



BODY OF ART

PHAIDON



JOHN ISAACS
I CAN'T HELP THE WAY I FEEL, 2003

Wax, resin, polystyrene, steel
220 x 150 x 170 cm (86½ x 59 x 70 in)
Wellcome Trust, London

John Isaacs's (b.1968) sculpture is a life-size and life-like human body distorted through extreme obesity to a fascinating and terrifying degree. Balancing on two feet that are puffy but relatively normal, a pair of swollen legs with stretch marks, veins and sores are clearly straining under the weight of the mass above. From the thighs upwards, bodily parts cease to be identifiable as the skin folds give way to inflated blobs of flesh, bulging in multiple directions. In a society in which obesity has reached epidemic proportions, threatening the quality of life and life expectancy of an alarming proportion of the world's population, Isaacs's work is an uncompromising warning of what could happen to any individual. Closer inspection, however, reveals that this figure has no arms, genitals or, most notably, head, and thus does not represent a realistic body at all. The title, too, implies an emotional aspect, suggesting that this may not represent how a body actually looks but rather how the individual feels about it. Seen in this light, it references body dysmorphic disorder, in which the sufferer cannot perceive his own body as it is, but rather imagines it with magnified imperfections. This focus on its failure to match an ideal causes misery and potentially leads to health-threatening eating disorders.

GLENN BROWN
THE HINTERLAND, 2006

Oil on panel, 148 x 122.5 cm (58½ x 48½ in)
Private collection

From afar this ambiguous painting appears to depict a bizarre, cartoon-like head. Closer up, an even more grotesque form emerges, from which arms and hands sprout and an embedded eyeball stares out. The creature's flesh seems to be made from lashings of thick, viscous oil paint, but the surface of Brown's (b.1966) painting is entirely flat; each apparent agglomeration of paint and gestural brushstroke has been laboriously created with small brushes and layer upon layer of thinned paint. Brown plunders imagery from art history and popular culture to make his own twisted versions of other artists' paintings. Here the artist continues to borrow from the art of the past but without any obvious references pieces together numerous fragments from unidentified artworks to form a monstrous, mutant head of his own imagining. Recognizing that most art is primarily encountered through reproduction, Brown's preferred source materials are art books, posters and postcards, which are scanned into his computer and then digitally collaged together. For this painting limbs, body parts, poses and gestures from across art history were distorted in various ways and combined to form a complex image that hovers between abstraction and figuration.

