

ARTS & CULTURE

Q&A: JIM SHAW

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

On prog-rock operas, Schulz sermons and the power of dream machines; taken from the current issue of Dazed



- TEXT BY [FRANCESCA GAVIN](#)

Jim Shaw is one of those exceptionally creative originals that can turn their hand to anything. For noise fans, he is best known as one of the founding members of Destroy All Monsters – the endlessly influential proto-punk band he formed in Detroit 1973 with artist Mike Kelley and singer Niagara that broke the boundaries between art, music, video and everything in-between. Shaw and Kelley left the band after three years to study at CalArts (where John Baldessari was teaching) in Los Angeles, where they both set about becoming renowned artists (Kelley tragically took his own life earlier this year). Shaw began his career working in special effects,

before establishing himself with an inventive “fine” art that gained serious attention.

His series *My Mirage* (1986–91), recently published in book form, is a narrative series of 170 ever-changing artworks that, through the tale of wandering young Billy, tell the story of US pop culture itself. The variety of paintings, drawings and objects that make up the series proved that Shaw could do almost anything, from reinventions of Hieronymous Bosch and Norman Rockwell to Mad magazine covers and comic book spreads. Following that, he embarked on his ongoing *Dream Drawings* and *Dream Objects* series, and has also created banner paintings and a fictional religion called Oism and curated the amateur-art show *Thrift Store Paintings* for the ICA. On the eve of a massive solo show at the BALTIC in Gateshead, Dazed spoke to Shaw about religious craziness and tapping into your own subliminal brainwaves for inspiration.

Dazed & Confused: I've heard rumours that you're making a prog-rock opera about Oism...

Jim Shaw: It's more a concept of a prog-rock opera that's continually being delayed by lack of funding. Originally it was also lack of me figuring out what the hell it was going to be. But I have figured out

a lot of that. Ever since the economic crash, the spare money that went into projects like prog-rock operas has been limited... This prog-rock opera is going to be interpreted in terms of artworks and ideas, but not by actual performances at all.

D&C: A performance that doesn't exist?

Jim Shaw: Yeah. Part of the reason for doing this is the looming prospect of likely failure; this constant promise that might never get made, like Orson Welles's last movie.

D&C: Do you have an idea of the story of your opera? Narrative is something you've explored in unusual forms.

Jim Shaw: I'm using opera as an excuse to lay out the history of my fake religion. One of the things I was constantly worrying about was, 'Is this going to end up like *The Osmonds' The Plan?*', which was a (1973) concept album about Mormonism that was not particularly

successful. Or like one of the many born-again Christian records with not-very-good musical numbers that came out in the wake of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It's probably going to be more like *Tales from Topographic Oceans* (by Yes, 1973), a weird mixture of poetic stuff and ham-fisted things, but it's got to maintain a certain relationship to reality. One thing about real opera is that there's long sequences of exploratory singing that are pretty unmemorable at times in things like (Wagner's) Ring Cycle or this new opera that the film composer Howard Shore did based on Cronenberg's *The Fly*. Long segments of someone singing, 'Oh blah blaaahblablahblah' – it's just not engaging in any particular way. I'm hoping it will be a little punchier than that. Part of the absurdity of doing a rock opera is that I'm a terrible musician.

D&C: Why does religion fascinate you?

Jim Shaw: It's something I personally left behind when I was 11 or 12. We had this Episcopalian minister that would literally give sermons based on Peanuts comics. Very, very middle of the road. When I was an adult I was exposed to the weirdness of born-again Christian stuff on TV, something that was completely hidden from public view then except for the occasional scathing reference. I was just fascinated with this other culture that existed in America – this was before they took over politics and the Republican Party. I was interested in the fact that no matter what progress happens, we keep falling back into that.

D&C: Your work is so accessible, but you also seem to be exploring your own internal landscape...

Jim Shaw: I want there to be things that people can access but also hidden secrets. If it's completely hermetic, the only way anyone could be interested is if it's worth a lot of money, because once something's successful then people pay attention. I want people to get something out of my work. I want there to be something that draws them in, like the top of a paperback draws you in to a potentially fabulous, potentially terrible book.

D&C: Is there something you like about not being pinned down stylistically?

Jim Shaw: I have ADD, or maybe it's ADHD. Throughout my life I did a variety of things and

none of them were all that successful financially, so it was easy to leave them behind. I like taking left turns, but I have this fear that everybody wants to see the work I've done when I've rendered the shit out of stuff, and I'm just getting too old to do that for the rest of my life. I want it to be a bit more about the ideas.

D&C: You were in Destroy All Monsters for the first three years of the band, with Mike Kelley. How has music influenced what you've done since?

Jim Shaw: Well, I took violin and viola in junior high but I never practiced. I was the world's poorest violist. The thing about an electric guitar is that it doesn't take a lot of talent to get some noise out of it. Now I'm utilising my voice – I've been listening to a lot of music from various time-periods and world places and I feel like nobody's ever really pushed the vocal. Stuff like pygmy vocalising, the Tahitian Choir and shape-note singing are just marvellous, so I'm trying to work some of that into the music. The thing is, with music, it actually functions at an immediately emotional level, whereas if you're emotional in visual art you're punished for it, and perhaps rightly so. Sentimentality can overtake there easily. It's innate in music.

D&C: Do you still love comics?

Jim Shaw: I fall back into them. I've been doing these things about the aesthetics of comics lately, because so much of what I do is about rendering things in pencil, in tones of grey. Rendering things in comics is a pure, symbolic version of something. It's an abstraction into high-contrast lines – it's just a different way of picturing things. I've been looking a lot at William Blake, who is kind of the first comic artist. I did these drawings reworking William Blake but doing it in the style of the leading Superman artist of my youth, Wayne Boring. An extremely stylised way of drawing the human body. I'm continuing to utilise a lot of those aesthetic elements and I've also done comics that tell the same story as the prog-rock opera.

D&C: Blake was a visionary, which knits into your Dream works.

Jim Shaw: The miracle of the Dream series was that the artwork already existed in my dream, so I didn't have to bother with too much hard work or research. The thing about the Oism series is I have to research every aspect of it and spend a lot of time on that, so it's a slower-going

thing, and that's one of the reasons that the book of Oism and the prog-rock opera are so far behind schedule. When I first started I thought, yeah, I'll get it done in six months. It's been 12 years.

D&C: Tell me a little about your processes?

Jim Shaw: Some of what I work on is tedious rendering, and that's 95 per cent sweat vs five per cent inspiration. There are times when things float into your head and times when they don't. I don't want to be someone who had a lot of their ideas back in their 20s and is just regurgitating the same stuff over and over again. I deliberately changed the kind of artwork that I was doing so that I wouldn't be doing the same artwork for the rest of my life. I have my best luck having ideas when I have a good night's sleep and lounging in bed listening to this device that puts you into alpha and beta states for like, half an hour.

D&C: What's the sleep machine like?

Jim Shaw: It's called Holosync. It uses sounds to set up a rhythm from ear to ear, which creates a brainwave situation. On the other hand, if you have a bunch of dreams you just transcribe them and there they are! The vast majority of dreams, as far as I can tell, are just sifting through the things that you're worried about, and every once in a while there's wish-fulfilment. Then you get ones that are bizarre and profound and prophetic and I think they're essentially your body's natural DMT kicking into gear. It's very, very similar to religious experiences. The longer you can prolong those glimpses, it's where the creative process is kicked into high gear.

*November 9–February 17, The Rinse Cycle, [Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art](#), Gateshead
NE8*