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NOVEMBER 2012





MAD WORLD

JIM SHAW'S
WONDROUS
AND
DIFFICULT YEAR

BY DOUG HARVEY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN SCANLON

It's been a crazy year for Jim Shaw. In January, having drastically down-sized his legendary

atelier community in the wake of the economic crash, he moved out of the studio that had produced some of Los Angeles's most ambitious and monumental artworks of the past decade. He took the opportunity to deaccession much of his equally legendary hoard of pop-cultural ephemera—we're talking tons of pocketbooks, vinyl LPs, vintage magazines, religious pamphlets, board games, collectible figurines, and so on—much of which had served as source material for his feverish postmodern appropriations. Two days later, the body of his longtime art comrade (and collaborator in the seminal noise band Destroy All Monsters), Mike Kelley, was discovered, an apparent suicide that the L.A. art world has not yet fully digested. So much for clearing the decks.

Named an executor of Kelley's estate, and the only artist on the board of the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Shaw found himself enmeshed in the minutiae of his good friend's legacy when he was supposed to be not only producing new work for solo exhibitions at Metro Pictures, Simon Lee, and his new L.A. dealer, Blum & Poe, but also sorting out the particulars for a large-scale midcareer survey that opens November 9 and runs



through February 17 at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, in Gateshead, England, where last year's Turner Prize exhibition was held.

I caught up with Shaw in the midst of his hectic schedule at his new, streamlined work space, sandwiched between a liquor store and a beauty salon in a strip mall in Altadena, a few minutes northeast of downtown L.A., and asked him how Kelley's death had affected him. He declined to go into detail about his legal responsibilities but was forthcoming about the personal impact.

"One thing it's done is make me realize

that for a lot of my life as an artist, I've looked at the people that came before me and thought they were really good, but they made this mistake, and I don't want to make it," he says, glancing up from daubing paint on one of his signature torn-photorealist portraits. "Of course, I made other mistakes, but—looking at Mike and what he achieved...he achieved a lot, but he paid a huge price for it, and I don't want to pay that price. I don't want to continue to kill myself to make this art and let the rest of my life go down the tubes.

"It's made me less materialistic, too, looking at Mike's library, his fabulous



library, then looking at my fabulous collection of crap. I was already getting rid of it at the time because I had to move out of that studio. But now I'm even more like—if I read a book, I'm not going to keep it forever; I'm going to recirculate it. I'll just keep the ones that have reference material that I need to keep going back to. That's why I don't want to get caught up in making the prog-rock opera if it means going into debt. I'll keep it as an ideal, but it may never get completed."

Yes, you read that right: Prog. Rock. Opera. The crowning Gesamtkunstwerk in Shaw's long-term project exploring the

mythological, historical, and cultural manifestations of a fictive 19th-century new American religion called Oism, the long-rumored multimedia extravaganza was gearing up to full production mode in 2008 when the Wall Street apocalypse struck. The originally envisioned debut of the work at the CAPC in Bordeaux morphed into the acclaimed "Left Behind" exhibition there, dominated by Shaw's ridiculously complex allegorical paintings on gigantic found theatrical backdrops, predicated, at least in part, on an inspired associative leap equating the fundamentalist Christian rapture with the plight of the American

working class—a curiously topical leitmotif that seemed to have been lurking in the material all along.

Shaw is certainly no stranger to acausal connectivity. Most of his long-term or large-scale projects—most overtly the "Dream Drawings" and "Dream Objects," but also "My Mirage," Thrift Store Paintings, and Oism—have drawn much of their power from the articulation of paranoid dream logic using commercial popular and outsider vernacular symbolic vocabularies. This might be mistaken for a mere reboot of Surrealism were it not for the intricate

*Capitol Viscera
Appliances, 2011.
Mural: acrylic on
muslin, 16½ x 33 ft.*

RIGHT:
Jim Shaw drawing.
BELOW:
Shaw in his new
L.A. studio.
OPPOSITE:
The Rinse Cycle,
2012. Mural;
acrylic on muslin,
12½ x 19 ft.



fecundity of Shaw's unconscious mind; the dream transcriptions found in *Jim Shaw: Dreams* (Smart Art Press, 1995) and elsewhere read like a mash-up of Brett Easton Ellis's cultural laundry-list fictions, *Alice in Wonderland*, and the *Comic Book Price Guide*. In recent work, the artist has been consciously constructing pictographic palimpsests that mimic the revelatory absurdity of dreams, visions, and conspiracy theories.

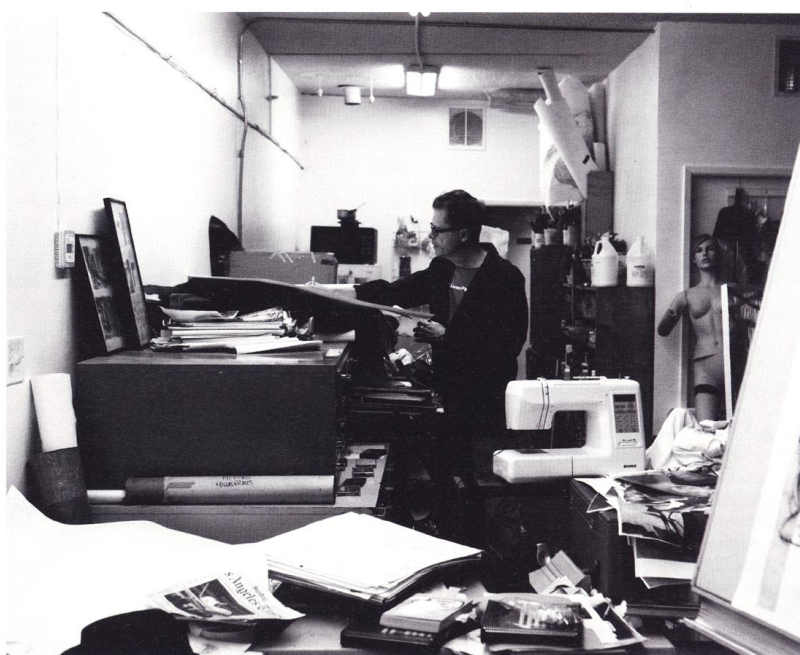
"I decided that I might as well get going on making these irrational correlations," Shaw explains. "In one of the books," the

three-volume *Left Behind* catalogue from Les presses du réel, "I wrote this essay that explained everything I did—it wasn't intended for publication; it was for critics to read through—and I called it 'Spoiler Alert.' Because saying everything is like revealing what's behind the curtain of Oz, and then you can go, 'Oh so that's what it all means.' But if the audience looks at it, and they're trying to make the connections—it's nice that there's an explanation, but I would prefer the irrational connections that people make.

"I got a call many, many years ago when I self-published the *Distorted Faces* book, and it was this 18- or 17-year-old girl who'd seen my book," he continues. "She never bought it, but she was fascinated with it—and then she told me she thought it was the story of this girl who'd been raped. And there's no story in the book whatsoever; it's just a series of faces. And I thought, well, yeah, I guess these people's faces have been distorted and fucked over. But the fact that some one could jump to a conclusion like that was pretty interesting to me.

"And I think we can all jump to some conclusions from something like Duchamp's *Large Glass*, but it's clearly meant to be incomprehensible in many ways. It's like a springboard. So if I'm going to make springboards, I like that there are complex things behind them, but also I like that you could look at them and get something without knowing the frickin' story behind them."

Still, the frickin' story can be pretty frickin' amazing. Take the prog-rock opera, which, like the Baltic survey as a whole and one of the quasi-gatefold album-art backdrop paintings included therein, is titled *The Rinse Cycle*. Inspired in equal parts by Yes's disastrous 1973 double LP, *Tales from Topographic Oceans*, and the Osmonds' Mormonist concept album,



OPPOSITE: JIM SHAW AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK

The Plan (released the same year), *The Rinse Cycle* outlines the mythological underpinnings of Oism. It is a more or less symmetrical (one might even say schizophrenic) unfolding of events beginning with the birth of a virgin from herself in an age before written language or agriculture.

This is followed by the revolt of underworld-dwelling dwarfs against an aristocracy of Atlantean priestesses, the discovery of a crystal power, the appearance of an interdimensional male trickster named "I," and the use of time-travel wigs to bring the technology for weaponizing the crystals back from the 1940s, resulting in a gravity increase that sinks the land beneath waves. At least that's what I can reconstruct from my notes. And that's just disc one!

"I sometimes excuse my methodology as being similar to the methodology of Godard, the way whatever he was reading got thrown into whatever movie he was making at the time," says Shaw. "I just finished this book called *Madness and Modernism* [by Louis A. Sass, published in 1992], which had me thinking more and more about madness in myself and society.

"It's hard for me to articulate this feeling about madness. I've had momentary madness that didn't last very long, so I have an interest in the relationship between madness and creativity. I've been interested in William Blake for a long time," the artist continues, "and he had visions of angels, conversations with angels. That seems like something worth pursuing. But I'm also interested in the art world of a few years ago, when people would say, 'It's different now; it's a worldwide art market, it's never going to crash like it did back in the '80s.'"

"But I could see that the art market was going to crash; the only question was when. And I could see the people who were the 'experts' not knowing—they were either lying to themselves or engaging in magical thinking. These are the kinds of everyday madness that I find interesting. But when it comes to things like climate decisions, they end up killing people just by staying with the status quo long enough. The art world's not going to kill anybody by being wrong about something—that's the great thing about postmodernism. But government policies enacted by the Koch brothers will."

"The Rinse Cycle"—the exhibition—will involve a generous portion of Shaw's

apophenia-generated sociopolitical critiques (and, with luck, a subsequent live version of *The Rinse Cycle: The Prog-Rock Opera*), but for the time being Shaw is focusing on the work in front of him, which seems to be taking the whole finding-meaning-in-random-patterns thing to a surprisingly personal level. He shows me a new series of barely started canvases, primed with the kind of gestural

"I don't want to kill myself to make this art."

abstractions that form the ground for many of the Oism works from the past decade.

"In these paintings I'm going to bring out faces, and then I'm going to cover them up. This one over here already has a pretty nice sort of Burgie Beer guy. I have no idea how they're going to turn out. I decided to start working with the same beginning point but different end points, because they're fun. I just want to go into unknown places and see what happens." Spoken like a true madman! MP

