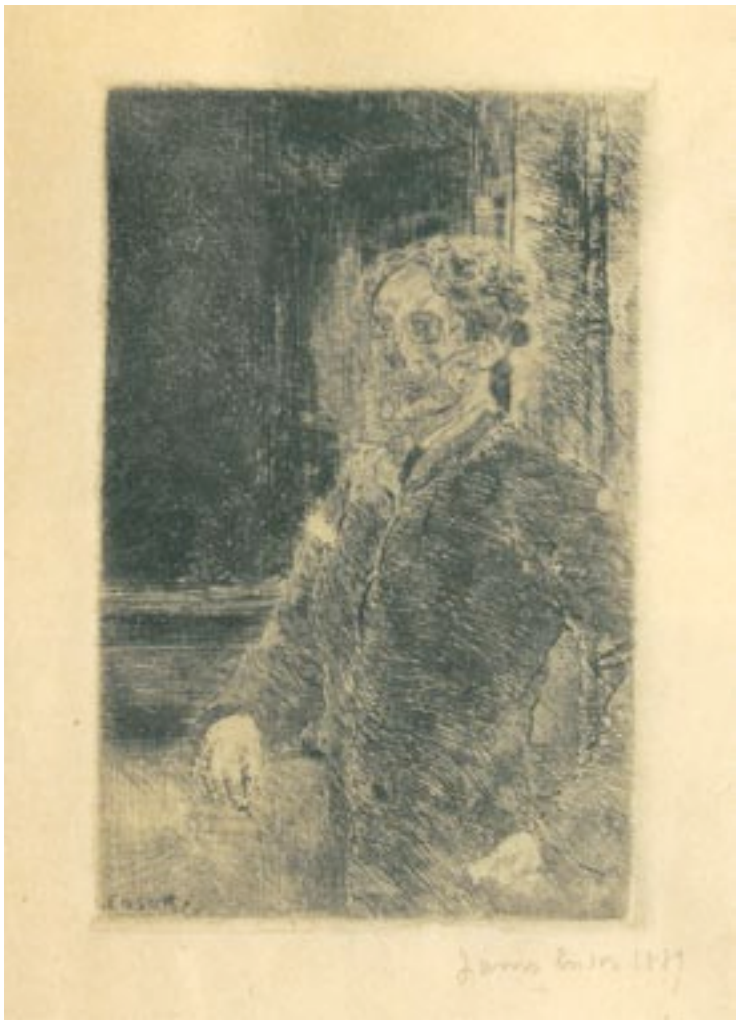
must have flowed, now dry. His mouth, rendered unnaturally wide by the smeared lipstick, is half-open, as if it were whispering the question. Perhaps the show has just finished; his sweat, which has washed away most of the white greasepaint, reveals wrinkles that are etched into his forehead, not traced by any pencil. His gaze is immobile, stunned, slightly downcast. The absent expression of someone absorbed by a thought, trying to work it through to the end. It is a doubly complex self-portrait: on the one hand, while the artist is shown in disguise, his disguise is fading away to reveal his face, and on the other, his face itself seems to conceal the object of an intensely introspective gaze. As if the makeup, the tears, the expression were merely veils that must be lifted to reach the truth inside those eyes. As if the spectacle consisted in the destruction of all theatrical devices, to finally present the true story of the actor. Erasing the fiction, the depiction of life, to let the face of real life, lived life, show through. It is the artist's attempt to reveal him-

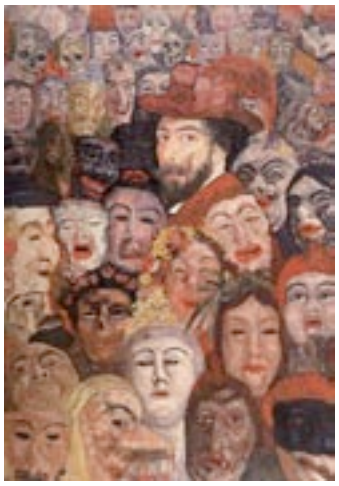


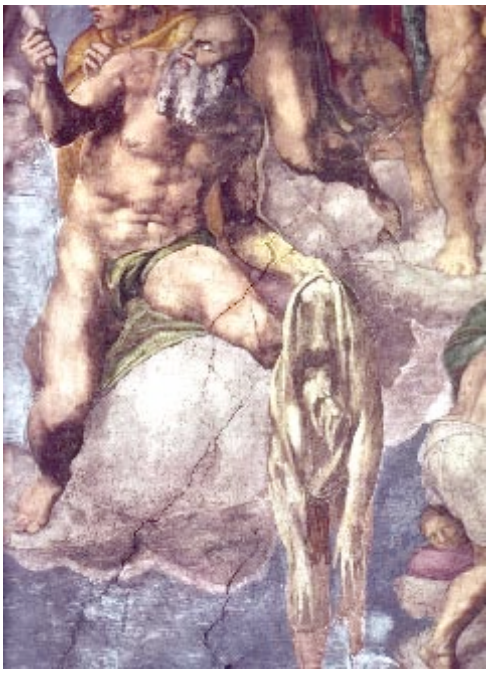
Thinking about it, 2002, wax, wire, plaster of paris, 30 x 30 x 50 cm

self to himself as a man, to see with his own eyes the person that lies under the skin of his character.

With its struggle to find an authentic identity, this work cannot help but remind me of that masterpiece of modern art, James Ensor's Autoportrait aux masques, in which the artist's portrait stands out against a dizzying carousel of masks, yet is almost lost among them. Whether these are masks that he himself has worn, or those of the people around him, we do not know, but what seems clear is that the painter's gaze, at the centre of the picture, is questioning its own creator. As with Ensor, an intense desire to find himself within his work – which is something separate from himself, but without which it would be impossible to grasp the meaning of his existence – is the bulwark of Isaacs's entire oeuvre. And this is how we can interpret the many, seemingly disparate self-portraits that dot the path he has travelled over the years, toeing the line between autobiography and self-analysis.

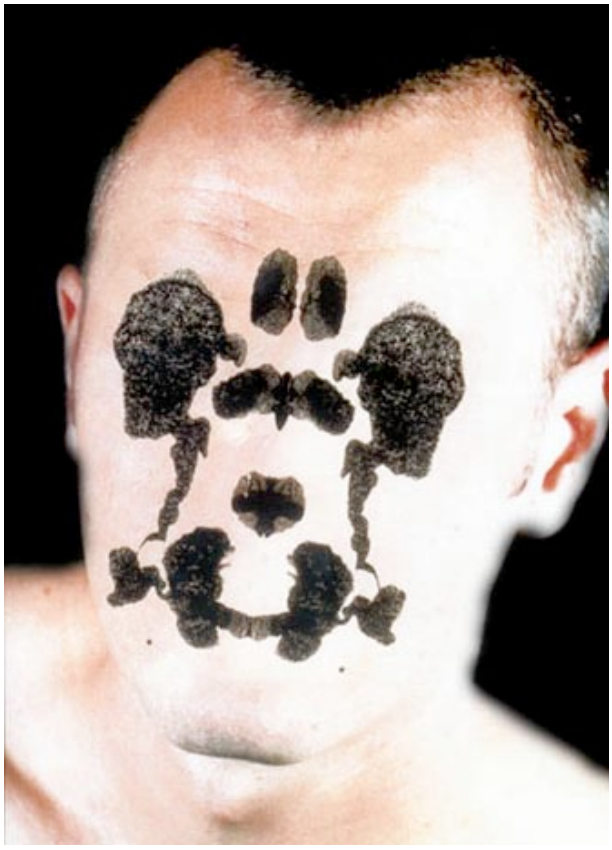






Left James Ensor*, Mon Portrait squelettisé, 1889, Etching and drypoint on wove paper, 11.6 x 7.5 cm (plate),* **Upper right corner** James Ensor*, Autoportrait aux masques*, 1899, huile sur toile, 120 x 80 cm, **Right** Detail of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* (Sistine Chapel), between 1535 and 1541

In *Thinking About It*, this desire to reveal his inner workings goes a step further, through a symbolic self-mutilation, to arrive at the physical deconstruction of his appearance, i.e., the dissection of his skin. It is a wax sculpture that shows the artist's head, severed at the neck and half flayed, with a miniature leafless tree rising from the top. His eyes are barely open, perhaps daydreaming, half asleep and half awake. All the skin has been removed from the left side of his face and head, to expose the red, bloody gleam of the flesh below. This is the ground in which that tiny tree is rooted, perhaps as a botanical metaphor for the psyche, for an idea of self, long dormant under the scalp, which has sprouted only thanks to the fertile humus of the raw, carnal truth. While in the Last Judgment, Michelangelo hid his self-portrait in the flayed features of Saint Bartholomew, here John Isaacs seems to be doing the exact opposite, suggesting that his true face can only be seen without that

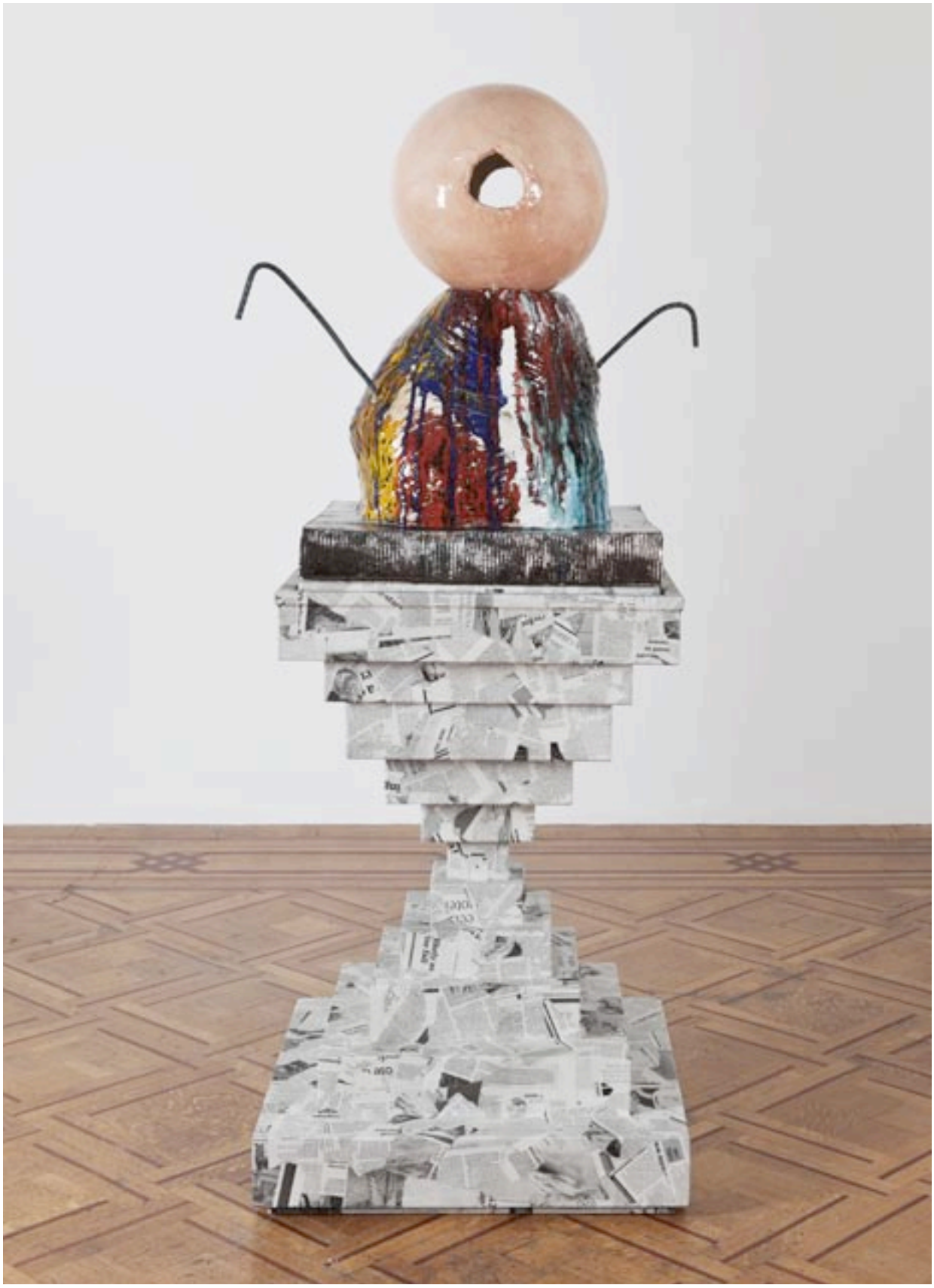


The Matrix of Amnesia
1997, C-print (diptych), 60 x 60 cm, Edition of 6 + 2 AP

shell. Just as Ensor did in Mon portrait squelettisé, which depicted the artist proudly decked out in elegant garb, but with a skull where his face ought to be. An unusual skull, one might add, since it is rendered extremely expressive by a thick head of hair framing the forehead, and above all, by the presence of eyes in its sockets, which gaze outside the frame with a questioning air. A skull that is definitely alive.

Under the mask, under the makeup, under the skin, after all the farces or tragedies have wound to an end, the storm of emotion has died down and the tears have dried, one's identity is at last laid bare. "...and the world is an immense desert. / In that desert / I look at myself with tearless eyes" wrote Camillo Sbarbaro in one of his most intense lyric poems, implying that only the disappearance of everything around it allows the ego to see itself for what it is. A primal desert, from which one emerges as if from a newfound amniotic fluid.

It is against a impenetrable, pitch-black background, like a primordial void, that John Isaacs has chosen to create another self-portrait, a photographic diptych again titled *The Matrix of Amnesia*. The unique characteristic of this work is that all



Perhaps in the emergent lines you will find yourself, 2011, glazed ceramic, steel, 155 x 67 x 60 cm

the elements making up his face – eyes, nose, mouth – have been replaced by an ink blot, which at first glance seems to be a crude, clownish mask, but is actually taken from a Rorschach test. Juxtaposed with it, side by side, is a close-up of a lamprey, a primitive sort of eel. There is a clear, immediate analogy between these two unexpected primal apparitions which inevitably leads the viewer to daydream about the physical origins of a world in formation. This first impression grows stronger as we look at the artist's naked shoulders, which suggest the complete, native nudity of his body. It is as if, in his attempt to trace the source of his own personality, he had found it to be a riddle that must be solved, blending the psychological interpretation of the mind with the natural history of the body. As if the only possible answer to the incessant search for his own identity were another question, an infinitely recurrent mystery. The mystery of life, of all lives. "All I can ever be to you is a darkness that we know ... and in this blue shade my tears dry on their own". Another heavenly day, buried up to one's neck in the magma of self, that is spent trying to give a face to one's existence, as Amy's voice reverberates like the sweet echo of this terrifying, tenuous uncertainty.

OUTRO (RESPICE FINEM)

Perhaps in the emergent lines you will find yourself is one of John Isaacs's most recent works. A bizarre little creature resembling a snowman, made out of multicolored ceramic, sits on an imposing colonne sans fin which is entirely plastered in newspaper cuttings about the riots in London. From its crudely indicated torso emerge two rough iron bars that stand in for arms, and the head is a flesh-coloured sphere with a circular gap in the middle. Where we might expect a droll, smiling face, there is only a hole through which one can see what lies beyond, what is not in the sculpture, but is suggested by the title of the work. Indeed, if our gaze follows the ascending lines of the column, past the jumbled procession of news and worldly affairs, moving over that clumsy structure that vaguely resembles a man, then once it reaches the void, it can no longer look at anything but itself. This curious manikin, conceived as a sort of magic mirror, is actually a juju, perhaps invested with the power to show those who look at it their own true essence, revealing, in the nature of their gaze, the reason they are there.

It seems to me that with great simplicity and economy, this work sums up the key poetic themes in the oeuvre of John Isaacs. The view of art as an existential

path, the keen focus on emotions (both his own and those of others), the vision of the world as an inevitable, inextricable tangle of conflicts, the constant tug-of-war between the raw materiality of the body and the ineffable abstraction of the mind, the sense of a time frame that is simultaneously anecdote, history and eternity, and ultimately, the feverish sensitivity to everything that is delicate, laughable and agonizing because it is so human. All aesthetic considerations aside, this is unquestionably the essential characteristic of his work: a deep, earnest humanity, both in the narrow, concrete sense of the word, and in the broader, more glorious one. A humanity that is humble, aware of its weakness ("And life is like a pipe / And I'm a tiny penny rolling up the walls inside..." as Amy sings), yet vibrant and impassioned, always managing to rebuild and recreate itself, to create, to resolutely recommence its Sisyphean task. The humanity of an art that is finally alive.

Didi Bozzini, January 2012