

METRO PICTURES

Sokol, Zach. “‘The Things I’m Interested in Have to Be Cheap and Strange’: Talking to Artist Jim Shaw,” *Vice.com* (January 10, 2016).

VICE



Installation view of *The End Is Here*

Jim Shaw's retrospective *The End Is Here* at the New Museum was my favorite exhibition of 2015, and I wasn't alone. The *New York Times* called the show "mind-blowing" and said his work was "gleefully demonic"—what other artist would showcase a painting of an elderly woman pushing cans of beer out her vagina in a museum, especially a painting the artist didn't make himself?

For those unfamiliar, Shaw is a Michigan-bred, 64-year-old contemporary artist who, alongside Mike Kelley, became known as one of the leading lights of the "lowbrow art" movement, which took inspiration from underground comics and other bits and bobs of both mainstream and fringe culture. Shaw, who was also a member of the protopunk band Destroy All Monsters (also with Kelley), has made his mark through multi-disciplinary work that's full of pop surrealist motifs and sometimes straight-up rips imagery and ideas from a million pop culture sources. For example, the biggest (and newest) works at his retrospective are giant theater backdrops that Shaw covered with a bricolage of imagery ranging from Casper the Friendly Ghost to a creature from Picasso's *Guernica* having sex with Dick Cheney.



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In the 90s, the artist was lionized for exhibiting a massive collection of paintings bought in thrift stores, small-town flea markets, and junkyards—amateur works, like the elderly woman giving birth to the can of beer. At his retrospective, this work was given its own floor titled “The Hidden World,” which also included a deluge of quirky ephemera Shaw picked up over the years, including religious tracts, tarot decks, and other cultural detritus. People often describe the objects in “The Hidden World” as representative of the Average American’s psyche, or a visual vernacular that speaks to the politics of Americans taste—the low-brow and the high. Shaw describes it differently though.

“I guess it’s stuff that has a sort of psychotic undercurrent to it—something that shows either a sad aspect of familiar life, an undercurrent of anger, something that’s pathetic,” Shaw told me over the phone from his home in LA. The same description could likely be applied to Shaw’s own work in the New Museum’s other two floors, which is funny, grotesque, and unsettling in almost equal measure. On the day before the retrospective ended, I talked to Shaw about his career and how young artists should navigate the sometimes cruel art market.

VICE: Can you tell me about making those new, giant theater backdrops that were included in the retrospective?

Jim Shaw: I came across them and they had this Americana content I wanted to speak to. I’ve been long interested in the political cartoon—both the ones that we grew up with as well as the 1800s when it was more related to history painting and it was sort of part of the way they were showing off their colored printing presses in the news media.

I’m working in a way that’s similar to the dream logic I tapped into for my *Dream Drawings* and *Dream Objects* work. Puns, visual puns, are an important part of political cartoons, and they’re an important part of the way dreams work. And the way that symbology functions visually. So I’m kind of working on that, and the history that’s built into these theatrical backdrops.

VICE: I remember reading an interview between you and Peter Saul where you said you kind of ceded total control for the retrospective.

Jim Shaw: Pretty much, but I did make sure the thrift store paintings and collected objects on view weren’t seen as my work and didn’t bleed into the rest of my work—because they’re not my work. That’s just stuff I collected.



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What I ceded to the control of the curators was the kinds of works that they were selecting. They didn't allow me to touch much of anything other than some of the thrift store paintings and the pieces in *The Hidden World* section, because it's not of any real value. I see myself as a curator. I mean I felt kind of guilty selling [the work I didn't make myself], but I couldn't afford to not sell it—it was spilling out of my basement.

VICE: What do you notice about your collecting habits today, compared to when you were younger?

Jim Shaw: Pretty much the same things, although, you know, like a screwed-up portrait has to be screwed-up in a more interesting way now versus when I first started collecting things. The things I'm interested in and collect have to be cheap and strange.

I'd say, anything that's got enough surrealism thrown in it will attract my eyes. Or something idiosyncratic like this painting I recently got of some old folks in wheelchairs in front of a pavilion of some sort. That one flirts the line of being too well painted, though, because it might be an art student painting rather than a strictly amateur painting.

VICE: Can you elaborate what you mean by "strange"?

Jim Shaw: I guess it's stuff that has a sort of psychotic undercurrent to it—something that shows either a sad aspect of familiar life, an undercurrent of anger, something that's pathetic... There are many different reasons to find something interesting.

VICE: What's your relationship like with the internet, generally?

Jim Shaw: I look at Google Images and I find things, bizarre images, accidentally, that way. I'm not on Facebook; I'm not on Instagram. My daughter wouldn't want me to be on Instagram. I like the random generation that you get off of Google Images. I looked up "Wrestling with God" yesterday and I found my own image on there. *[laughs]*

VICE: What sort of pop culture do you consume?



Collected thrift store paintings

Jim Shaw: I'm very interested in all the horror comics from the 50s that are out of [print] right now. I hardly read any fiction. I read mostly just research materials, lately stuff about the intertwining of slavery and the industrial revolution. I'm also reading a really lurid book about Hollywood in the 30s and 40s, as well as about Ronald Reagan's sex life. I'm constantly in need of new stuff, new ideas. This is problematic because it's hard to sell art that's new.

VICE: You've been vocal about your dislike of art fairs in the past. Do you still feel the same way?

Jim Shaw: Art fairs are the bane of my existence, really. Instead of being able to concentrate on a show and then another show, you have to concentrate on a gallery show as well as making artwork for art fairs. And the art fair has become the main venue now for artists to exhibit work, whereas before it was the show, where you got to make a coherent body of work with a coherent idea behind it.

I don't know that I'll ever attend another [art fair] because they're just depressing. I think Billy Al Bengston once said an artist going to an art fair is like a cow going to the slaughterhouse. You go there and you see how much art there is there, and you realize that your art that you slaved over is just a drop in the bucket. And you see what people spend their time looking at, which is, mostly, pieces that are by really well-known artist and have recognizable styles.

VICE: What about that is bad, exactly?

JIM SHAW: Well, if you're not that artist, you know, what are you doing there? It's like, you're just screaming for attention. Do you put florescent paint and giant arms that reach out to the viewers? It's not the best situation for subtlety.

VICE: What are ways that young artists can subvert the "look at me" attitude and still participate in the art market?

Jim Shaw: Well, you could find your way completely away from the art market. I'm not sure how to do that. You could live in a cheap place and make your art regardless of the market itself and then hope that someday someone finds your work and thinks it's interesting. That's the long route.



Jim Shaw's collected ephemera, "The Hidden World"

You could maybe make artwork that's not really for sale but somehow it exists on the internet. It could be interactive; it could be images; it could be writing. You'll never make a living doing that, as far as I know.

It's kind of a weird thing because when I was a young person, there wasn't really an art market, so it wasn't there for us to subvert. And now, there is. If you play your cards right, you could be one of those newly minted art stars for a little while. I just hope that you save up some money for when the prices drop.

VICE: To me, your work is distinctly American—from the reference points and influences to the things you've collected. What's your current relationship like with America and how do you feel as an America citizen?

Jim Shaw: I feel weird as an American citizen. I was just reading a long analysis of my work and this other artist, who I think was from Pakistan, in relation to religion, and they noted that one of the gallerists who had shown the Pakistani artist had been murdered. And that's not something that's likely to happen to me. It's like we're insulated and isolated in that sense, so we've got this delusional idea here of how we're being attacked, and all that violence is really occurring to other people elsewhere for the most part.

VICE: Do you feel guilty?

Jim Shaw: Guilty? Yeah, sure. I was born feeling guilty.

VICE: Are you a religious person today?



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Jim Shaw: Vaguely. I'm not a believer in any particular faith, but I think there is a sort of a faith that you can experience in abstract ways because you can tap into the same part of the brain that is being tapped into by people who are having ecstatic religious beliefs. It's hard to have zero religious beliefs because then what's the point?

VICE: Do you have any other new projects you can tell me about?

Jim Shaw: I'm still talking about doing a prog-rock opera. It's just time-consuming, and, you know, I'm always running out of time, as well as the money to pay my collaborators.

I've been thinking about doing [one painting] for a while that's gonna include a fat-cat robber-baron type who's dancing the can-can. Money is flowing out of the sort of symbolic vagina of the skirts that are flinging around, and the crowd is horrified of the vision of what's coming out of this fat cat.

VICE: What advice would you give you people who want to be a full-time artist but are also skeptical of the art market and institution?

Jim Shaw: My career came about accidentally, you know. If I hadn't gone to school with Mike Kelley, if I hadn't been a student of John Baldessari, etc.... I wasn't aggressive enough to attain a career in the art world. So I'd say be patient. I think the internet has got to be the gallery of the future, in some way. I just don't know how you'd make a living at it yet. Just don't spend a lot of money getting a degree. Also, unless you've got it in the bank already, don't go into debt to become an artist.