

# METRO PICTURES

Saltz, Jerry. "How Jim Shaw Birthed a New Era of Appropriation," *NYMag.com* (December 8, 2015).

## NEW YORK



*Jesus and Babies Over Mountain Pool Landscape, Thrift Store Painting*

Magpie-eyed artist Jim Shaw has spent most of his career in the shadows of his good friends and colleagues Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy. He recently told *The New Yorker* that that he played "Poncho" to the late Kelly's "Cisco Kid." Now the New Museum is giving Shaw his time in the sun with an excellent, full-fledged three-floor retrospective, "The End Is Here," which examines his eccentric activities and includes him functioning simultaneously as collector, curator, and artist. This is not altogether unusual for artists of his generation. Yet Shaw is his own breed of appropriation artist who both does and doesn't fit his generation. His appropriation has a distinct, self-effacing quirky generosity about it — something encyclopedic, delirious, manic that helped perpetuate and detonate lots of subsequent ideas about styles of two-dimensional rendering, including calendar and fashion illustration, pulp fiction and pinup depiction, porn, and other semi-looked-down-on or low approaches to art. Shaw's activities can be seen to presage artists like John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, Lisa Yuskavage, Karen Kilimnik, Sean Landers, and others — all of whom explored then-unused visual painterly information. When Kilimnik and Peyton especially first appeared, their styles were ridiculed as too twee, girly, fashion-y, or childish. Currin was seen as kitsch; Yuskavage as a maker of cheesy, candy-colored Russ Meyer pictures. Indeed, Luc Tuymans's wan-looking paintings initially struck many as only flat-footed illustration. Even if he wasn't able to make it to the blue-chip promised land that awaited many of these other artists, Shaw blew open the doors of painting. And the New Museum has made it even easier to see how pivotal Shaw is by going the extra mile and reinstalling a 1991 show of Shaw's, one the best gallery exhibitions of that decade, perhaps of the last 25 years, "Thrift Store Paintings," at Metro Pictures, a show that released these and thousands of other off-the-wall pictorial genres into the world, many still having repercussions. Artists who spend time here even today will discover *still*-untapped optical genres.



*Topless Artist Paints Nude*, Unknown artist

In September 1991, in a moment of incredible instability and change in the art world, in the wake of the 1980s market fizzle and gallery closings, new spaces opening (most of the galleries now called “big” or “blue-chip” were either then nonexistent or only in their nascent phase in this economic and philosophic birthplace nebulae of a generation); amid recession and coinciding with a new generation taking the stage and changing aesthetic directions, Shaw, now 63, curated “Thrift Store Paintings.” I still remember how agog artists were by this Green Street Metro Pictures Gallery show. I was, too; still am. (Just last night, *L.A. Times* writer Carolina Miranda, artist William Powhida, and I tweeted Shaw “Thrift Store” images to one another for an hour.)



Installation view at Shaw's "The End is Here" at the New Museum

In "Thrift Store Paintings," Shaw followed in the footsteps of greats like Duchamp, Picabia, Enrico Baj, Asger Jorn, and Jean Dubuffet, and, closer to the present, Martin Kippenberger, Mike Kelley, and others who either altered ready-made paintings, presented them as unmediated material that needed to be seen, or just went and commissioned paintings by others (pace Kippenberger and John Baldessari). "Thrift Store Paintings" was a wall-to-wall installation of 200 paintings, all of them secondhand, bought at swap meets or yard sales, scavenged from the trash, found in flea markets or on the street. The sight is stunning: All these earnest outsiders, amateurs, aspirants, wannabe-artists, hams, hopefuls, moms painting kids, perverts with brushes; all these people who've had a close encounter of the artistic kind and against all odds given voice to this individual vision in a style that is astonishingly singular — made up of 100 other ideas but twisted in such a way as to make each one of these works one-of-a-kind, the only of their species, but, here at the New Museum, in the light of this art context, may be able to reproduce themselves in the work of other astute artists who may glean some special density or essence. Perusing this work at the New Museum, I surmise that many of these people only made *one* painting, and that *this is it!* Cheesy, sleazy, flat-footed, fervent, or whatever, this gives the gallery a sense of being a sacred garden, sanctuary, or redemptive. There are pictures of the strangest, most exciting, loving, and odd-duck kind. A Dapper Dan in safari outfit with no crotch tries to woo a pinup vixen; religious pictures include a glowing Jesus, the prophet Zoroaster holding a great book, crucifixions, and saints. There's a mustached *Cosmic Blonde Girl With Liquid Universe* and *Ball Point Defacing*. (Shaw titles every work in impeccable deadpan.) In addition to more bizarre portraits than you'll see in the best museum Mannerist exhibitions, there's my favorite painting of all: a black woman in a maid's uniform spraying water through a garden hose at two white kids waving from a second-story Los Angeles-like house. This picture makes you travel universes of pathos, hate, love, blind steps falling in American daylight. Then there are the sex pictures. I fancy many made by clueless men exploding with hormones and yet unable, for any number of reasons, to attract or seduce anyone of the opposite sex. In addition to a woman in a red room wearing matching red bra and panties, a pink-skinned pinup with a cigarette-holder, the strangest of all is a group of former First Ladies — Nancy Reagan, Betty Ford, and others — explicitly exposing their genitals. Making these pictures stranger still, each is mounted on hinges, so should an unwanted visitor enter, the picture can be flipped to the wall. The reverse side is a pretty landscape. It's like Jacques Lacan, who owned Courbet's *Origin of the World*, kept the painting behind a drawn curtain that he'd open. Shaw opened one of the last curtains to painting, the one that makes you realize that all artists are outsiders working from their own inner needs, inside and aware of, but also *outside* of, art history. Sadly, this curtain scares many artists these days, and they step into safer known domains of art. The implication being that if they step through this curtain and closer to the further shores of painting, to work that is more their own, eccentric, personal, or individual, art that doesn't fit neatly into whatever the latest trend of abstraction or figuration is — be it all-over intellectually justifiable abstraction that critics, curators, and collectors can process in an instant, or photographic-derived, Richter-referencing figuration — artists who go their own way risk not having "successful careers."



Christian Lit Material from Jim Shaw's "The Hidden World," Collection of religious and pedagogical materials.

Next to the "Thrift Store Paintings," a goldmine of optical information is in another gallery of material that includes hundreds, if not thousands, of examples of posters, pictures, photographs, illustrations — anything you can imagine, including massive banners hanging from the ceiling — of all sorts of bizzaro-world ephemera, be it religious, cult, UFO, pedagogical, fliers for self-made prophets, people who predicted the end of the world, comet-worshippers, Satanists, tarot masters, utopias, dystopias, anatomy books, hermetic diagrams, alchemical pictures, T-shirts, weird record album covers, and much, much more. Every item in this walk-in cabinet of visual ontology contains yet more still unpacked pictorial information to be mined by anyone willing to take the chance.

It's fantastic that the New Museum has allowed Shaw so much rope. But it's not a surprise. This has become something of a happy habit here. As with so many of its shows in the last couple of years, even with its horrible, claustrophobic, Chelsea-gallery-like space, the exhibitions have been commendable, adventurous, and gnarly. This museum's shows and curators would be seen in far more heroic light were its space not so problematic. (Some giving millionaire, *please, please* fund the raw loft building that the Museum already owns next door but doesn't have the budget to run so these poor curators can come out of the dark!) Beyond that, "The End Is Here" makes me wish some museum somewhere would name Shaw an adjunct curator and allow him to curate shows. Like these! I can think of other artists who have this maniacal eye for overlooked, discounted, outside-the-mainstream optical material (artists like Oliver Wasow, Brad Phillips, Lucy Dodd, Carl Ostendarp, or writer Rabih Alameddine come immediately to mind). The other great thing about the Shaw show is that it loosens the highly professional-theoretical-canonical party line that many museums keep such a tight hold on. Nowadays, we're too used to having to endlessly process shows through filters of theory, explication, jargon, text-heavy wall labels, and all the rest. Everything has to fit in, with every artist trying to make the latest art-historical micro-milli move. Yet artists come to their art in myriad ways, not just through the academic pedagogic theoretical methodologies or models. Finally, lest anyone counter that while Shaw is a great curator-collector, he's any less of an artist: Spend time in the gallery containing the tip of the iceberg of his extraordinary bountiful "My Mirage" series of paintings, drawings, collages, castings, and assemblages (his own Matthew Barney-like "Cremaster" epic), and you'll see what Anthony Quinn, in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, meant when he described his fecund giving, saying, "I am a river to my people." So has Shaw been to his.