

PUNKS OUT OF THE PAST

**MIKE KELLEY,
JIM SHAW,
AND DESTROY ALL
MONSTERS**

BY DOUG HARVEY





Prior to 1994, if you mentioned the name Destroy All Monsters to punk aficionados, it conjured only a minor footnote: a band in Michigan rock

music history known for the participation of the former Stooges guitarist Ron Asheton and the MC5 bassist Michael Davis. But by the time its first single, "Bored," was released in 1978, three of the band's four original members had left; two of them, Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw, had headed west to attend graduate school at the California Institute of the Arts, Los Angeles.

During the course of the next two decades, Kelley and Shaw rose to the upper echelons of the international art world. Their work prompted considerable interest in the little-known earlier incarnation of DAM, which also included the filmmaker Cary Loren and the chanteuse Niagara. In 1994, Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and the music critic Byron Coley issued a lavish three-CD set

of archival DAM recordings, which was a revelation to many. It garnered unexpected critical accolades and prompted a series of reunion projects, including performances, recordings, art exhibitions, and publications that brought together various ephemera, such as the collective's eponymous post-psychedelic, pre-punk zine.

Although the intervening years have seen a steady stream of DAM-related activities and artifacts, 2011 saw a significant increase, culminating in a small retrospective at the Prism Gallery, in West Hollywood, accompanied by a lavish catalogue published by the co-curator Dan Nadel's imprint, PictureBox. The title of the book (and the exhibition), *Return of the Repressed: Destroy All Monsters 1973–1977*, provides a strong

hint that the DAM reclamation is largely part of the co-curator Kelley's ongoing exploration of the recovering, reconstruction, and archiving of lost personal and cultural histories, and as such, it manages to short-circuit or repurpose most of the problematic absurdities inherent in exercises in DIY subcultural nostalgia.

It's impossible to calculate the number of small, insular experimental-art communities that existed during the time of DAM's original activities. But it's safe to assume that every medium-size urban center sprouted one or more communal freak house, where well-worn copies of *Trout Mask Replica* and *Stimmung* inspired drug-fueled reel-to-reel hijinks, and back issues of *Zap Comix* and the *East Village Other* provided a template for self-published manifestos and Xeroxed collages. And that's not even taking into account similar experiments in collective improvisational creativity that came before and after—which, in fact, make up a secret alternative history of modern art dating back at least to the Cabaret Voltaire of the early 20th century.

So the recent surge of DAM documentation—which, in addition to

ABOVE:
**Destroy All
Monsters
Collective**
(Mike Kelley, Jim
Shaw, and Cary
Loren), *Mail
Culture*, 2000.
Acrylic on canvas,
8 x 11½ ft.

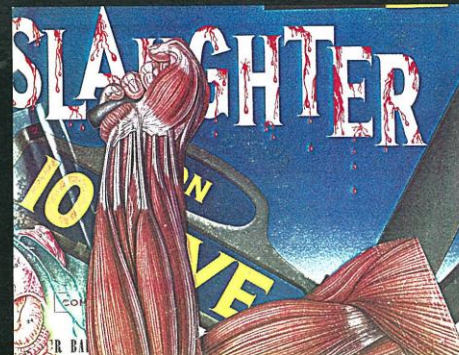
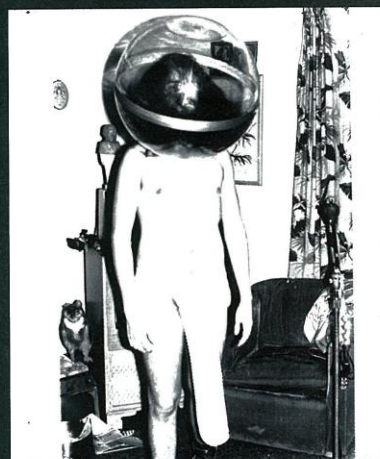
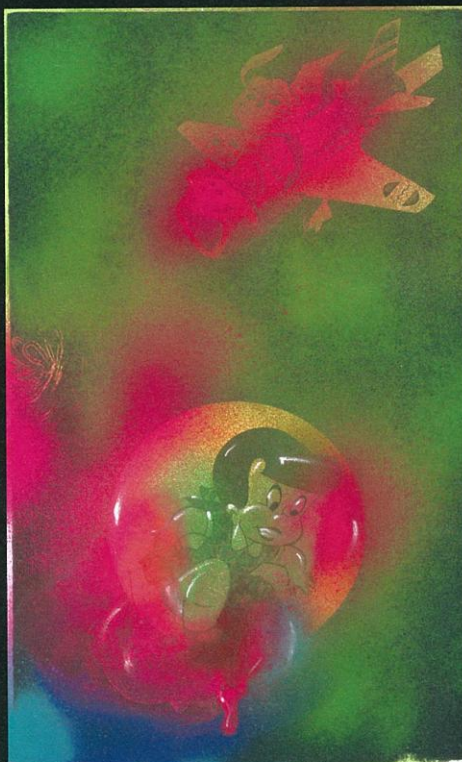
PREVIOUS PAGE:
The cover of the
catalogue for
*Return of the
Repressed: Destroy
All Monsters 1973–
1977*, designed
by Norman
Hathaway.

Return of the Repressed, includes Primary Information's complete reprint of *Destroy All Monsters* magazine, a reissue of the long out-of-print 1994 three-CD set, a vinyl-only release of a 1975 *Double Sextet* improvisation, plus a double-CD set of contemporaneous duet jams by Shaw and Kelley, and a staggering eight-CD anthology of Shaw's vintage solo electric-guitar improvs (all issued on Kelley's Compound Annex label)—operates on multiple simultaneous levels. At face value, it is a historical account of the early formative milieu of two of Los Angeles's most celebrated contemporary artists, but it is also a token acknowledgment of the hundreds of similar undocumented communities whose legacies remain below the radar of mainstream culture, and lastly, it is a facet of Kelley's magnum opus of auto-archaeological fetishism.

The fictionalizing quality inherent in the reconstruction of any historical moment—particularly of a collectively authored improvisational one whose raison d'être hinged on the rejection of any thoughts of posterity—has been one of Kelley's main thematic concerns throughout his career, and it is this ambivalent approach to the notion of authenticity that provides the loophole through which the "Return of the Repressed" exhibit and accompanying book (and the DAM archival project in general) escape the crippling pitfalls of most institutional attempts to capture and display insurgent avant-garde initiatives.

The sheer narrative absurdity of presenting much of this ragtag work in such an upscale, pristine venue as Prism Gallery is underscored by the fact that the most striking of the objets d'art on display is the series of hagiographic banners from the "Strange Fruit: Rock Apocrypha" installation of 2000, acknowledging such Michigan cultural icons as Iggy Pop, George Clinton, Sun Ra, John Sinclair, Stanley Mouse, and Lester Bangs—the place of honor in it is saved for *Destroy All Monsters*.

Those conversant with Kelley's and Shaw's archetypal vocabulary will find themselves in familiar territory here: debased Surrealist and Warholian gestures; occult, paranormal, and fundamentalist Christian appropriations; B-movie monsters and pulp-fiction illustrations; curdled depictions of the Middle American Dream; and glamorous ladies in bondage. Niagara's delicate watercolor-and-pencil-crayon renderings of Art Nouveau femmes fatales capture a sensibility that was routinely beaten out of art-school students back in the day



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Jim Shaw
Painted Xerox, 1975. 13 3/4 x 8 in.

Niagara
Sacrifice, 1975. Watercolor on paper, 17 x 14 in.

Mike Kelley
Promise Her Anything, 1975. Etching with aquatint and spray paint, 18 x 22 in.

Jim Shaw
Color Xerox, 1976. 8 1/2 x 11 in.

Mike Kelley
Political Cartoon (In the Clutches of Evil), 1976/2011. Pigment print, 30 x 44 in.

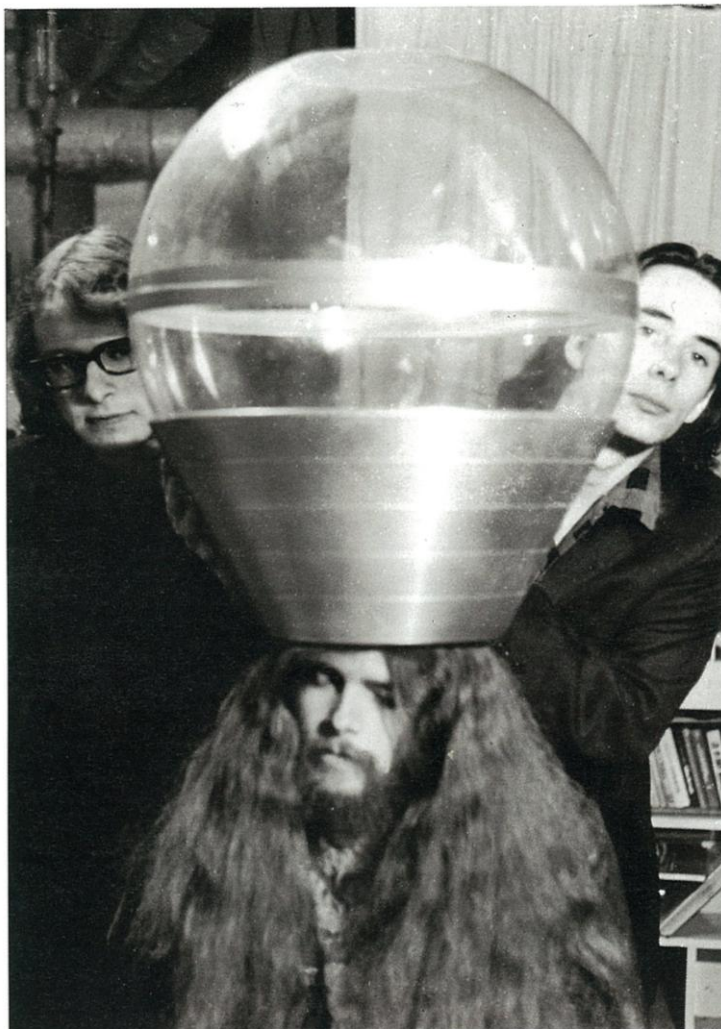
Jim Shaw in space helmet and plastic penis tube at God's Oasis boarding house, in Ann Arbor, 1975. Silver gelatin print.

but has gained currency in the intervening years of de-skilling and the discovery and celebration of the work of Henry Darger.

Cary Loren, who went on to participate in the international mail-art network of the 1970s and '80s, is best represented by the DAM zine, for which he was largely responsible, and which is more appropriately experienced in the anthology reprint than displayed in Plexiglas vitrines. Unsurprisingly, the strongest works are by Kelley and Shaw, both of whom exhibit seeds of their later signature styles—the former with his grotesque, Hairy Who–influenced political cartoons and “Allegorical Drawings,” and the latter with a remarkable mimeographed faux-crackpot flying-saucer religious-cult pamphlet, “The End Is Here,” and a series of doctored “UFO Photos,” both from 1978, two years after he moved to L.A.

Fishy as all this is, there is an elegant symmetry to the rose-tinted recreation of a lost creative Eden that was and is characterized by a vehement anti-utopianism. There is also a familiar frisson from canonical hierarchies disrupted not through ridicule of the established order but through the elevation of seemingly undeserving cultural phenomena to the level of scrutiny and dedication of resources normally reserved for subjects of agreed-upon Historical Importance. Indeed, Kelley’s “Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstructions” series transforms examples from the artist’s extensive collection of carnivalesque high school yearbook photos documenting DIY folk-art performances and installations for homecoming ceremonies, Halloween, and the like into an ambitious *Gesamtkunstwerk* of professionally executed music-video installations.

Considered as an aspect of Kelley’s work, the reinvention of Destroy All Monsters represents a considerably riskier form of historical revisionism than the appropriation of anonymous snapshots of football team initiations, or even the reconstructions of educational architectures from his own past that make up his “Educational Complex” of 1995. By incorporating the memories and archives of other artists, he simultaneously destabilizes the position of hermetic authority that imbues much of his work and flirts with a history-written-by-the-



FROM TOP:
John Reed, Jim
Shaw, and Mike
Kelley in the
basement of God’s
Oasis, 1975. Silver
gelatin print.

Jim Shaw
Blueprint, 1977.
15 x 21 in.

OPPOSITE:
Installation view at
Prism Gallery
of a Jim Shaw
Xerox grid, 2011.



THE MATERIAL RECORDS THE FORMATIVE MILIEU OF TWO OF L.A.'S MOST CELEBRATED CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS.



Jim Shaw
Dr. Goldfoot and His Bikini Bombs, 2007. Acrylic on muslin, 12 x 16 ft.

OPPOSITE:
Unfilled (Blonde Hair), 2007. Oil on canvas, 70 x 46 in.

winners form of manufactured consensus. But perhaps the main outcome of this strategy is to shift attention to the mythologizing efforts of the other members of the DAM collective—the archiving and anthologizing activities of Loren and Niagara to some extent, but most emphatically (albeit almost indirectly) to the parallel solo career of Shaw.

Although the DAM materials prefigure Shaw's later work, as noted—in their suggestion of a fictional cult as a framework for a larger body of work (manifested during the last decade in Shaw's ongoing exegesis of the culture of Oism, his fictive 19th-century religion), as well as his juxtaposition of tightly rendered photorealist figuration and generic nth-generation abstract-painting clichés, a motif that recurs throughout his oeuvre—they also spotlight his own subsequent translation of his formative period into a series of fictional histories that are as ambitious in their own way as Kelley's more celebrated inventions are.

Shaw's complex narrative of such shared 1960s and '70s countercultural talking points as religious cults, psychopharmacology, sexual liberation, and the polar oscillation between high and low culture is less well-known than Kelley's is for at least two reasons. Apart from his slightly later emergence as an art world player, there is also an essentially formal one: Shaw's feverish and overwhelming appropriations—half homage, half parody—are in some ways more disturbing to denizens of the art world than Kelley's more assimilated influences are, inviting parallels to John Oswald's copyright-challenging "plunderphonic" compositions.

It hasn't helped that Shaw's three large-scale projects—his encyclopedic accounting of Oism; the exhaustive documentation of his exceedingly detailed and reference-laden dreams; and his breakthrough picto-biographical coming-of-age series, "My Mirage"—have mostly been seen in fragments. Two recent publications, *Dream Object Book* and *Jim Shaw: My Mirage*, go some way toward remedying this. The former is the catalogue of a miniature retrospective of artworks that appeared in Shaw's dreams and which he subsequently fabricated, all reproduced in miniature à la Duchamp's *Box in a Valise*, and documented before incorporating them into a meta-dream object as a scrap heap beneath a sculpture of the Whore of Babylon.

Among the Oist artifacts that make up Shaw's show this month at Metro Pictures, in New York, are some of his more recent engagements with the vernacular of graphic narrative in the form of an Oist comic book, which will hopefully see publication in the next year or so. Even more compelling is the long-awaited publication of the "My Mirage" works in their near entirety, which follows the sexual, psychological, political, cultural, and spiritual transformations of the teenage protagonist, Billy, during the course of five "chapters," compiled by Fabrice Stroun and Lionel Bovier, and released by JRP Ringier. The original "My Mirage" artworks were created and sold piecemeal between 1986 and 1991. With its reproductions of approximately 170 extant works at half their original 17-by-14-inch size, *Jim Shaw: My Mirage* references an astonishing array of high, medium, and low visual art—from John Baldessari and Frank Stella, to M.C. Escher and Edward Gorey, to Martin Sharp and Jack Chick. Folded into what must now be considered one of the most ambitious and accomplished graphic novels of the last quarter century, it is a landmark in experimental postmodern narrative—alongside the reconstructed history of Destroy All Monsters. MP

