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O N I M U S

Aldo Iacobelli – A Conversation with Jheronimus

Miserrimi quippe est ingenii semper uti inventis et numquam inveniendis

It is a characteristic of the most dismal intelligences always to use clichés and never their own inventions

These lines, written by the Flemish Renaissance artist Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450-1516) in the margins of his drawing *The Woods Have Ears, the Fields Have Eyes*, c.1502-05, struck Aldo Iacobelli when he recently encountered them.¹ Iacobelli transcribed them onto a canvas hanging in his studio in suburban Adelaide—a direct missive from the great artist. How can we interpret Bosch’s inclusion of this Latin proverb on his drawing? Is it a reminder to himself to take risks in his work despite the narrow artistic conventions of his religious milieu, or a statement of pride at his own originality?

Iacobelli encountered the drawing in an exhibition of Bosch’s art at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, held to mark the 500th anniversary of the artist’s death. As Iacobelli walked through the rooms of paintings, a title for his own exhibition came to him—*A Conversation with Jheronimus*—, a proposition that could be tested in studio on his return to Adelaide². What could connect the two artists across the span of five centuries and radically different worlds?

Over the past four decades Iacobelli’s multidisciplinary practice has covered a wide terrain, with the artist employing both abstraction and figuration in his work. Drawing on a range of art historical sources—from Goya to de Chirico, Morandi to Arte Povera—Iacobelli’s art has addressed the world around him in works that are often reticent, poetic and allusive. Iacobelli is interested in social justice, and his sensitivity to contemporary political discourse is shaped by his experience as an immigrant; born in Naples, he arrived in Australia as a seventeen-year-old. His understanding of what it means to belong—or to be excluded—whether in his adopted homeland of Australia or in Spain, where he has lived and worked intermittently since the 1990s, underpins much of his art. Not surprisingly, the role of memory and ritual in creating identity or sense of place inform his diverse projects³.

Iacobelli’s *A Conversation with Jheronimus* comprises a range of objects—an installation, drawings, sculpture, and paintings in the physical space of the Samstag Museum of Art. The artist has conceived the exhibition as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*⁴—that is, for all the objects and elements to be read as a single work of art. This approach came to Iacobelli as a response to the formal qualities of Bosch’s paintings. Bosch’s works, including his most well-known creation *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1490-1500 (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid), are distinguished by a dense visual field of imagery, the surface of his paintings a patchwork of small vignettes of fantastical scenes. In the architectural space of the Samstag Museum, Iacobelli places, as though on a stage, a series of objects, with each grouping addressing different but related subjects. These elements, like Bosch’s paintings, are rich in themselves, yet they are intended to be read as a whole.



The central component—a large cart laden with hay—references Bosch’s late altarpiece *The Haywain Triptych*, c.1512-16 (Museo Nacional del Prado). Bosch’s painting depicts an unusual subject with no prior visual tradition, and it has been suggested the work may have been inspired by the Flemish proverb “*The world is a haystack and each man plucks from it what he can*”.⁵ The haywain, a symbol of vanity in the fifteenth century, is used by Bosch to reflect on the greed of his fellow citizens for material possessions and sensory stimulation. The pursuit of earthly goods grips everyone, irrespective of social class.⁶ Iacobelli’s re-creation of Bosch’s cart at a length of almost seven metres serves to dwarf the visitor. It is both comforting and unnerving to consider that this human instinct—to covet, to possess—is so central to human behaviour. Yet Iacobelli’s inflated re-staging suggests that the condition is particularly acute today. We know household debt in Australia is among the highest in the world, yet we are still encouraged by politicians and economists to keep shopping.⁷

Around the cart Iacobelli has placed an assortment of clay sculptures that refer to Bosch’s paintings—fish, frog, bucket, funnel. Like the cart, these objects are drawn from nature and from Bosch’s everyday life, and they still serve a function in our lives today. Despite their familiarity, the objects are a surreal presence. Iacobelli underscores their temporary placement by positioning them on platforms with wheels, a mode of presentation that suggests that they can be rearranged in the *gesamtkunstwerk* in new and endless configurations.

In another piece—*Triptych in Grisaille with a Hanging Mechanism*—Iacobelli is inspired by Bosch’s technique of painting in shades of grey, particularly on the closed side of a triptych. Iacobelli’s austere response comprises three two-and-a-half-metre squares, their appearance suggestive of concrete.⁸ The panels are hung on rustic hooks, found and repurposed by Iacobelli. The grey utilitarian appearance of Iacobelli’s triptych belies the surprising quality of its surface, which carries the imprints of his fingers and palms. In fact, these similar yet distinct panels are made from pulp – to be precise, from *The Advertiser*, Adelaide’s only surviving daily newspaper. Iacobelli’s works can be understood as a lament for what has been lost during the recent past (media independence, reliable news) and as an expression of nostalgia for an age when history could be set down in newspapers, which served as records of the day.

Iacobelli’s art has addressed Australia’s immigration policy, and this exhibition contains a suite of drawings that comment on the Australian government’s policy of indefinite detention of asylum seekers during the processing of their claims. Iacobelli translates the current situation using the visual language of Bosch’s paintings. Each asylum seeker is depicted as a strange creature, its body made of a vessel such as a bucket or a funnel. These anonymous creatures resemble the forms found in Bosch’s *Temptation of Saint Anthony Abbot*, c.1505-10 (The Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri), their presence arguably denoting the Devil or manifestations of evil.⁹ Each of Iacobelli’s drawings is numbered, reflecting the Department of Immigration and Border Protection’s practice of assigning numbers to those seeking asylum. Iacobelli’s borrowing of Bosch’s strange iconography to speak about this human catastrophe recalls Charles de Tolnay’s observation of Bosch’s paintings: “...the more fantastic they appear to us, the more forcefully we feel the reality behind them”.¹⁰

Returning to Iacobelli’s recording of the Latin proverb found on Bosch’s drawing, is it possible to find a way to express what indefinite detention means—and how we, as citizens, are implicated—without resorting to the language of cliché? Iacobelli’s *A Conversation with Jheronimus* folds this question tightly into the objects and elements that comprise this disquieting work.

Maria Zagala, 2018
Associate Curator of Prints, Drawings & Photographs,
Art Gallery of South Australia



- 1 See Paul Vandebroek 'The Axiology and Ideology of Jheronimus Bosch', in *Bosch: The 5th century exhibition*, ed Pilar Silva Maroto, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2016, p. 91, illustrated, p. 92.
- 2 Author in conversation with Aldo Iacobelli in his studio, Adelaide 16 May 2018.
- 3 The most comprehensive study of Aldo Iacobelli's art is John Neylon's *Aldo Iacobelli: I ♥ painting*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2006. See p. 7
- 4 See Ingrid Macmillan 'Gesamtkunstwerk', in *Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner, Macmillan, London, 1996, vol. 12, p. 496: "[The] term first used by Richard Wagner in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849) to describe his concept of a work of art for the stage, based on the ideal of ancient Greek tragedy, to which all the individual arts would contribute under the direction of a single creative mind in order to express one overriding idea."
- 5 Pilar Silva Maroto, *Bosch: The 5th century exhibition*, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2016, p. 287.
- 6 Pilar Silva Maroto, p. 283.
- 7 [http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/6523.0~2015-16~Feature%20Article~Household%20Debt%20and%20Over-indebtedness%20\(Feature%20Article\)~101](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/6523.0~2015-16~Feature%20Article~Household%20Debt%20and%20Over-indebtedness%20(Feature%20Article)~101)
- 8 Iacobelli first exhibited pulp works in *Pulp* at Fontanelle, Adelaide, 8 November 2015 - 6 December 2015
- 9 Pilar Silva Moroto, p. 248.
- 10 Charles de Tolnay, *Hieronymus Bosch*, trans. M. Bullock and H. Mins, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1966, p. 37.





Image: **ALDO IACOBELLI**, *The Cart*, 2017-18, hay bales, mild steel, wood, 350 x 310 x 625cm. Construction by Tony Rosella and George Street Studios. Commissioned by Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia. Photo: Grant Hancock. Courtesy the artist.

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Cover image: **ALDO IACOBELLI**, *Bicycle riders* (detail), 2007, ten terracotta forms, four branches, metal wire, 15 x 33 x 10 cm. Courtesy the artist and Samstag Museum of Art. Photo: Sam Noonan.



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