

## *INTERVIEW JOHN ISAACS BY ELS FIERS*

*Could you explain why you made a portrait of yourself as a sad clown?  
(Untitled, 2001, C-Print, 156 x 106 cm, framed, Edition of 6 + 2 AP)*

At the time of this photograph I had used the generic image of 'clown' in some different ways including photography painting and performance. I was and still am interested in the perceived cultural role of an artist as a savant, leader, free thinker and the way in which we label and define our activities as human beings. The white lab coat of the scientist and the colourful garish costume of clown go about denoting not just their activity but how we must perceive them. Equally the gallery as context has to my mind a similar effect, in that as we enter one we enter a space in which we are in dialogue with art, and as much as the art is free to be what it is, we are already conditioned to look in a different way. The clown represents humour, the fool, but as in the role of Diogenes the fool is also the one who has the distance from society to reveal some truths by self-deprecating actions. The clown offers himself as a sacrifice, a scapegoat, but conversely is free to criticise. The self portrait image of the sad clown is of course a cliché, but this image was a happy accident as I was merely removing the makeup from after a performance and this photograph was taken at the very moment when the makeup smudged in such a way as to break the mask of the painted smile, I just pushed it further with the facial expression. As it is now it works because of the double tragedy implicit and the feeling that we cannot hide from our emotions or conceal them from others.

*You use your own image in your work a lot, why?*

Our bodies are the spaces that we personally inhabit and that from within which we measure everything, including pain, sorrow, time, love, etc with. It is language, music, and all art, with which we try to communicate these things to each other in specific or abstracted ways. It's pretty natural then to use yourself as the starting point of such a dialogue and very common amongst artists – especially those from the 60's and 70's who were getting more involved with new mediums such a performance (look at Abramovich) photography (look at Baas Jan Ader through to Cindy Sherman) and even artists such as Bruce Nauman who spans pretty much every media from neon's formed around his body to architectural spaces. These kinds of art form are not really classic self portraiture, infact they are absolutely not about representing an image of the artist as in those of Rembrandt or Van Gough, but more involved in revealing the roles we all play in each others existences, and through the use of the human body to make us aware of our conventions. Of course I too must start from my own perspective and sometimes this actually means my physical self is in the work, but even when not the work bears my imprint and identity, the work that I must do as an artist is to find out if we have some common ground, and that we can find the

similarities of our existences rather than the differences, as the objective is to bring us together and it is useless to entertain the idea of communication if the door remains closed due to prejudice.

*Your work can be rough and confronting on the one hand, and soft and funny on the other. Is there something that's connecting it all? Some basic thought or attitude?*

My basic thought would be that we need to be more inclusive in our thinking, and I'm not talking about all this politically correct bullshit but the ability not to be afraid of difference, to embrace it and then to discover that all things are truly connected any way and that these things which are seemingly so different are alike but the difference between them is a thing of beauty. I think that we are already becoming aware of the kind of ugly monoculture we are building for ourselves, and intuitively feel the blood seeping out of life as it gets wrapped in cellophane and labelled with a sell by date. I know this sounds like hippy shit but this notion, a kind of cubistic perspective on space and time influences and directs my work. It is for this reason that there are so many varied physical manifestations of the work, so many styles, that as an artist I have the right and actually the necessity to bring together everything. I simply don't believe in making a version of the same thing endlessly, actually that is self-portraiture. I do believe that by combining many things together bigger questions are arrived at, though of course to reach an understanding takes longer, but this may be the point, that understanding is not the holy grail we believe it to be, that there are many truths, and that one perspective is simply just not enough and should be avoided.

*Where do you find all these great titles?*

Titles are incredibly important as they help to dislocate the physical presence of the works from the viewers initial response and offer another door into how to look at it, how to think about it. Sometimes titles come to me before works and vice versa, but usually it's through the working process and some titles are much more direct than others as some works are. I keep notes all the time and constantly write down small sentences and restructure them or edit them down until the essence remains in shorter form though still they can sometimes be fairly long. For instance a title such as, 'from a distance you look smaller but I know that you are there' evoke many things, whereas another title such as 'are you like me full of hope and full of fear' are more like a direct question to the viewer, an attempt to include them, but still open enough to not constrain anything. My Grandmother always said, "The harder you grip the bar of soap the more likely it is to fly out of your hands." This attitude is perfection and I strive to achieve this with the titles.

*What would be your ultimate dream as an artist?*

To never get complacent.