

BOMB

The Art of Noise: Jim Shaw Interviewed by Osman Can Yerebakan

Remembering Mike Kelley.



Destroy All Monsters Collective (Mike Kelley, Cary Loren, Jim Shaw), *Greetings from Detroit*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas. 120 x 228 inches. Courtesy the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Los Angeles. © Destroy All Monsters Collective (Mike Kelley, Cary Loren, Jim Shaw). All Rights Reserved/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.

Michigan natives Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw met as students at Michigan State University in the early 1970s. There, they formed an alternative punk band called Destroy All Monsters (alongside two other members, Cary Loren and Niagara), organized the “guerrilla noise/junk happening” *The Futurist Ballet* on campus, and together found their way to CalArts. *Michigan Stories: Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw* at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University investigates crucial periods in both artists’ careers in reference to their Midwest home state. Starting with ephemera from the Destroy All

Monsters days, the exhibition at the Zaha Hadid-designed museum amasses an impressive selection of works, including the somberly melodic installation *Mechanical Toy Guts*, the last artwork Kelley completed before his passing in 2012. Shaw sat down with Osman Can Yerebakan following his sound and video performance with Loren during the exhibition's opening night.

—Osman Can Yerebakan



Jim Shaw, opening night performance. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University. Photo courtesy MSU Broad.

Osman Can Yerebakan

It's hard to believe that there has never been a two-person exhibition with you and Mike Kelley before.

Jim Shaw

The closest we've come to collaboration would be past shows that presented Destroy All Monsters materials, including me, Mike, Cary, and Niagara. This exhibition is not a typical two-person show either. It has Cary's work in it, but also my *The Hidden World* installation includes other peoples' works.

OCY

How did both you and Kelley decide to move from Michigan, and why did you choose CalArts?

JS

Mike said he was going to apply to CalArts, and since I had been seeing great films coming out of CalArts, I also decided to apply. I was sick of living in a college town; a lot of my friends were moving to San Francisco. In Michigan, things had started to go downhill. A few years later, when I was in Los Angeles in 1979, I read an article about a kind of newcomer called "black-plate specials" in the Skid Row part of L.A. because of their black-and-white license plates. These were the official license-plate colors of Michigan. The oil crisis meant that many left Detroit for Texas or L.A. Then, it was cheap to move to these cities, which is not the case anymore. I came to CalArts because of their film department more than their fine arts program. There were certain filmmakers whom I wanted to work with, such as Pat O'Neill and the animator Kathy Rose. Oh, they also had a swimming pool.



Jim Shaw, *Untitled (Obliterated High School Self Portrait)*, 2004. Graphite on paper. Courtesy Cranford Collection.

OCY

Kelley has always been critical of educational systems and institutions, and he faced restrictions at CalArts when he wanted to study music. They didn't let him take music classes because he was a fine arts student. How was your experience with educational institutions?

JS

Before we got there, a professor told students they could clean Portapaks, which were the given tool people used then to make art videos, the same way they would clean the heads on an audio tape recorder, so eventually a lot of Portapaks were destroyed. After this incident, they made it harder for art students to work in the film department. I think I took one music class, and they let me use the synthesizer; there was still stuff one could do.

OCY

Last night I overheard you say something to the effect that you were trying to get used to Michigan fall. How's visiting here every time?

JS

I come here either in Christmas or summer; my roots are here. I miss the fall since we don't get a lot of weather in Los Angeles.

OCY

Destroy All Monsters was formed in the aftermath of the '60s counterculture, hippie movement, and the economic downfall in Detroit. Looking at the current sociopolitical landscape in the United States, how do you consider the role of anarchist reactions in art and music? What do you think young artists can or should do?

JS

There is a big change in distribution systems. Young artists can be a part of the whole world out there. The person I am working with to make animations, for example, just got out of school, he plays music, and he can do all of this animation shit really fast on the computer. I am an old folk who likes to make objects, but young artists look at the internet as a distribution tool. There is a whole new distribution network. There is no money in it, but it's free distribution. Before eBay, I was on a treasure hunt when I used to go to thrift stores and discover weird parts of America. There are still unique objects to discover out there, but they are not prized possessions.

OCY

Kelley said the band was "my painting strategy made in flesh." How did the band influence your later art and vice versa?

JS

At this point, I use music to create something that I am not fully in control of as opposed to two-dimensional imagery, for which I have full authority as an artist in the creation process. With music, you can only grasp onto a certain amount of its totality while it goes by. I am able to get certain emotions from music that two-dimensional work just does not do. Before mass production, two-dimensional work was the only option. If I could be David Lynch, that'd be amazing, but I am not. I think he's the one artist who can affect culture in such a great way. Without *Twin Peaks*, there wouldn't be *Sopranos* or anything that uses advanced sequential storytelling. I am a big fan of the new episodes, too. I always wish I could do a film version of a Hieronymus Bosch painting, and I think the new *Twin Peaks* came close.



Michigan Stories: Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw. Installation view. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University. Photo: Eat Pomegranate Photography.

OCY

Looking at Xerox prints or the documentation of *The Futurist Ballet* performance in this exhibition, the effort to create out of limitations is evident in those days. As your career progressed and you became a prolific artist over the years, have you tried to maintain that novice soul?

JS

I am still using a Xerox machine. For a series of black-and-white paintings in my current exhibition at Metro Pictures, I moved drawings to Xerox exposure, cut them out, and put them facedown to create various combinations. I only occasionally checked what the result looked like and made adjustments. I had a similar process for the animation, which included cutting leftover collage pieces and scanning them to make them move. I added some interesting warpage,

which turned out to be more than I intended. Especially in the end when it got really dark, I said, "Maybe there is a way to create a motion version of Bosch!"

OCY

What kind of responsibility did you feel working on this exhibition for Kelley and your mutual legacy? How involved were you with his parts of the exhibition?

JS

The Mike Kelley Foundation was very involved. It's hard to imagine what Mike would have done. A charitable foundation has to do things based on a parameter by its nature, but it's in our interest to make sure his legacy grows.

Michigan Stories: Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw is on view at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University in East Lansing, MI, until February 25.

Osman Can Yerebakan is a New York-based art writer and curator. His writing has appeared in New York Times: T Magazine, Village Voice, Brooklyn Rail, ArtSlant, ArtAsiaPacific, Hyperallergic, ArtNewEngland, Art Observed, Filthy Dreams, and elsewhere.