

METRO PICTURES

Lehrer, Adam. "American Culture Is At War With Itself In Artist Jim Shaw's New Exhibition At Metro Pictures," *Forbes.com* (November 14, 2017).

Forbes



Jim Shaw, *Miss Universe*, 2017, Acrylic on muslin.

When ever a new Jim Shaw exhibition comes through New York it always feels to me like it's been far too long since I saw the influential artist's work in person. In reality, it was only two years ago that Shaw was subject of a fascinating solo retrospective at the New Museum. That exhibition, *The End is Here*, saw the artist put his extensive archive of collected ephemera alongside his own extended body of work of paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations. That exhibition offered a clear definition of Shaw's approach to fine art. Shaw is fascinated by the vernacular of American visual language: art history, comic books, sub-cultural underground iconography, collectible objects. He often uses the images of an American past to define an American present. While people often give Shaw's late friend, CalArts classmate, and former Destroy all Monsters bandmate Mike Kelley the credit he deserves for progressing notions of what contemporary art could be, Shaw's importance isn't mentioned as often. I lament this, and I think what discrepancy comes from is that Kelley worked in a slew of mediums that have been lavished with more critical importance over the last 25 years. He painted, sure, but he was equally known for his work in video, performance, installation and photography. Shaw, on the other hand, is primarily a painter, draughtsman and sculptor.

But even working within those historical mediums, there are few artists equally adept at simultaneously erasing the cultural and historical meanings of imagery while imbuing that imagery with truths much larger. The New York gallery Metro Pictures has a long relationship with Jim Shaw, and their current exhibition showing Shaw's most recent paintings, drawings, sculptures and one video piece is their 14th (!) Shaw exhibition to date. It's also one of his most immediately stunning body of works that I can remember, and testament both the artist's eternal growth and his dizzying work pace. Every piece in the show was made in 2017..



Jim Shaw, *Three Bells*, 2017, acrylic on muslin with basswood and fabric.

The paintings on view grip aesthetically. Virtuoso rendered, humorous in content, and bizarre in form, Shaw's images work one-dimensionally. Directness is a virtue in our contemporary culture. With information overloads, false narratives, and political bile force fed to us every time we hear an alert ring on our iPhones, Shaw seems to be working with an immediacy that has always been a part of his work, true, but feels amplified in this new series.

Shaw has a way, however, of burying hidden meanings inside of images that at surface level seem like they could be easily defined. The painting *Miss Universe*, for example, looks to be a surreal image of a pageant winning woman approached on the beach by some four legged mammal creature in business casual attire. But the image is in fact Shaw's rendering of the Greek myth *The Rape of Europa*. Europa was a Phoenician woman (after whom the continent Europe was named) who the king of gods Zeus grew sexually obsessed with. Zeus literally kidnapped the woman and raped her, impregnating her with the mythic King Minos. In the painting, the beautiful Europa is the pageant woman, washed ashore and at mercy of Zeus, who has emerged on Earth as a Minotaur. The contemporary allegorical possibilities within the image are endless.

By illustrating the myth with contemporary imagery, Shaw could be suggesting that by comforting ourselves with mindless joys and entertainment (like pageants) we have put ourselves at the mercy of indifferent, callous gods. Zeus could be a stand-in for the rises of neo-Fascism, the Alt-Right, and Trumpism, and who could ignore the fact that Trump owns the Miss America pageant? I highly doubt that Shaw was unaware of that delightful fact.

In many of the works, American culture seems to be at war with itself, with the world, and with history. In *The Great Whatsit*, a laptop screen opens while three suburban women look upon in awe in a sequence that reminds one of the typical Spielberg Oner shot. We have lost our interest in the physical reality, Shaw suggests, and have placed our inspiration in a fickle machine. A machine that offers us information which we in turn curate to inflate our own preexisting ideas about the world. Shaw uses an image that skews aspirational but belies it with utterly sinister subtext.

In *Daniel's Dream #1*, a man trapped inside of a Hummer H2 emerges on a beach with a violent ocean crashing behind him. With Trump's pulling out of the Paris Climate Accord, it's impossible to not read this as a searing indictment of how we've let, and yes continue to let, corporate America destroy this planet so it can keep inflating its annual returns.



Jim Shaw, *The Wig Man*, (2017), styrofoam, aquaresin, fiberglass and hair.

Trump is all over this exhibition. With most artists, I would find the constant repetition of the President's diabolical mug heavy-handed at best and sub-intellectual at worst. But with Shaw, it's impossible to ignore the fact that Donald Trump is the apex of the American cultural decay that Shaw has been warning us about for decades. Here is an artist who has always examined how commercial imagery and pop culture have been used to dumb down the populace into a grievous, angry mob incapable of understanding nuance, or geopolitics, or sociology or worse. Shaw has seemed to recognize that America has been losing its empathy, burying itself into its idiosyncrasies and paving the way for fringe interests to emerge as mainstream thought schools.

Trump's face is the archetypal ugly American: that horrific tan, that awful fake hair, and that hideous grimace bloated by narcissism and misinformation fed prejudice. And indeed, Trump's face is used as content in many of the drawings in the show. That awful image is abstracted and contorted in a multitude of ways, meting outwards and inwards, folding onto itself. That face has become emblematic of the toxicity that has existed in opposition and response to what we hoped America was on its way to becoming. Tolerance and neighborliness have given way to fear, rage, and a white male culture that has grown to see itself as emasculated and castrated. Indeed, Shaw's contemporary surrealism has become realism. The evil that he has recognized in the past has become apparent to everyone else, and his work feels as relevant as ever.

Though Shaw is often associated with his more conceptual fellow CalArts alumni; Kelley, Stephen Prina, and Richard Hawkins among them; his work actually sits more comfortably within contemporary Surrealism. Shaw filters his vast knowledge through his own sub-conscious, and through his dreams we become acquainted with a reality that we are often too anxious to confront. In Shaw's work, angst works as raw material. Surrealism has always been more interesting during times of political upheaval. Hans Bellmer created his fetish dolls as a means of holding onto his desires in the face of Nazi oppression. Francis Bacon's contorted and mutated human subjects were in response to the overwhelming death he confronted during World War 2. Now, the time of Trumpism and Steve Bannon and the Alt-Right, is the closest the United States has ever come to full on destruction, and Shaw is tapping into it directly. In the monochrome drawing *Study for Uncle Sam fighting cake*, Uncle Sam is quite literally fighting off being strangled by a piece of cake. That cake is the apathy born of the comforts that the American dream has made possible. And Shaw is both fascinated and terrified by what will happen if that cake wins.