

Shaw, Jim. "1000 Words: Jim Shaw Talks about 'Entertaining Doubts,'" *Artforum* (March 2015): 244-247.

## ARTFORUM



Jim Shaw, *Not Since Superman Died (detail)*, 2014, acrylic on muslin, eight parts, overall 22' 6" x 50'.

1000 WORDS

### Jim Shaw

TALKS ABOUT "ENTERTAINING DOUBTS"

LIKE WILLIAM BLAKE, who wrote, "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's," Jim Shaw is compelled by a logic of his own design, inventing alternate realities as bulwarks against—and cautionary tales about—contemporary existence. With an incisiveness akin to Blake's, Shaw offers sharp insights into the complexities of global politics, economics, urban and environmental turmoil, the powers of organized faith, and human bondage. The worlds he creates via his drawings, monumental paintings, stage-set-like sculptures, "Dream Objects," and videos—all of which will be represented in "Entertaining Doubts," his twenty-thousand-square-foot exhibition at MASS MOCA, curated by Denise Markonish—are allegorical collisions of classical and popular, antic farce and Gothic drama. To Shaw, Blake's radical visions and the golden age of comic books are equally fertile ground for dealing with the grotesqueries of late capitalism.

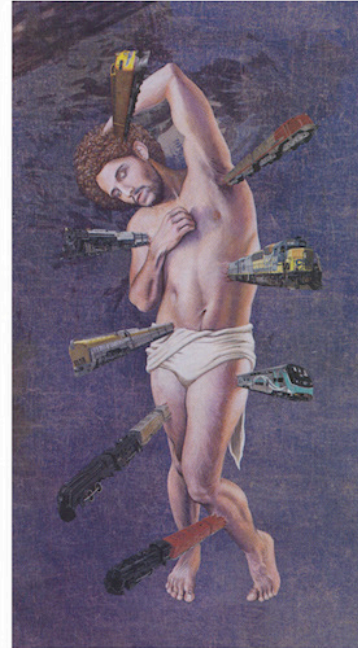
One of the pillars of the extraordinarily complex system Shaw has created is the fictitious religion Oism, a vernacular sect based on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American movements like Mormonism, Freemasonry, and Evangelicalism. Oism has provided Shaw with the narrative basis for, among other things, an unfinished prog-rock opera; videos *The Hole*, 2007, and *The Whole*, 2009, respectively depicting zombies and female-only new age rites; and, most recently, Oist scriptures packaged as comics. The comics idea generated a profusion of works that excavate the accidental surrealism of DC comics—the stylized line, forced perspective, and psychedelic, hero-centered plot twists. Shaw's new "Xerox Collages" appropriate lines originally inked to emphasize Superman's swoosh, explosions, or a flying fist; lifted from their original sources, they are recombined, redrawn, and morphed to paradoxically AbEx effect. Appropriation of a sort also surfaces in Shaw's playfully modified copies of Blake's own drawings, rendered in the style of DC artist Wayne Boring, and in his "Forces of Nature" works, where comic books again provide source imagery. At



Left: Jim Shaw, *The Rhinegold's Curse*, 2014, acrylic on muslin, three parts, overall 8 x 12'.

Right: Jim Shaw, *Trains A Comin' Through*, 2014, acrylic on muslin, 87 x 48'.

Below: Jim Shaw, *Dream Object* ('At a LACE meeting with Liz Taylor in some warehouse I realized I could make (as 'Dream Objects') stuff I'd not dreamed of like the giant ear lounge chair...'), 2007, foam, upholstery, wood, 29 x 96 1/2 x 46'.



MASS MOCA, the intimate scale of these works on paper will find its exaggerated counterpoint in *Not Since Superman Died*, 2014, an installation for which Shaw created a twenty-three-by-fifty-foot painting that sets multiple iterations of an expiring Man of Steel against a moody Metropolis backdrop. Shredded into strips, the painting will festoon one of the museum's capacious galleries. In another installation, tentatively titled *The Issue of My Loins*, 2015, Shaw blows up the outline of Superman's underwear to create a negative space for psychological projection: the strictures of gender conformity, repression, death, castration... It's all there in Superman's crotch.

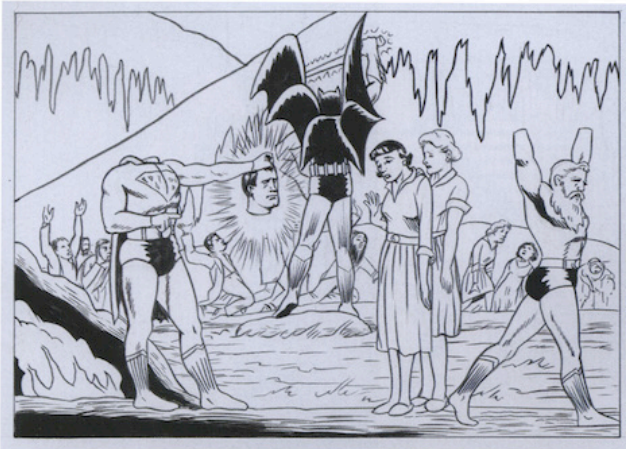
—Catherine Taft

**I WISH THAT I WERE WILLIAM BLAKE**—you know, that would be my dream job. But part of what allowed Blake to exist was his ability to live under the worst circumstances in order to pursue his art. I'm a lot more middle-class than that, and I'm not really a visionary, but I can have visions.

Since 2004, I've been making paintings on old theatrical backdrops, and when I was looking at MASS MOCA's architectural plans, I had this idea for doing a backdrop work in which a variety of dying Supermen would be painted into this sort of wistful, sad view of Manhattan—Central Park on a foggy evening, but in shards, to pull viewers into the space. That idea was eventually merged with an earlier idea for a body of work, *Not Since Superman Died*, a meditation on death.

One of the figures in the painting is based on the logo of Swan Song Records, Led Zeppelin's label. It's a fallen angel—in other words, Lucifer—and originally comes from *Evening* [1869–70], by the American painter William Rimmer. Another is modeled on Christian Griepenkerl's Prometheus, eternally chained to a rock with an eagle eating his liver. So there are dying figures from art history, but some are just dying Supermen I made up from scratch and rendered in the style of Wayne Boring, who was the primary artist for DC's Superman comics in the 1950s and early '60s, when I first started reading this stuff. This is followed by a room of collages made from images of apocalyptic natural forces out of '60s comics.





From left: Jim Shaw, Blake/Boring, 2010, ink on paper, 9 × 12". Jim Shaw, Blake/Boring, 2010, ink on paper, 12 × 9".



There's also going to be a hallway gallery at MASS MOCA that ends with a blow-up of Superman's groin. Hung on the walls will be a series of lessons, with teacher's corrections, that my father did sometime during my childhood, I think, but that we only found after he died. They were part of the Famous Artists School's correspondence course, something that was advertised in every comic book and in magazines like *Popular Mechanics*. My grandfather was a professional artist and an accomplished watercolorist, while my father was a package designer, and he tried most of his life to paint as his father did, but with little success. For me, it was a kind of family secret I'd unearthed.

In the DC comics of my youth, Superman would wear a sort of bathing suit, like a Speedo, and his groin was always rendered as a black void, as if the artists were trying to get around the fact that he had genitals. So the blow-up will have an excision—a void—where there would normally be a swath of black ink. As you approach this excision you'll eventually see glowing Kryptonite rocks—Kryptonite radiation was a major part of Superman's story lines that was added after his early years. When he was invincible, the stories had no real human problems, so he needed pain and mortality. At first, he was vulnerable to green Kryptonite, but with endless issues to churn out, and in need of variety, the editors added five other colors that each had a unique effect on him.

My father's health was declining when I initially thought of this piece—and for me, Superman was always a father figure. He looked like a middle-aged guy, with this very wide waist (added by DC, who hired Boring in the late '40s to

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redesign him from his original thin-waisted, happy-young-man form, to avert the threat of a lawsuit by Superman's original creators). His face was that of a worried dad. When Superman loses his powers, it's a kind of castration complex by proxy. Using Superman to come to terms with the deaths in my life seems appropriately schizoid for me.

All of my recent Superman works are linked to my ongoing body of work about Oism, the religion I invented, though I have to go back a bit to explain how. Around seven or eight years ago, I started planning a prog-rock opera called *The Rinse Cycle* that would dramatize Oist mythology the way the *Ring* cycle dramatizes Germanic mythology, but inspired as much by Yes's *Tales from Topographic Oceans* and the Osmonds' *The Plan* as by Wagner. Since then, I've produced works related to *The Rinse Cycle*, like a 2012 backdrop painting of the same title, featuring a washing-machine interior over a desert scene, with a number of '60s wigs floating about. It's meant to evoke '70s concept-album art.

Jim Shaw, *The Rinse Cycle*, 2012, acrylic on muslin, 12' 6" x 19' 2"



That will be among the large backdrop pieces at MASS MOCA, and there will be four videos that I made for the opera's light show, each with its own elemental theme: earth, water, air, fire. But the opera is still an unfinished work, in need of more time or money than I've had.

Since writing is not my forte, it occurred to me that I could chronicle the history of Oism through four comic books, and using this visual form, I could lay out the groundwork for the opera. In order to procrastinate, since I wasn't feeling up to the task of creating these comics—and to think in the visual language of brushed ink lines, rather than the shaded pencil photorealist style I was good at—I spent some time combining Boring's work and Blake's drawings. As visionary artists the two were completely different—one was basically fulfilling the needs of his corporate parent, DC Comics, while the other was an actual visionary who represented a personal and unique set of fantasies based on real visions. But both were creating sequential narratives about fantasy worlds and rendering forces of nature, mists and steam and things like that. Boring—that's an interesting name—was very stylized, and I thought that in some weird way I could make a connection between his bodily stylizations and Blake's. So I began doing all these ink drawings of Blake pieces in the style of Boring, and also various forces of nature. Some of these will be at MASS MOCA, too—one shows Moses holding up the Ten Commandments while Supermen-heralds blow their trumpets. Another, set in hell, has a decapitated Superman proffering his head to Lois Lane as Batman-Satan lords over lost souls.

Last year, I had the idea for an Oist Apocalypse—another book of Oism, which would be written by Oism's prophet, Annie O'Wooten, after a group of church businessmen wrest control of the religion from her in the 1880s. And so I've been doing a bunch of work that revolves around that. It gives me the opportunity to insert things like Blake's satanic mills, the robber barons, and slavery into my work, to make up mythical beasts and other fantastical imagery that refracts the Industrial Revolution and the dehumanizing aspects of modern life that derive from the schism it started. Most of these are still in my head, but *Decapitated Okapi 1*, *Decapitated Okapi 2* and *Trains A Comin' Through!* [both 2014] are finished examples. All of it—this imagery of the corporate depredations of an earlier era—functions as a stand-in for what's happening today.

I'm veering more toward the grotesque the older I get, and my art was already pretty grotesque to begin with. And to me, the biggest grotesquerie is that we accept living with the naked lunch—the realization that in order for us to lead our privileged lives in the West, someone across the globe is digging up coltan by hand and enduring a horrible existence. I'm as guilty as everyone else of driving a car and using new gadgets. What makes our lives comfortable could be destroying the earth or allowing despots to despoil other countries because they control the material that we need for our high-tech stuff to work. That, to me, is the hardest horror to deal with. And it's going to keep surfacing in my artwork, I think. □

*"Jim Shaw: Entertaining Doubts" opens at MASS MoCA in North Adams, MA, Mar. 28.*