

METRO PICTURES

Whittaker, Iona. "Jim Shaw," *Spike* (Winter 2018): 190-191.

SPIKE

Views

NEW YORK

190

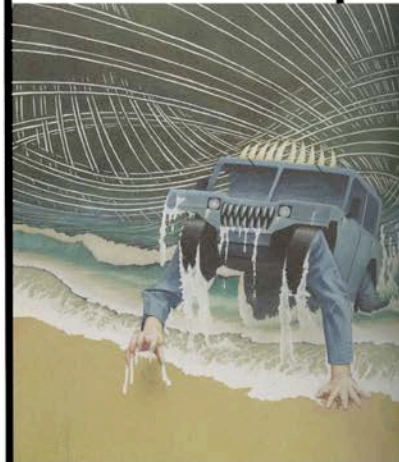


Jim Shaw
Metro Pictures
2.11. – 22.12.2017

A relentlessly curious pulp generalist, workaholic and draftsman of great technical and imaginative skill, Jim Shaw ('1952) absorbs anything and everything – tacky or erudite, recent or remote, real or mythological, suppressed or consumed – into his work. This makes him somewhat difficult to categorise; as Eddie Ruscha, the artist Ed Ruscha's son, once said: "Jim doesn't make art, he does Jim stuff." On the heels of his powerful retrospective at the New Museum in 2015, this exhibition of twenty-five works from 2017 was a further reminder of how an older generation of West Coast, CalArts-educated artists (Llyn Foulkes also comes to mind) can bring a welcome blast of irreverence to New York's often high-minded aesthetic environment.

It is hard to imagine a New York artist making a work that even comes close to, say, *The Ties that Bind* in which a wholesome couple is wearing matching knit turtleneck sweaters that transform, from the waist-down, into a mass of giant yellow ringlets. Blonde hair appears again in *Rationalism and Delirium*, this time coiled parasitically around the grey workings of a crane or drawbridge, vaguely reminding one of films like *King Kong* or *The Blob* in which some huge, misunderstood body wraps itself around the machinery of a city (it makes sense that Shaw worked in special effects for films before his artistic career took off). *Mystery Babylon*, meanwhile, depicts a glossy hamburger with arms and legs that appears to crawl forward toward the viewer.

Jim Shaw
Mystery Babylon, 2017
Acrylic on muslin, 122 x 122 cm



Jim Shaw
Daniel's Dream #1 (The Teeth of Steel), 2017
Acrylic on muslin, 112 x 134.5 cm

Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

A still greater sense of narrative is conveyed in *Miss Universe*. In Shaw's version of the myth of the rape of Europa she is sitting on a beach wearing a mauve dress and Miss Universe sash. Her neck and head have been replaced with a swirling galaxy (perhaps because Europa is also a satellite of the planet Jupiter). Zeus approaches as a predatory minotaur in a light brown suit, checking his watch. The figures are superimposed like cut-outs, while

the backdrop above the horizon line is a dim, vaguely patterned miasma of purplish and yellow swirls and crosses. Seamlessly rendered in acrylic, the galaxy head only emphasises the dreamlike strangeness of the scene; it also obliterates Miss Universe's most important features, exploding the beauty expected of her.

Without a whiff of earnestness, the exhibition made a good case for the curious pantheon of American culture that "Jim stuff" sums up. Two bizarre sculptures capped it off: *Head*, an oversized, faceless cranium mounted on a stick with floor-length, wispy blonde hair encircling a bald patch, and *Wig Man*, a large crawling figure covered entirely in different wigs. Hair is a recurring motif that Shaw often uses as a vehicle for the uncanny. Here his use of it has political overtones, too. The innermost room of the show was devoted to images of Donald Trump that are among the best caricatures of him so far produced. In the "Trump Distortions" series, the President's famous quiff is comically flattened, slicked or disheveled. The monochrome "Trump Chaos" series, meanwhile, does exactly what it says on the tin: whole canvases are stuffed with revolting, overlapping distortions of classic Trump expressions. There is no negative space left in these works, as if, metaphorically, it had been entirely supplanted by the adversity of Trump's presence. Dramatizing American anxiety has always been one of the artist's strengths; now it has been afforded new depths.

Iona Whittaker



Jim Shaw
Miss Universe, 2017
 Acrylic on muslin, 101.5 x 135.5 cm