

PRIDE & REFUSE

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A Safe Little World Monograph
by Andrew Killick

shadow press

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Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth;
depository of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error;
the pride and refuse of the universe.

- Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

Prologue

there's a quote that always nags around in the back of my head. i can't shake it. it's creatively compelling. when i first read it, intermittently staring up at a clear blue sky and what i was reading as i lay on a recliner in the backyard, i wrote it down in my notebook. i've had other notebooks since but i get anxious if i don't know where that notebook is - mainly because i worry about misplacing the exact wording of the quote.

the quote comes from pascal's *pensées* (VII:434). pascal was one of the world's great thinkers - a genius of science, but also an astute observer of the condition of man. when he died in 1662 he left behind an unfinished work, in notebook form. *pensées* (french for 'thoughts') is a collection of notes that he jotted down about life, the universe and everything.

the quote ('my' quote) is his definition of humankind:

'Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depositary of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and refuse of the universe.'

this captures the massive paradox, the tension, in what it is to be human.

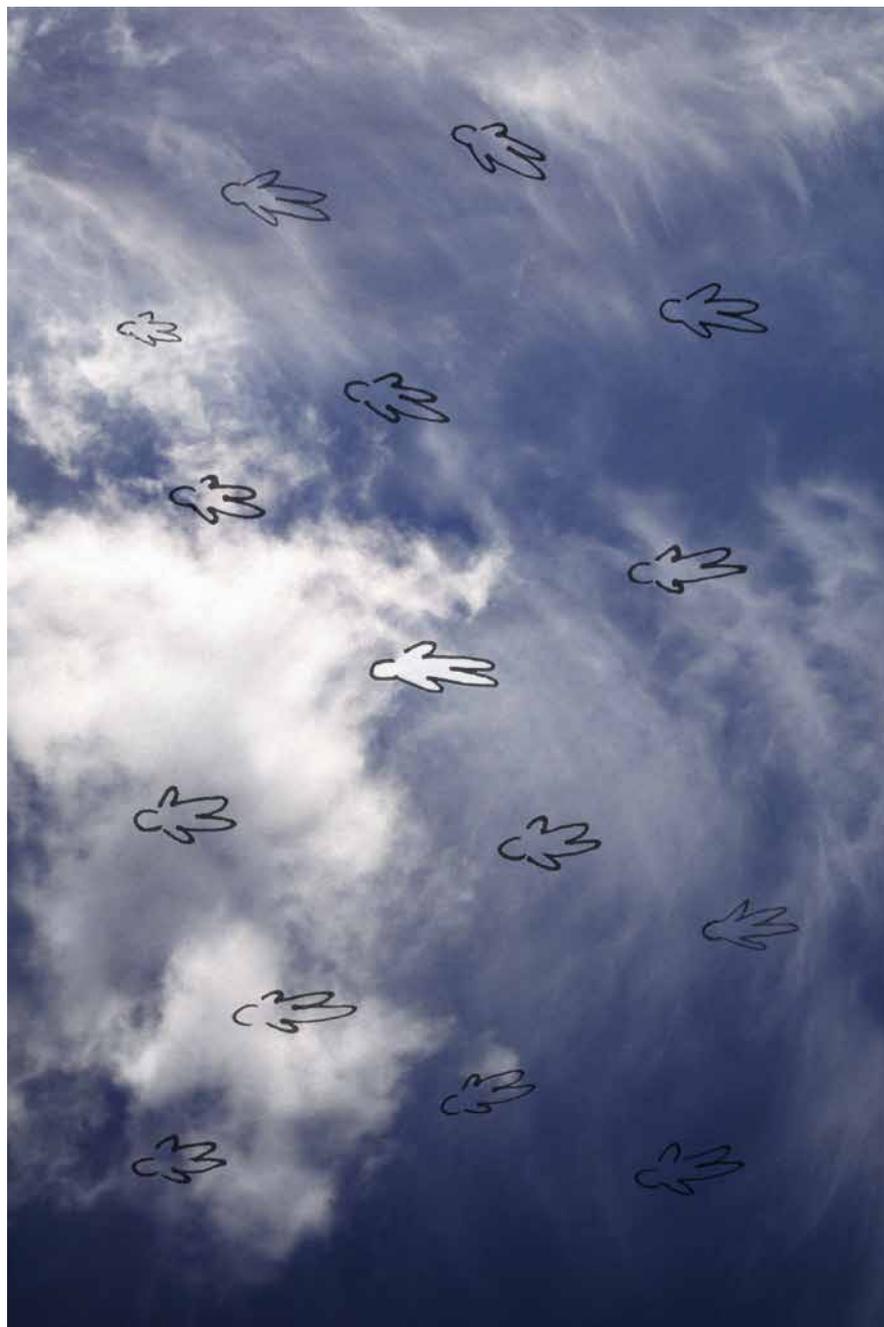
- Blog excerpt (170710)

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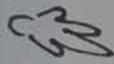
Instructions for looking: Turn your head on its side.
(Or turn the book.)

Part One:
Pride & Refuse









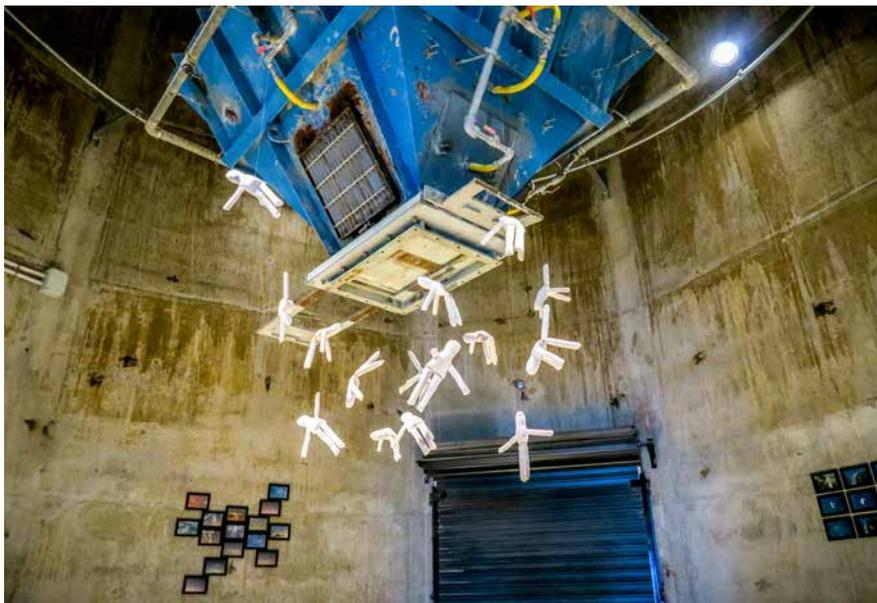
**Part Two:
Rising/Falling**











Installation view, Transitions, Silo 6. Bottom right: dance artist Georgie Goater interacts with the installation during a performance with Kristian Larsen. Images, left to right, by Paul Buckton (1&4) and Dave Simpson Photography (2&3).

An Introduction (after the fact)

The Pride & Refuse project falls within the wider framework of the Safe Little World concept, which deals with the paradoxes of our internal and external worlds and spaces, the mundane and the extraordinary.

It's an examination of the pitfalls, potentialities and aspirations of humankind, and takes its title from an excerpt from *Pensées* (as seen in the epigraph and prologue of this book) in which Blaise Pascal is dealing with the paradox of what it means to be human. In its fuller French context:

Quelle chimère est-ce donc que l'homme? quelle nouveauté, quel monstre, quel chaos, quel sujet de contradiction, quel prodige! Juge de toutes choses, imbécile ver d'éterre, dépositaire du vrai, cloaque d'incertitude et d'erreur, gloire et rebut de l'univers.

Echoing Pascal, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel expressed a similar dichotomy: 'Man... is a duality of mysterious grandeur and pompous aridity, / A vision of God and a mountain of dust.'

Meanwhile, 20th century American philosopher Dallas Willard more gently fleshed out a related and relevant concept like this: 'The distance between the aspirations and the physical realities of humanity can be the stuff of the ridiculous, the cynical, and the tragic but at the same time be filled with compassion, faithfulness, heroism, and creativity. In short, that distance is life as we know it.'

It's a big theme, but in this project it is handled with relatively simple, small-scale visual elements and a sense of play that juxtapose with the cerebral, metaphorical and existential scale of the main question.

Then comes a beautifully succinct reading, provided by Anna Sjardin-Killick (my wife): ‘Pride & Refuse. We are the best and the worst of the earth. We fall down and we rise up.’ And that’s about all you need to know, unless...

The English version I originally used as the source of the Pascal quote, and therefore the title of this project, was translated by W.F. Trotter in the very early 1900s (later packaged with an introduction by T.S. Eliot). What’s perhaps a little quirky about this translation is that the phrase ‘*gloire et rebut*’ is translated as ‘pride and refuse’. It would seem obvious to translate the phrase as ‘glory and refuse’. Meanwhile, Google Translate renders ‘*rebut*’ as ‘scum’, but Trotter’s quirk stuck and happenstance results in my project’s title being what it is, rather than Glory & Scum. Though my mate Dean Ellery reckons I might have sold more copies if the book had been called Glory & Scum.

Pascal introduces the flourish of his statement about humanity with the question, ‘*Quelle chimère est-ce donc que l’homme?*’ Trotter renders this as, ‘What a chimera is man!’ Or in another version (Krailshaimer), ‘What sort of freak then is man!’ Pascal (more invitingly) frames the sentence as a question rather than a statement, and it rings similar to the biblical query, ‘What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him?’ (Job 7:17 KJV). Which, in turn, sounds even more impressive in the Latin of the Vulgate: ‘*Quid est homo, quia magnificas eum?*’

It’s a concept that is, or could perhaps be, entangled with the theological notion of ‘original sin’ – i.e. the fall and essential ‘fallenness’ and/or ‘badness’ of humanity – a framework that

brings me a little disquiet these days. But Pascal hasn't said that's all we are – he's proposed a balanced appraisal, and it's probably an existentially honest one as well. Humanity is clearly not always what we're sometimes cracked up to be; not to mention our inherent vulnerabilities and how many countless millions of us have ended up on some form of trash pile over the millennia.

I'm also less fond of dualities these days. When a concept proposes two poles, I now tend to look for (at least) a third term or position. Where might Pascal's paradox, if it functions as a dialectic, take us?

In looking for the original source of the excerpt that forms the prologue of this book, I came across some other interesting material in the same blog post (once upon a time I liked to write in lowercase):

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while researching [Christina Rossetti's] work [for my MA], i came across a book [*Writing the Incommensurable*, Penn State University Press, 1992] in which the author (mary finn) had critiqued rossetti's poetry from the standpoint of a concept devised by søren kierkegaard (the 19th century philosopher and theologian).

that concept was the idea of 'incommensurability'. i might be a little patchy on this – i'm working from memory, and i doubt i ever fully grasped exactly what kierkegaard was on about even at the time. but for our purposes, and i'm probably hijacking kierkegaard's concept here a bit, it describes in another way the tension described by pascal in the quote above.

mary finn's point was that out of this tension – this struggle to unite the paradoxes of the human condition – come some of the greatest works of creativity.