

Hilary Jack: Prophecy, Memory, and the End of the World

Part 1: History teaches us that man learns nothing from history - Hegel

The title of Hilary Jack's exhibition at Bury Sculpture Centre is taken from a book first published in 1970. Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth* took political and social events, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, or the rise of hallucinogenic drugs and 'New Age' culture, as evidence to support the truth of biblical end-time prophecy, predicting Christ's return and the subsequent apocalypse at some point in the 1980s. The book became hugely popular, an international bestseller that even inspired a film voiced by Orson Welles. The undeniable falsehood of his bold predictions hasn't stopped subsequent generations repeating the somehow alluring process of prophesying the end of the world.

Most recently, *Four Blood Moons* written by Pastor John Hagee has topped the New York Times list of bestsellers. Hagee takes the sequence of four total lunar eclipses that has been unfolding over the last year, from April 2014 with the final eclipse scheduled for 28 September 2015, as an omen for the coming apocalypse. The term 'blood moon', the moon seeming red as is common in lunar eclipses, is linked to the Bible's Book of Joel which states, '*the sun will turn into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes*'.ⁱ Further support comes from Revelations; '*there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood*'.ⁱⁱ Hagee and his supporters contest that the coincidence of these eclipses with Jewish festivals, as well as the growing number of earthquakes and other natural disasters mentioned in Revelations, signifies that the end of days will begin with the final eclipse of this sequence, at the end of September.

In response to this unfortunate forecast, which would cut short Jack's exhibition (as well as everything else), the artist has made a major new work for the show, *The Last Dance*, which delves further into end-time prophecies and their appeal. The installation in the guise of a log cabin is inspired by stories of American 'end-of-days preppers' found on the Internet, people who, the artist notes, '*plan their weekend around making jam and pickled vegetables to last them for ten years after the apocalypse*'.ⁱⁱⁱ Jack's cabin is a refuge to hide out through any apocalypse, including a glitter ball for an end-of-the-world party as well as multiple references to the biblical prophecies in question. With an eerie soundtrack of nocturnal woodland sounds, a smoking chimney and an awaiting Barbour jacket, it speaks of underlying, ever-pressing anxiety. When Lindsey quoted Hegel in his book, as above, he meant to underline that even though the biblical prophets had been proved correct, albeit somewhat tautologically, through biblical stories, civilisation was still reluctant to believe them. However, the quote is equally appropriate to describe the persistent belief in the coming of the end of the world, despite continued evidence to the contrary. That each generation finds new support for humanity's impending demise points to Freud's death drive, an impulse first outlined in 1922 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Noting that behaviour observed in patients was often self-destructive, Freud hypothesised a drive running alongside the sexual drives towards life and pleasure, for which '*the goal of all life is death*'.^{iv} This drive pushes the individual towards their inevitable return to the inorganic, and also accounts for destructive impulses towards the external world. In Jack's log cabin neat shelves holding books feature a copy of *The Knowledge: Or How to Rebuild Our World From Scratch*, hinting at a further appeal of these scenarios. Another current bestseller, its author Lewis Dartnell acknowledges the attraction of apocalyptic fantasies commenting that, '*one part of our fascination is wishful thinking, that yearning for a simpler time... you don't have a job and a calendar and a mobile phone. You can do whatever the hell you please*'.^v In some ways, these imaginings allow a shirking of responsibility; why bother recycling when the end of the world is nigh?

Part Two: The Late, Great Planet Earth

In the 2011, the UK government proposed privatising significant swathes of public woodland, transferring ownership from the Forestry Commission to private sector companies. After much public campaigning, the proposal was overturned and Caroline Spelman, the Environment Secretary, was widely reported as acknowledging, 'we got this one wrong'. Around this time whilst on a woodland walk, Jack found a discarded helium balloon with 'Congratulations' written on it, left punctured and deflated among the trees.

A photograph, *Relieve* from the same year, shows the balloon repaired and re-inflated, floating in a woodland scene as if celebrating its escape from privatisation. The public outcry that saved these woods revealed the passion felt about the preservation of these patches of uncompromised nature. An idea of utopia as a 'green and pleasant land' traces back at least to William Blake's rousing description in 1804's Jerusalem and can be seen vividly in vintage postcards featuring rural idylls, neatly cropped by the photographer and packaged for viewing, which Jack has collected for years. *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, also 2011, comprises a number of these postcards, cleverly pieced together so each view expands out of its frame to create a continuing sublime landscape. A view of misty tree-tops and branches leads down via a patched-up trunk to a lake, which in turn cascades into an extended, five-postcard waterfall. As this scene unfolds, questions arise of what is beyond the confines of this selected ideal. Jack has wryly noted the pitfalls of natural tourism, visiting places like Niagara Falls and having to mentally crop out motels, gift stalls and food vendors from the scene. As art historian Linda Nochlin has suggested, the cropping of photographs to exclude unwanted realities offers an illusion of control over the subject of the image, a comforting ability to keep things exactly as one wants, however possible or impossible that is.^{vi} It seems coincidentally appropriate that the carefully cropped postcards would initially have been created as souvenirs - a word which is also the verb 'to remember' in French - reminding us of what the earth looked like in its natural state, before humans littered it with amenities and, well, litter. Vintage images of landscapes also feature in *Souvenir*, 2012. Visitors peer through a found piece of wood floridly resembling an eye to see changing slides of big landscapes, sunsets and sunrises, trees being felled and industrial landscapes, including Ministry of Defence images of explosions and devastated buildings and cities. The use of these items as memory tools is underscored by both the title and the click and whir of the projector as the images pop up, are consumed, and then lost again. It is a celebration of temporality, a rally to appreciate these scenes that could soon be gone, and in the case of the vintage images, probably already are. The wooden 'eye' functions like a seer, or a time machine, allowing glimpses of the past but also, through enabling the vision of a succession of disappearing vistas, the future.

Part Three: Turquoise Bag in a Tree

Ironically the natural disasters propping up current end-time prophecies probably do indicate serious trouble ahead. Dramatic fluctuations and extreme weather have been linked to climate change,^{vii} which itself parallels these prophecies, contested as pure hypothesis and predicting the end of the world, at least as we know it. One of Jack's most persistent works confronts the society of waste and consumption that contributes to these environmental concerns. The ongoing project *Turquoise Bag in a Tree* began in 2008, prompted by observing generic plastic bags, the kind issued at corner shops, stuck in trees throughout Manchester. She began taking photos of them and inevitably noticed increasing numbers having started the process. They offered attractive images, a splash of colour against the urban back-drop, waste on display as a city-wide ersatz guerrilla exhibition, particularly in those instances when Jack added labels to examples she saw. She recalls, '*It just seemed to say so many things about the way we live, about how plastic bags outlive us and they never really go away.*'^{viii} These items, cheap and disposable but not biodegradable, sum up the unthinking consumer culture that has built up over recent decades, in which broken items are frequently discarded and replaced rather than mended and recycled, or as Jack puts it, the increasing 'built-in obsolescence of objects', things not made to last. Jack's process of documenting of this phenomenon was described by Dan Hicks, Professor of Archaeology at Oxford University, as 'quiet activism', highlighting 'the excess of forgotten, discarded objects generated through the material practices of everyday life.'^{ix}

The abundance of plastic bags in trees proved to be more than a local issue, as Jack's website established for people to upload photographs of their own discoveries elicited images from all over the world. This revealed how universal the design was, a decision someone had once made of the colour (is the specific turquoise a cheap colour, was it the first producer's favourite?) echoing around the world and over decades, a failure of 'built-in obsolescence' as the bags refuse to go quietly into the night and persist, openly and visibly. Perhaps their time has come. With the increasing dominance of Tesco Metro, local corner shops and their unbranded turquoise bags could become endangered themselves.

Their current visibility could be interpreted as a caution, highlighting the issues of landfill and a degrading environment that is largely unthinkingly being destroyed. Jack has taken this moment to make an idol of the turquoise plastic bag, actively turning it into a permanent memorial to the culture of waste by casting a bag in bronze. This is a material designed to last, often used to create monuments intended to be timeless and embedded with monetary value. The reified bag is presented complete with tree, but in contrast to the origins of the series, the tree is dead while the bag is made permanent and eternal. As waste has become prominent, nature is diminished. It is the last logical step of the series, calling for recognition of the worth of waste, as a prophecy of environmental crises as well as the object itself, no longer to be discarded or disregarded.

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ⁱ *The English Standard Version Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments with Apocrypha* Oxford University Press (Oxford: 2009) Joel 2:31

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* Revelations 6:12

ⁱⁱⁱ Hilary Jack in conversation with the author, 23 July 2015

^{iv} Freud, S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* translated from the second German edition by C. J. M. Hubback International Psycho-Analytical, (London, Vienna: 1922) Part V, p.7

^v Mostyn, N. 'At World's End' in *Big Issue North* 20 – 26 July 2015 p.17

^{vi} Nochlin, L. 'The Imagined Orient' in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society* Harper and Row (New York: 1989) pp. 33 - 59

^{vii} See McGuire, B. *Waking the Giant: How a Changing Climate Triggers Earthquakes, Tsunamis, and Volcanoes* Oxford University Press (Oxford: 2012), among other publications on this subject.

^{viii} In conversation with the author, 23 July 2015

^{ix} Hicks, D. Contemporary Art and The Contemporary Past: Hilary Jack, Turquoise Bag in A Tree, retrieved from <http://www.turquoisebaginatree.co.uk/page4.htm>