

JIM SHAW IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDY HOLDEN

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JIM SHAW  
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Jim Shaw's current exhibition at Simon Lee, *The Whole: A Study in Oism Integrated Movement*, sees Shaw continue to expand and evolve his construct of Oism. Oism is a religion invented by Shaw in 2000, which he has exhibited in various stages over the last few years, including a large survey at PS1 in 2007.

Prior to this Shaw spent a number of years working on dream drawings and dream sculptures, seen in London at Emily Tsingou in 2006. Other major projects have been the *Thrift Store Paintings*, Shaw's collection of found paintings shown at the ICA in 2000. Earlier, *My Mirage* (1986-1991), told the story of Billy, an alter ego, who as a pubescent discovers the joys of masturbation and sniffing glue, then enjoys a hippy heaven, followed by drug hell and is finally reborn as a Christian. Jim Shaw was a founding member of the band *Destroy All Monsters*, formed with fellow artist Mike Kelly. In the following conversation with Andy Holden he discusses his recent paintings, religion, movies, politics, thrift store finds and the art world.

**AH:** In some respects your construction of Oism is a very literary idea, to invent something that has its own history, as opposed to adapting and reworking existing mythology. It is a technique that is used to great effect by Sci-Fi writers,

for example Kurt Vonnegut's use of Bokononism in *Cat's Cradle*. It allows for a plurality of authorship, and gives a great freedom to criticise and question motivations and morals, however, it is a technique uncommon in art. Could you tell me a little about the background to Oism and what attracted you to taking on such an enormous enterprise?

**JS:** I like to do things that I am not really qualified to do, I guess. I have never read *Cat's Cradle*. I've read a limited amount of fiction, most of the Chandler books, and a lot of William Burroughs, and a certain amount of Don DeLillo. I just read research. I always thought of the *My Mirage* series being based on Burroughs' cut-ups. I had some literary aspirations without being a good writer. I was inspired by the Mormon story, by the Watchman, and the Scientologists. L. Ron Hubbard invented a whole mythology to go with a scientific approach.

**AH:** How do you see the individual pieces in a project such as *My Mirage* or Oism in relation to the body of work as a whole? Do you see them functioning as individual canvases, or do they operate as pieces of a larger puzzle?

**JS:** They are conceived as parts of a larger puzzle. I always think of my work as a narrative. Eventually the book for *My Mirage* will come out, maybe this year, so that you can see all the puzzle pieces together. There is an Oism book that came out a few years ago but it clearly doesn't contain everything because I have done more Oism since then. I've also done another body of work in the meantime, as well as more dream objects.

**AH:** In a way, as with all your projects, Oism is specific to America. I think I'm right in saying that the American constitution includes something like, "one is free to choose to practice any religion". This leads to a very individualized concept of faith and an extremely heterogeneous religious tapestry, which is very different from the institutionalized models that exist in Europe. I was wondering has creating

Opposite page: *Untitled (faces in circle)*  
2009  
Oil on Canvas  
(152.4 x 152.4 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee gallery, London





your own religion helped you understand the mentality of those in America who embrace cults and minor religions?

**JS:** I had done a fake religion when I was at Cal Arts for my graduating project, so I have been interested in it for a long time. I was initially thinking of a short-term thing - if there could be a completely different religion, what would the effect on aesthetics be? I was teaching in Las Vegas and I found out that a number of my students were Christians, which is something you don't normally have a lot of in art schools. So I thought I ought to take it a little more seriously. I did a lot of research and I had this idea of evolving an American created religion. Most invented religions began in the Upstate region of New York and Pennsylvania in the Eighteen hundreds. I came to realise that it was kind of like California in the Sixties - a lot of new ideas were being explored. In terms of coming close to understanding that mentality... I don't know. I felt close enough when I used to go to this Hare Krishna vegetarian restaurant on the West Side. I once saw a woman there chastising her child and I realised that they are just like us, except that they want to hold on to this sort of small group mentality and control things in the face of cable TV, video games and Madonna. It's a difficult thing to do, but I understand why they, I mean all religious sects and cults, are doing it. It's just unfortunate that they often step on peoples toes to do it, or that they elected our last President and believed in him, and believed in Palin.

**AH:** For one Oist exhibition you invented an artist, Adam O Goodman, who is presented as the first Oist painter. 'His' abstract paintings were shown alongside an archive of forbidden figurative imagery, as figuration is outlawed by Oism.

**JS:** A certain faction of Oism... there is more than one faction.

**AH:** Well, I was thinking about its echoes in art history... In the paintings of Philip Guston, who on reintroducing figurative elements back into his canvases was labeled

'a stumblebum' by one reviewer and in some respects was excommunicated from the high church of American Abstract Expressionism. In recent years there has been an emphasis on abstraction as 'pure' and figuration as 'impure'. This tension between the abstract and the figurative, the pure and the impure, seems to return again in the Oist portraits in this show. Is it an idea that is central to the construct of Oism?

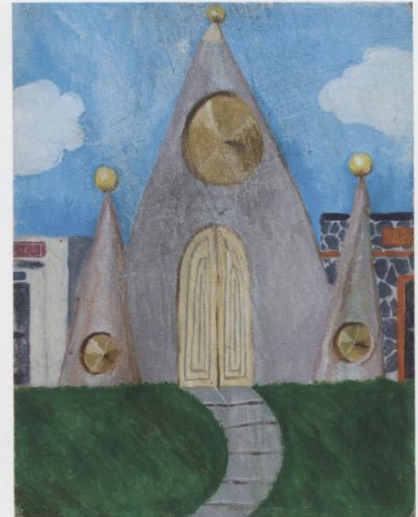
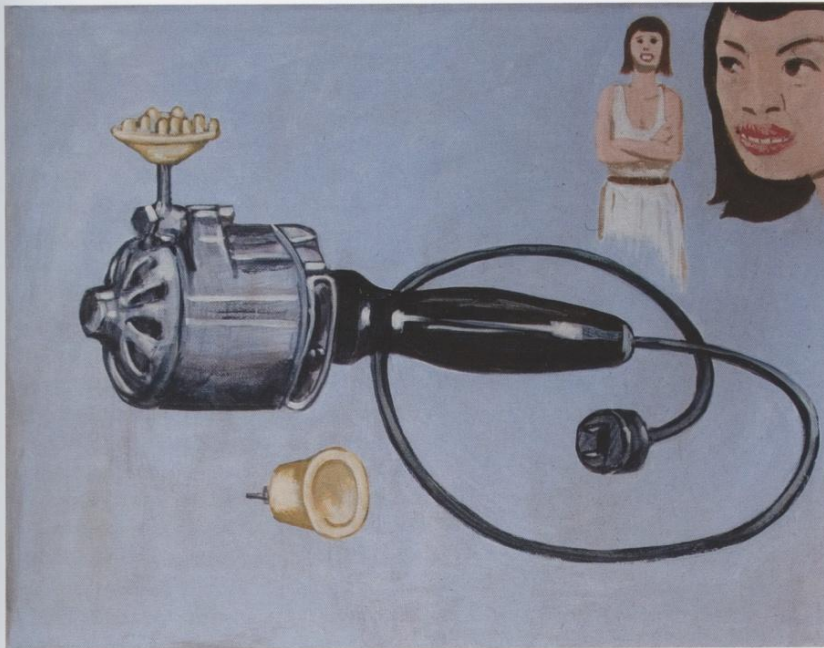
**JS:** It is somewhat central to Oism. I have this constructed idea that I sort of believe, in which language and thus history separates our mind from our body. That is why the heads are always floating in an abstract void. There is also realism versus the abstraction going on at the same time, and the illusionary versus the flat field. I recently read an argument by a cultural historian that the introduction of perspective in the Renaissance was a defining point in the growth of intelligence in humans, which I take some issue with because I believe that the pre-Renaissance artists actually were coming out of a tradition of realism. Perhaps they had forgotten it, but in the Dark Ages realistic art was frowned on because of its association with the Romans. There was a need to abstract back then, so they flattened everything out. Anyway, there is some of that fighting going on in the rendered images as they flow in and out of perspective space.

**AH:** Do you find it difficult to move between the two different mentalities required to paint both photo-realistically and also in a loose abstract fashion?

**JS:** I'm doing the best Abstract Expressionism I can do but since I'm not an abstract painter I can't just leave it alone. They are usually unless I have made a mistake; just separate sittings, because the under-painting has to dry for a while before the realism can get adhered to it. But then every once in awhile something gets painted in the wrong place, so I have to fake a little bit of the fast, loose, abstract painting and that's very difficult. I'm looking at all this stuff pretty much as I

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All: Paintings found in Oist Thrift Stores (Present)  
2007  
Acrylic on board

Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee gallery, London

imagined an Abstract Expressionist would, and then I go back if it needs a little bit here and a little bit there, and I try to balance out the push-pull of the composition.

**AH:** I understand the drawings take a tremendous number of hours to do, sometimes up to two months. Is the intensive labour required something you have always been naturally inclined towards or something that has developed to meet the needs of your practice?

**JS:** Even when I was 5 years old I drew a fairly photo-realist drawing of a Gila Monster and sent it in to Captain Muddy's cartoon show and it was commented upon for its realism. So it's a perverse thing, I can't defend it. It's a technique that given enough time and patience I think anyone can do. You have the photograph - all you have to do is reproduce it, just keep looking at it and get it right. It's pretty easy, just tedious.

**AH:** I saw your exhibition *Dr Goldfoot And His Bikini Bombs* at Metro Pictures last year. When I saw the show it was relatively sparse, much like this show. However, when I looked up images from



the exhibition on the Internet it seemed crammed with works that must have been added part-way through the show. What was the thinking behind the addition of all the new pieces?

**JS:** It was a sort of a self-sabotage. I think I ended up selling less work by having more in the show, but it was a very perverse way of adding to this body of stuff. A lot of it was about the body being taken apart, as I had been reading a couple of books about the Black Dahlia murders and a connection to Man Ray and the pose of the body in Duchamp's *Etant Donnes*. I also have in my own history a large number of dreamt of objects that involved body parts. It was



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(from) *Paintings found in 01st Thrift Stores (Present)*  
2007  
Acrylic on board

Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee gallery, London

also a reference to this movie called *Dr Goldfoot with Vincent Price*. Every once in a while something you read just sticks with you. There was an article about James Nicholson, the head of American International Pictures in *Life Magazine* back in the Sixties in which they followed him around for a day. During the day he just comes up with the title *Dr Goldfoot And His Bikini Bombs*. He turns to his assistant and says, "let's make that movie!" Just like that, based only on the title. I remember thinking as a young artist how good it was that I was so constrained by economics, stopped from actually acting on my ideas. By being broke it gave me the chance to think about things for years before being able to make them. Now that I am a successful artist I could suffer from having ideas that I am going to act on immediately, like adding twice as many works part-way through a show. In a way it was a reference to that, to do all this giant stuff, like making the nose lighting sconces with a hi-tech manufacturing firm.

**AH:** I like very much the dream drawings, especially the grey pencil drawings

that combine fragments of dreams and snippets of narrative in a comic book-like framework. The removal of all colour unifies the various disparate images, and although they are so specific to you, they had that uncanny, familiar quality. Could you talk a little about this process of recording your dreams in this way?

**JS:** There were a couple of years when all I did was draw my dreams. I would dream dreams and I would make notes on them, I would draw them, and then I would have some more dreams. I just kept condensing more and more into a page. I would record them when I woke up in thumbnail sketches. I would kind of draw them quickly because with time details fade. If you try to write it down verbally, and this goes back to that mind/body separation thing, it actually erases some of the pure pre-linguistic memory of the dream. So from there I would start laying out the thing and I would get bogged down in the perspective and all that crap. And God forbid there were shingles on a house in a dream! I was aiming, in one sense, in the beginning anyway, to bring out the mundane aspect of the dream.

**AH:** Surrealism was such a European phenomenon in its origins, rooted in the objects and architecture of the period, that when it reached the American consciousness it must have had an exotic appeal in its quirks and stylization. Do you think that your take on Surrealism, your dream objects filtered through an American subconscious, have a similar appeal in Europe due to their configurations of American styles that seem exotic and otherworldly? Do you find the works are received differently in Europe to America?

**JS:** I know that in Europe George Bush was the ultimate American, exactly like the dumb Texan. He played that part to the hilt. And I may be the comic book obsessed pulp American for a British audience, I don't know, I can only conjecture that. I was always interested in what I call American Surrealism, which in actual



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fact Philip Guston was part of, centring on a group of painters in Los Angeles in the Thirties. They believed in taking a kind of Surrealist iconography and making it a positive, rational force. And you can sort of see that, when it ends up being in the form of advertising, although I'm not sure if it is all that positive, being used to sell stuff. An earlier thing in my youth would have been the Ray Harryhausen films. You get this broad daylight imposition of something unreal into reality. He was able to make a surreal thing happen but back then it was very difficult to achieve. Now you can do it at home on your Mac. Surrealism is now all over the place, and special effects have lost their special-ness.

**AH:** You worked in the special effects industry for a while, didn't you? Did this influence the aesthetic of the Oist videos in the show?

**JS:** One of the highlights of my career was working on *Nightmare On Elm Street Part 4*, I also worked on *Earth Girls Are Easy*, and *The Abyss*. Such a crucial part of Hollywood filmmaking is to mythologise. Particularly to mythologise the rebellion, to invigorate the viewers identity with that position. There are many movies like *Star Wars* where the brave scrappy little band fly their aeroplanes down the tunnel to destroy the evil cooperation. The model of *Star Wars* is so similar to what the 9/11 hijackers did - flying into the heart of the engine to destroy the Death Star. You know everyone can cling onto those myths, and that is another aspect of practical Surrealism that interests me.

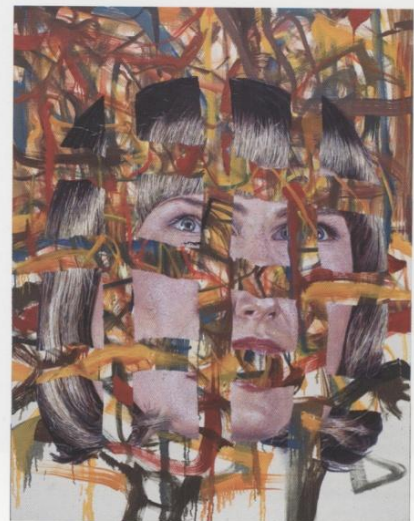
**AH:** Huxley made an interesting point in *Doors Of Perception*, that the mental space to which William Blake belonged is fairly widely distributed even in the urban-industrial societies of the present day. Blake's uniqueness did not consist of the fact that he actually saw those images, but consists solely in his ability to render the experience. Is it of any consideration what a viewer might think when confronted with these intimate sketches of your dreams? Do you worry about how the images from your



dreams might be interpreted?

**JS:** I have a whole body of censored dream drawings that I intend selling sometime in the future. I don't want them to be sold in America. I've still got a nine year old in school. I was on an aeroplane with Paul McCarthy once and he said, "I've got this porno film I want to make but I can't do that now that I've got kids." But now his kids are grown up and one is a co-director. America is a very puritanical society - you can have your children taken away if a drug store finds pictures of your children in the bathtub. There are some things you don't want to become an issue so that leads to some self-censorship. I'm a political animal. I know what does not to step on to continue functioning in the world.

**AH:** I was going to ask you briefly about the Thrift Store Paintings. This was a really important project for me as when I turned up at art school. One of the first things I showed was my collection of paintings and prints of children in idealized, pseudo-romantic landscapes bought from charity shops. All anyone could say was "what about Jim Shaw's Thrift Store Paintings?" Anyway, I looked up your work and saw that what was so interesting about it was that it was so specific to the psyche of a culture, simultaneously revealing and incomprehensible, but more importantly it



Top: *Untitled (Aerial roots horizontal)*  
2009  
Pencil on paper  
(134.5 x 204 cm)

Bottom: *Untitled (Ripped up face)*  
2009  
Oil on canvas  
(151.77 x 116.84 cm)

Both courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee gallery, London

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was a kind of anthropological study. Can you tell me a little about what initially drew you to collecting these paintings?

**JS:** It was the psychotic nature of what they 'did' reveal. What I imagine is interesting about the work, beyond the work itself, is you have no idea of why these things exist, so you are forced to project onto them, whatever you think they are. You are better off not knowing in some cases anyway. The other thing is if you buy one of my paintings you are getting one of a thousand or a hundred or whatever. You get one of these you are probably getting one of twenty at the most, so you are getting the best the person has to offer. Obviously they are going to pour a lot into those few paintings.

**AH:** One curious overlap in the current Oism project is the Paintings Found In Oist Thrift Stores. It is at points such as this that as a viewer the continuous mix of images copied from pop culture, images you draw from your own dreams, and the paintings that you find become impossible to separate out or tell apart. What is the status of these works? Do you paint them or are they found canvases?

**JS:** A few of them are painted over really boring thrift store paintings. Most of them are painted from scratch, at my suggestion, by people that work for me. I would just give them a sentence and they would try and interpret it. Sometimes I intervene. The problem with acrylic paint is it is too bright and things you find in a thrift store have been scuffed up, so we have to scrape the new paintings on the floor. The edges are the most telling thing as they are bright white so I have to airbrush them with a dingy colour to dull them down. Sometimes I actually put holes in them and crease them to lend them some authenticity. It was a way of filling in some gaps of Oist history that hadn't been illustrated in any direct way.

**AH:** Many of your projects unfold over a number of years, being exhibited at various stages of completion. With the enormity of the current endeavour can you foresee an end point? How will you know



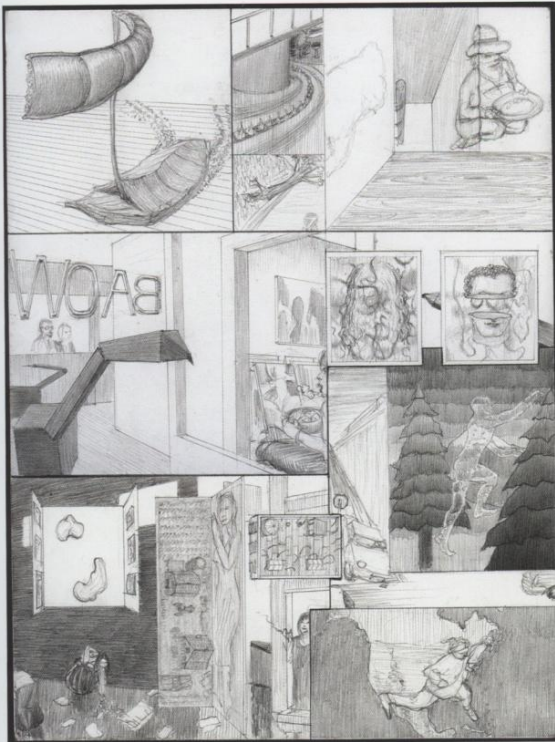
Above: *A study in Oist integrated movement*  
Exhibition views  
Simon Lee Gallery

*Both courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee gallery, London*



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Left: **Dream Drawing**  
2008  
Pencil on paper  
(30.5 x 22.9 cm)

*Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee gallery, London*

Above: **Claw Grabber (with knotted rocks)**  
- Andy Holden  
2007  
Mixed media

Right: **Boy Fishing** - Andy Holden  
2007  
Photograph and oil paint  
*Both Courtesy of the artist*



when it is finished?

**JS:** I don't know when it will finish. The end point is when I write the book of Oism and maybe I have to take drugs or something to get into that state. There is an academic scientist in Canada who can put electrodes in part of your brain to act as a stimulus for visions of talking to God. So I figured there is either that or DMT or something.

**AH:** Do you think that with this kind of immersion in the project that there is a possibility that you might convince yourself?

**JS:** Sure. Why not? I mean, I wouldn't convince myself of this actual religion, but I might convince myself of another religion. I'm likely to remain outside, but who knows what L. Ron Hubbard's first goals for Scientology were?

**AH:** The film *The Right Of The 360 Degrees* depicts a group of established artists and critics acting out a ritual of admittance to their ranks, whilst playing

musical instruments constructed from large-scale body parts. To what extent does this work and the Oist religion as a whole function as a pastiche of the art world? The Oist banner – 'A faith for the faithless' – is perhaps apt?

**JS:** Well I'm definitely faithless – it is one thing I don't share with cults. As regards the art world pastiche, it was pretty much accidental. I had to cast that piece out of people I know who could show up and play instruments, and that included Stephen Prina, Mike Kelly, and others. With pieces such as the *Donner Party* it is more intentional. I am always a tenuous member of the art world. It's a really chancy thing that you are going to succeed in the art world, and the chance that I would was pretty unlikely because I am not really an artist who is particularly focused on one thing, which is the more normal recipe for success. I am still waiting to be pinched and to wake up from the dream to find it all never really happened.