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Installation view of *Michigan Stories: Mike Kelley & Jim Shaw* at the MSU Broad

EAST LANSING, Mich. — In a 2006 interview I conducted with Mike Kelley for the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, I asked if, after 30 years in Los Angeles, he still felt connected to his home state (as well as mine), Michigan. Kelley replied, "Oh yeah, I'm a Detroiter. There's no doubt about that. I'm much more of a Detroiter than a Los Angelino." This sense of connection is the foundation of *Michigan Stories: Mike Kelley & Jim Shaw* at Michigan State University's Broad Museum, a joint survey of Kelley and fellow Michigan native Jim Shaw, curated by the museum's director Marc-Olivier Wahler and assistant curators Carla Acevedo-Yates and Steven L. Bridges.

Kelley (born in 1954 in Wayne, Michigan) and Shaw (born in 1952 in Midland, Michigan) met in 1972 as undergraduate art students at the University of Michigan (U of M), where they formed a conceptual noise band, Destroy All Monsters, with two other art students, Cary Loren and Niagara. They left Michigan in 1976 for graduate school at CalArts. Both artists settled in Los Angeles, where they maintained their friendship until Kelley's untimely death in 2012.

For fans of Kelley and Shaw, *Michigan Stories* is a kind of origin story, a way to decipher the work of two multifaceted and prolific artists. It begins in Ann Arbor, with their collaborations at U of M and in Destroy All Monsters, before splitting into their separate but intersecting practices in California. What distinguishes the exhibition from standard biography is its representation of Michigan's visual and social culture as formative influences and unique phenomena. In Kelley's words, "It's a very particular place."

The backdrop of Detroit's economic collapse and social unrest accompanied by the failure of 1960s utopian ideals inform the artists' early work, especially that of Destroy All Monsters. Yet their disillusionment is coupled with their fascination with counterculture. Photographs and videos of band members, along with Xeroxed flyers and other ephemera point to the influence of figures such as Jack Smith (with whom Loren corresponded) and Andy Warhol, as well as European Dada — particularly in Kelley's and Shaw's improvisational performance *The Futurist Ballet* (1973).



Jim Shaw, "Untitled (Obliterated High School Self Portrait)" (2004)

The focus of the first gallery is *Strange Früt: Rock Apocrypha* (2000), an installation comprised of a video and four mural-sized paintings created by the Destroy All Monsters Collective (Kelley, Loren, Shaw). Executed in the style of travel postcards or advertisements, three murals depict local cultural icons and symbols: in "Greetings from Detroit," the Detroit skyline (with the monument "The Spirit of Detroit," 1958, by sculptor Marshall Fredericks at the center) is lined with musicians including The Stooges and Sun Ra, both significant influences on the artists; in "The Heart of Detroit by Moonlight," the proto-punk band, the MC5, and the comedian Soupy Sales are juxtaposed with figures such as Alice Cooper and Lester Bangs, as well as the Vernor's gnome (the winking mascot of the Detroit-made ginger ale); and in "Amazing Freaks of the Motor City," White Panther Party founder John Sinclair stands in front of a giant Uniroyal tire, which is located by the side of the I-94 freeway near Detroit. The fourth billboard, "Mall Culture," depicts the four band members in a courtyard of suburban Westland mall.

The line between sanctioned and subversive culture has always been porous in Michigan, a border state literally — with multiple entry points to Canada — and figuratively. The murals are compendia of the state's culture and counterculture: almost all Michigan natives should recognize at least some of the references. For non-natives, they unveil the weirdness that underlies Michigan's distinctive character and explain something of why the artists' home state warrants a museum-level examination in relation to their practices.

In an adjoining first-floor gallery, the collages and paintings Kelley made in college — some revisited several years later and collectively titled *Missing Time* — are exhibited along with previously unexhibited college drawings and slideshows of images and objects the artist collected and categorized, from his childhood on. Called *The Harems* (and originally shown in the Kelley-curated group show *The Uncanny* at the Tate Liverpool in 2004), the collections include clippings from fashion and porn magazines, nature scenes, and vinyl records.

Shaw is represented with a large gallery of his own work and another gallery featuring *The Hidden World* (1960s-ongoing), the artist's collection of didactic art and ephemera related to mostly non-secular belief systems, from such sources as secret societies, new-age spiritualists, fundamentalist and evangelical movements, and conspiracy theorists. Shaw explained by email, "My fascination with all the stuff began while in high school and college, as I began finding leaflets aimed at converting the young, and crackpot publications about UFOs"; raised Episcopalian, he discovered the 700 Club and the rituals of Christian fundamentalism through an illegal cable hookup while at U of M. Collected over nearly 50 years, the objects range from books, pamphlets, and didactic drawings to t-shirts, comic books, records, and anatomical drawings. (The exhibition also includes videos and other items on loan, most notably costumes from the Unarius Educational Foundation in El Cajon, California, that look like they belong at a Funkadelic concert.)



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The Hidden World is fascinating and disturbing, but not entirely unfamiliar. The religious fanaticism of so-called Christian and New Age cults persists in more marketable guises in mainstream Christianity across the United States, while the spirit of self-determination that impels many of these sects is central to American ideology. The collection draws attention to the spiritual inspiration that gave rise to so many sects, as well as the slippage between mainstream and apparently transgressive beliefs. Among the most impressive works in all of *Michigan Stories* is a suite of eight drawings dating from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s by Victor Houteff, who founded the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists in 1935, after breaking from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Houteff's restrained radicalism, gracefully depicted in his delicate drawings, mutated after his death into the Branch Davidians, the church behind 1993's Waco, Texas, massacre that left over 75 members dead.

Works in *The Hidden World* such as Houteff's pose a classification challenge to audiences. As MSU Broad director Marc-Olivier Wahler told me of a didactic banner, "It's impossible to see it as an artwork because it has to do with that ideological, didactic material, with the purpose of convincing people of the superiority of one belief over another. [...] At the same time you cannot see it as an ordinary object because it has been done by very, very talented artists who were commissioned to do it. So what do you do with that?" For Wahler, the answer is ambiguous, but the question parallels those Shaw and Kelley raise with their own art. He continues, "We leave this to people to play around with that. And for me this is what contemporary art is about, to give the power, the responsibility to people to deal with their own interpretation, with their ability to integrate it in their own sphere and in their own world."

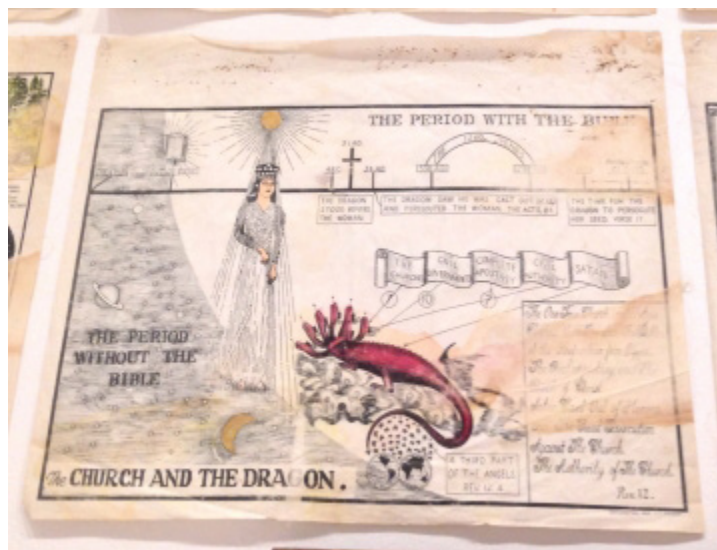
Shaw's artwork, in an expansive gallery near *The Hidden World*, plays with the ambiguity between reality and imagination or dreams, as in his *Dream Drawings* and *Dream Objects*. Some, such as "Dream Object (Butt-head bucket)" (2007) — a transparent head-shaped container with an indentation in the back, filled with pinkish matter — verge on the ridiculous. In many, though, elements from waking life, including Shaw's daily routine and surroundings, interweave with the strange and fantastic.

A series of paintings and sculptures merge his interest in mythology with references to his childhood in Midland, home of the Dow Chemical Company. For example, the painting "The Blood of Fafner" (2013) draws on the character of Fafner, a giant who transforms himself into a dragon, in Richard Wagner's epic opera *The Ring Cycle*, as well as the Norse myth of Fáfnir, the son of a dwarf king who is transformed into a dragon because of his greed; an abstracted figure rendered in blood red is surrounded by a green "wreath" of Dow logos.

My Mirage (1985-91), a series of mixed media works, showcases Shaw's love of comic books and underground comix. It tells the story of Billy, a sort of alter-ego to Shaw, born in the 1950s in a Middle American town called Midville. Cycling through diverse fine-art and vernacular styles (i.e., comic-book narratives; psychedelic abstractions; modernist design; an image of Jesus in a pizza in "Icon (Pizza Face)," 1990), the works illustrate Billy's descent into hippie hedonism and eventual transformation into a Christian fundamentalist.



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Detail of a drawing by Victor Houteff included in *The Hidden World*

While *My Mirage* is a refraction of Shaw's background and American culture in the latter half of the 20th century, the artist's invented religion, Oism, reflects his interest in the self-created religions that emerged in the mid-19th century and came to his attention while researching *My Mirage*. The mythology of Oism — supposedly founded in the 1800s in upstate New York (a hotbed of self-created religions) by Annie O'Wooten — evokes that of Mormonism and similar belief systems, with a significant switch to matriarchal leadership and a female deity.

Among the Oist works in *Michigan Stories* is "Octopus Vacuum" (2008), a 192 ¾ by 282 ½-inch acrylic-on-muslin mural of women in Sunday dress, overlaid with disembodied mustaches and vacuum tubes stretching in all directions, like tentacles. "Octopus Vacuum" mirrors the didactic art in *The Hidden World*, relaying Oist narratives through its iconography. A related work, "Into the Vacuum: Drones" (2007), is a collection of vacuum cleaners — covered in oozing foam and repurposed as musical instruments — arranged in front of a projection of swirling psychedelic colors, like those at a laser light show. In addition, the exhibition includes religion and ritual-themed videos, such as *The Initiation Ritual of the 360 Degrees* (2002), which depicts the artist's friends (including Kelley) in procession, playing instruments shaped like body parts.

A small gallery adjacent to Shaw's work features Kelley's installation *Mechanical Toy Guts* (1991-2012). One of his last completed works, it consists of sound boxes from children's toys arranged in two groupings: white sound boxes on a white textile, and black ones on a black textile. While the cacophony emanating from them evokes his experimental recordings in *Destroy All Monsters*, the piece also references his genealogical groupings of stuffed animals from the mid-1990s, which brought his first wide acclaim and incited intense audience reactions. The toys' deconstruction and the color-coordination (black and white) of the sound boxes are subtle and poignant reminders that Kelley's work, even at its most theoretical, is rooted in the real world.

Michigan's significance to Kelley's art is evident not only in the state's counterculture, which he considered hugely influential to his practice, but in its reactionary elements and general sense of failure — of society, life, and art to achieve their utopian promise. This sense of failure is discernible in much of his oeuvre, for instance, in his 1988 series *Seventy-Four Garbage Drawings and One Bush*, based on George Baker's Korean War-era *Sad Sack* comic strip, and in the exhibitions *Lumpenprole* (1991) and *Riddle of the Sphinx* (1991-92), in which stuffed animals under blankets create lumpy, abject surfaces, physical manifestations of Marx's theory of the debased *lumpenproletariat*.

In the 2000s, with such noteworthy projects (not included in the exhibition) as 2001's *Black Out* and *Mobile Homestead* (2005-ongoing), a partial model of his childhood home permanently installed next to the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, he began to revisit his roots more directly.

Among the most complex of his autobiographical interrogations is his 1995 work "Education Complex" (also not in the exhibition). Grounded in the theories of Repressed Memory Syndrome (RMS) and False Memory Syndrome (FMS), "Educational Complex" is an architectural model of every school Kelley attended, plus his childhood home, made from memory, with unremembered areas left blank.

In our 2006 interview, he explained, "Through Repressed Memory Syndrome it was just like any part [of the buildings] I couldn't remember would be a site of trauma and I repressed it. Now of course that's ridiculous, but through that theory you'd have a tendency to look at everything as: I can't remember it; something bad happened. Then how do you recover that memory? Well, I just invent them."

Michigan Stories features related works, including two 1995 drawings, "Notebook Sketch for Entry Way (Genealogical Chart) (Victim Culture)" and "Notebook Sketch for Entry Way (Genealogical Chart) (Welcome to Waste Land)," the former a family tree of abuse and the latter a diagram of regional associations (e.g., the NRA; Knights of Columbus; Rotary Club) beneath the artist's sarcastic take on Westland's welcome sign.

Two nearby sculptures from a 2002 series titled *Repressed Spatial Relationships Rendered as Fluid* (accompanied by working drawings, also 2002), were intended to resolve the problem of the unconnected spaces in "Educational Complex" by recreating the sites as mobiles floating in space. "Repressed Spatial Relationships Rendered as Fluid No. 5: John Glenn High School with White Panther Satellite" adds a purple cube — the color of the White Panther Party flag — to the structure, Kelley's personal stamp and a kind of "inserted" memory.

With RMS, the victim only knows his or her trauma in terms of an absence. Kelley fetishizes the unremembered areas, or absences, in these works by equating each one with repressed trauma. His sleight of hand acknowledges the apparent trauma without materializing it; in the place of "real" repression is a sort of spectral theater, a performance of the sinister crystallized in the absence of an actual memory. In this light, a 1981 painting in another gallery, "The Logo on a Can of Vernors Drawn from Memory," imbues the corporate symbol of a gnome with sinister undertones.

Two felt banners based on found college campus flyers, "Untitled (Pasolini)" (1990) and "Untitled (Christian Drama/Thursday Night)" (1993), are similarly ominous, while the series *Timeless/Authorless* (1995) reverses the dynamic, inserting traumatic narratives in unexpected places, like a staggering return of the repressed. For this series, newspapers such as the *Westland Eagle*, *Detroit Free Press*, and *Los Angeles Times* are reconfigured with high school or community event photos and unrelated texts — some, real restaurant reviews; others, horrific and absurd accounts of abuse.

The final gallery rejoins Kelley and Shaw, with early work from both artists, including Shaw's high school and college comic strips and graphic art, evidencing his expert draftsmanship, and a collection of Kelley's comix-style characters, influenced by R. Crumb, Ed Roth, and Basil Wolverton, drawn the summer before he left Michigan in 1976.



Jim Shaw, "The Blood of Fafner" (2013)



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One later work in the gallery, Kelley's "Missing Time Color Exercise #2" (1998), serves as shorthand for the artist's practice and the exhibition in general. The work intersperses issues of an adult humor magazine, *Sex to Sexty* (published 1964-1983), from Kelley's incomplete collection, with modernist monochrome paintings, all mounted on a large panel. Its visual tension issues from this basic aesthetic dichotomy. The "missing time" refers to the missing issues, suggested in the colors of the paintings; this, in turn, evokes the missing time of repressed trauma (institutional trauma, Kelley hints, caused by his Hans Hoffmann-based "push-and-pull" training at U of M).

Kelley's gestures undermine the dichotomy, not by elevating the "low" or lowering the "high" (he preferred the terms "allowable and repressed"), but by creating porous borders, exposing the one within the other. Hiding in plain sight — the unseen *Sex to Sexty*, the unseen trauma, the unseen untraumatized, the unseen imaginary. The unseen roots of the tree.

Michigan Stories: Mike Kelley & Jim Shaw continues at the MSU Broad (547 E. Circle Drive, East Lansing, Michigan) through February 25.