

## VISUAL ART

**Jay Isaac**

by Ben Portis



Jay Isaac has shown entrepreneurial/flâneurial flair in support of his primary calling as a painter—publisher of the now defunct *Hunter and Cook*, gallerist, impresario, peddler of curio heirlooms—earning him tremendous appreciation and goodwill amongst peers. This art, however, is anything but congenial. It meretriciously ingratiates, flaunting tinselled gaudiness in the face of taste, both bourgeois and sophisticate. Although Isaac does not calculatedly provoke, he is an apostate contemporary artist, fond of the dazzling incidental surfaces found in proto-modern symbolist and synthetist paintings (Redon, Ensor, Sérusier) through to the late-1970s post-minimalist practitioners of Pattern and Decoration (led by certain tendencies in Johns and Samaras) to say nothing of scores of splendid, now forgotten, modern genre painters of still life and figure who pepper the timeline in between. The unsettling effects of Isaac's own work may well arise from his toeing, testing and teasing a nostalgic, reactionary line.

A constant and prolific artist, Isaac nonetheless demonstrates restraint, measure and purpose in

his exhibition frequency. Isaac's inaugural appearance with Monte Clark Gallery took some who follow his career by surprise yet it was a well-matched setting that reveals much that has been heretofore overlooked in both the artist and his dealer. Isaac played the space like a native, with a varied array of form-fit paintings, assemblages, photographs (the first such I have seen by Isaac) and a spectrum of hybrids, all untitled. These autonomous works involved and implicated the architectural and, by extension, the socio-cerebral frame of the gallery, much as two fellow artists with whom Isaac has had long friendships but not so evident aesthetic affinities, sculptors Scott Lyall and David Armstrong Six.

In the rear gallery, a square, post-like wooden base made of salvaged household trim supported a discrete marble plinth under a classic vase encrusted with paint and pastel. The disparate, specific elements nobly proportioned into a unified sculpture. The sculpture stood on a section of the industrial concrete floor from which an old supporting wall was once removed and the resulting excavation

repaired. This scar in the foundation would not have been noticed ordinarily. Now it became at once a monumental flatbed Barnett Newman zip and a Robert Smithson non-site. Moreover, the surface of the post, with swaths of its original utilitarian white paint planed and sanded away, uncannily burly, echoed a concrete pillar in the front gallery, a remnant of the restoration of the historic building, its corners haphazardly chiselled by time and neglect. These are only the quietest details, but through such subtleties, Isaac reclaimed the space as if it were only awaiting his arrival.

Frameworks were the consistent motif of the exhibition, no two alike, each specifically integrated to its contained or embellished picture plane. Isaac has achieved a radically original departure from the seminal Cubism of Picasso and Braque, century-old yields almost completely ignored by his generation. He cobbled together materials that are beneath humble—discarded rattan, gardening panels, pegboard, shutters, basketry—into rhythmically topographic supports that might be painted or photographed or both or neither. One of the most commanding works consisted of concentric white slabs of nailed baseboard and moulding, swelling gently at its middle, the obvious result of additive, intuitive construction, yet with all the poetic precision of a Josef Albers *Homage to the Square*, 1965, or a particularly spare Gee's Bend quilt.

The disparagement of craft to eccentric or outsider statuses has been an Achilles heel of the neo-conceptual hegemony of the past 20 years, a vulnerable point that sensitive artists (Gabriel Orozco being a prime example) have tried

to indicate and restore with mixed success. The concurrent triumph of digital imagery and content has stoked the countercultural waves of beautiful losers, gleaners and makers. However, Popsicle sticks and pipe cleaners are inadequate substitutes for marble and bronze. The looming issue is a perceived tyranny of history, the past somehow curtailing the will of the present.

Isaac practises confidently in the present. Another baseboard construction contains an upright pentagonal mirror in its centre, roughly the third tier. Its glass surface has stripes etched into it. The beholder gets momentarily subsumed into the picture on the picture's terms. The boards of the two outer tiers are contoured with brush, plane, hammer and saw into blowsy cloud forms dappled with mauve, pink and light green oil paint. The vaporous treatment of the frame belies the rough-hewn immediacy and solidity of its carpentry and contrasts with the harsh striations that the mirror imparts upon the bodily apparitions that pass through its sightlines.

"Second Eye" was the nerviest gallery encounter of the year. Its smartest riposte/mash letter was a crisp, black-framed C-print, the lingua franca of the Monte Clark stable, populated as it is with second- and third-generation Vancouver School photographers such as Roy Arden, Scott McFarland, Karin Bubaš and Chris Gergley (the accepted orthodoxies around whom are loosening, by the way). Isaac photographed a slapdash backdrop of painted bric-a-brac, the likes of which were described above, painted in broad strokes of house paint and artists' oils, flattened by the camera and



the digital print. It especially calls to mind two other Monte Clark photographers: Evan Lee, who has insistently crept towards painterly effects, and Greg Girard, whose "Phantom Shanghai" series followed, in part, the improvised shambolic living conditions of the migrant workers who reshaped an antique city into an ultra-modern Chinese metropolis. Most of all, this confident photograph conjures the nonchalant hand of Michael Snow, the grand shaman of postmodern apostasy. Isaac likewise forthrightly grapples with the accidental moment at close quarters, knowing that deed, not ritual, is the meaning. ■

"Second Eye" was exhibited at Monte Clark Gallery, Toronto, from September 13 to October 14, 2012.

Ben Portis is the curator of the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario.

1. Jay Isaac, *Untitled*, 2012, digital C-print, 63.5 x 50.8 cm. Courtesy the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Toronto

2. Lyse Lemieux, *Untitled (Faces for March 2)*, 2011, ink, watercolour, collage and medical tape on archival board, 197.5 x 115.6 cm, framed. Courtesy Republic Gallery, Vancouver. Photographs: Byron Dauncey

3. "Lyse Lemieux: New Work," installation view. Courtesy Republic Gallery, Vancouver