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### Art World

# Studio Visit: Artist Jim Shaw on the Music He 'Blasts' to De-Stress at Work, and the Documentaries He's Binge-Watching

Shaw's new exhibition "Hope Against Hope" is currently on view at Simon Lee in London.

**Katie White**, November 13, 2020



Jim Shaw in his studio, 2020. Photo by LeeAnn Nickel.

Jim Shaw's studio brims with vintage magazine and newspaper cut-outs, posters, comic books, and gimmicky advertisements, all of which the artist began collecting as a teenager in Michigan in the 1960s. Shaw's provocative tableaux are a confetti of this image archive, where scenes plucked from vintage Americana collide with fantastical monsters, political caricatures staged amid antique theatrical elements, with a kick of horror kitsch.

"Hope Against Hope," Shaw's current exhibition at Simon Lee in London, is a playground of these satirical and, at times, dystopian, references. When it comes to politics, Shaw's sentiments are clear. In one painting, a turgid Napoleonic Donald Trump and First Lady Melania are shown riding down a golden escalator into Dante's Ninth Circle of Hell.

Other images are a tragi-comic wink at the pandemic: a prim-and-proper blond woman in a pink '50s swing dress stares adoringly at a roll of toilet tissue in the matching shade of pink—a nod to the American toilet paper shortage earlier this spring.

Recently, Shaw offered us a glimpse into his studio life, where the mile-a-minute artist shared what it's like to move his studio cross-country in the midst of a pandemic, and why he's binge-watching documentaries.





Jim Shaw, *Pandora's Box* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery.

**What are the most indispensable items in your studio and why?**

My reference files and library, because my work usually depends on being bounced off an image that reverberates with an idea, or mood, or a dense visual pun. The reference files come from old magazines —*Fortune*, *Playboy*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Women's Day*, *Look*, *Life*, etc.—which were published in the era when print was the main media, so a great deal of effort went into those images, especially the ads.

The library contains “fine” art catalogues, with a heavy emphasis on Surrealism, Pop, and more contemporary work; then unequal amount of books on comic book and cartoon artists, with a heavy emphasis on silver age DC; '50s horror (much of which was in the public domain and hence easily reproduced in the last decade), and political cartooning; then a number of historical or sensational books about stuff like the history of slavery, cotton, Jim Crow, redlining, various assassinations, the mafia and its entwinement with politicians and the CIA, corruption, tacit support for terrorists, financial chicanery involving the housing market, etc.



**Is there a picture you can send of your work in progress?**



Jim Shaw's in-progress work *Magical Thinking*, 2020.

**What is the studio task on your agenda tomorrow that you are most looking forward to?**

My studio is itself a work in progress as my family is currently attempting a move from LA to Connecticut, which is closer to our daughter's school, and where my wife, Marnie Weber, grew up. COVID made this very difficult, in part because the real estate here suddenly became "hot" with people moving out of New York City, and by making travel risky. So my studio will be partially packed into a pod to be moved to our large rental here in Connecticut so I can work on the next show.

Finalizing the current exhibition, plus the strain of moving and the stresses of the election and the pandemic have, for the first time I can remember, forced me to take some time off, and stressed me into my first old man's disease, so I'm currently a semi-invalid. The studio task that I'm most looking forward to is simply being able to draw a little. Otherwise, it's something I never do: binge-watching documentaries. I wish there were another season of *Hamilton's Pharmacopeia*.



Jim Shaw, *The Master Mason* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery.

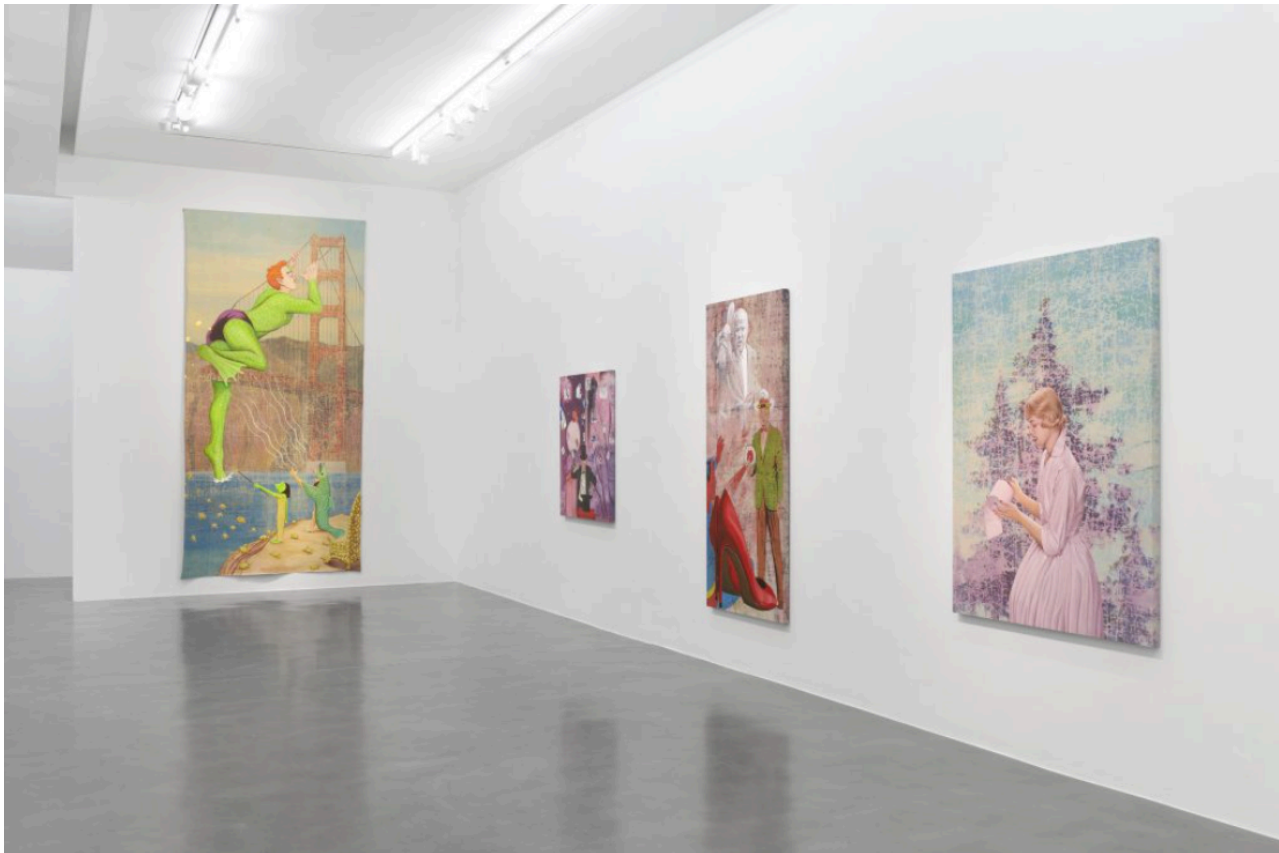
**What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?**

I prefer to play music while I work. Silence, especially when doing something really hard, like painting a straight line, can be stressful. In the past I have had assistants, originally because I am a lousy carpenter, later, to avoid eye strain and repetitive motion doing large pencil drawings, I'd take over when the basic tracing was done, but eventually, I ended up doing the last 25 percent. More recently, it's been the tracing and some underpainting that my assistants do, which means either wearing headphones or finding stuff that doesn't annoy them... I listen to '60s psychedelic compilations (which have blossomed of late for the same reason as '50s horror comics), '20s and '30s gospel, country blues and jazz, Scott Walker, Cathal Coughlin, doo-wop, "classical" (from Stravinsky to Penderecki), Martin Carthy and the Incredible String Band, John Cale, and a lot of other stuff. With the new studio, I will be working alone which means I will be able to blast out the music at whatever level I want.

**What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?**

God, this is a hard one, since I admire everything from Bosch to Barnett Newman. I admire artists who stick to it no matter what. I am biased, in terms of first viewing something, toward obvious painterly skill, so I have to hold first impressions in check since there are many skilled artists with little to say. Also, in lockdown, I'm looking at art on Instagram; I know from the experience of posting my own work, there are aspects that work well person but don't function on a cell phone screen. I guess I have a distrust of art that is signature, where each piece is a slight variation on a winning formula, but that may be because I'm incapable of such work and so my reaction could be jealousy. Also, there are artists who seem to be popular due not to talent but some combination of art world shenanigans. Again, jealousy could be at work in my resentment of said work, so I would say my life's philosophy is summed up in the Incredible String Band line "I know nothing, and know that I know nothing."





Installation view, "Jim Shaw: Hope Against Hope" at Simon Lee Gallery, London. Photo: Ben Westoby.

**Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?**

As far as artists, it's hard to say since the democracy of the internet brings in so many "unknowns" and older artists may not post at all. Tony Oursler posts many outre photos as well as his own installations. Jerry Saltz has a lot of funny stuff as well as things seen in exhibitions. I also follow the curator [Dan Cameron](#), who posts from some great exhibitions. There are also some good "outsider art" sites and retro-illustration sites I like.

**When you feel stuck in the studio, what do you do to get unstuck?**

I take a walk, either to come back with a fresh eye or as an idea generator.



Jim Shaw, *The Adoration* (2020). Photograph by Lee Ann Nickel.

**What is the last exhibition you saw (virtual or otherwise) that made an impression on you?**

Another tough one. I'd say it's kind of impossible to have an impression made online. It's been a long time since I've seen any art in person. The last things that shook me were a podcast about people in the psychedelic community latching onto QAnon conspiracies and a chunk of *The Social Dilemma*, a documentary about the dangers of social media that specifies the mechanics of dopamine depletion and how they are replenished by certain triggers, including conspiracy thinking. This cut close to home as I, too, am addicted to some of that thrill, always with a grain of salt, but still....

**If you had to put together a mood board, what would be on it right now?**

I've never made a mood board. I wouldn't want to represent my present mood of stress. If I wanted inspiration for coming art pieces, it would H-bombs, mafia figures, atomic scientists, the Kennedys, old musicals, Botticelli, and lots of unknown images, which I await pending the pod's arrival.