

METRO PICTURES

Russeth, Andrew. "Secret Meanings: Jim Shaw Brings Floods, The Flash, And Farrah Fawcett's Hair To Chelsea," *ARTnews.com* (September 12, 2014).

ARTNEWS



Jim Shaw, *Wedding of the Ear*, 2013.

On Wednesday afternoon, two days before the opening of his 12th show at Metro Pictures, in Chelsea, Jim Shaw was hunched over in front of one of his new paintings with a thin paintbrush, adding little touches to the face of a young man with a blond crew cut who is climbing up a strand of DNA next to white-feathered chickens that each have Superman as heads. "Sometimes things show up when you see a photograph," he said as he worked, looking through two pairs of black glasses, one angled over the other. "You see things you didn't see."

Shaw explained that he was working on Barry Allen, the alter ego of the comic-book hero The Flash, whom he has also painted on a huge swath of fabric, originally made for the Venice Biennale, which was hanging behind him. In that work, a yellow snake is swirling around the superhero and biting him in his ass as milk-white water floods the scene. An Indian princess figure, her body made of corn, stands nearby holding a box of Land O'Lakes butter, oblivious to the horror.

"Flash was based on Mercury," Shaw said, totally deadpan, as we surveyed the violence. "Mercury is a number of things. He's fast, but he's also a thief. He's also a psychopomp, someone who can ferry the dead to the afterlife. Mercury's staff has the intertwined snakes of nature, which are certainly related to DNA."

Shaw is 62, and with his slightly grown-out hair and ultra-dry, ultra-erudite soliloquies he comes across as equal parts aging rocker (which he is, having played in the early avant-rock group Destroy All Monsters) and absent-minded professor, albeit one who wears purple dress shirts and Filas. His art has always been just as difficult to peg.



Though he had known for years for his outré comics, Shaw first gained art-world notice in the early 1990s for “Thrift Store Paintings,” shows he organized with scores of amateur pictures scoured from such shops. Shows of his own “Thrift Store”-style paintings followed, then absurd, surreal sculptures and drawings based on his dreams, and various works that related to a homegrown 19th-century American religion called Oism that he has meticulously created and continues to develop.

He’s an obsessive aficionado of marginal, folk, outsider, or whatever-you-want-to-call-it culture, and a clear forebear to the generation of young artists working with cartoons, but he always channels those influences into projects that are handsomely, expertly composed, ultimately classical in their rigor.



Delilah, 2013.

One work in the new show is inspired by Leonardo's drawings of a monstrous flood, which Shaw has transposed into a scene that features Cary Grant holding Eva Marie Saint in front of a nose on Mount Rushmore as the hand of God reaches toward them. Like all the pieces in the exhibition, it's painted atop old theater backdrops that Shaw purchased in his hometown of Los Angeles.

I asked Shaw to tell me about what was happening in each painting, but he started out with a warning. "I can tell you, but maybe it's better not to know," he said. "It's better to make up your own mind." (He once penned a text called "Spoiler Alert" for critics demanding such information.)

Here's Shaw's explanation for one of his new paintings, which doubles as an almost exact description of it:

I had this vision of a tank that was covered with Farrah Fawcett's hair. And then I thought, 'What's it doing? It's crashing through a wall,' and I thought, 'Well, I think it should have some reference to Babylon and Iraq,' and then I thought, 'Shit, yeah, there's this outlet mall in Southern California that used to be the Samson Tire Factory and that's a Deco landmark.' It's both the destruction of the manufacturing basis of the economy in deference to a consumer culture, or Delilah once more vanquishing Samson, or our long excursion into the Middle East. It has a lot of different potentials.

Another painting, done over a backdrop of a window and brick wall, has Alfred Hitchcock spewing out a string of pearls in front of a bag of McDonald's hamburgers, which refers to an old magazine story Shaw read about, he said, "this woman whose son was retarded and the only thing that would assuage his fits of anger were these greasy hamburgers that she would give to him. And she kept a bag of them in the closet. Which always scared me. Not the refrigerator, the *closet*." (It seems she somehow used a photograph of Alfred Hitchcock to keep the boy from eating all of the burgers.)

Viewing this menagerie of images, certain uncomfortable, frightening concerns begin to coalesce. Flooding is everywhere ("This gallery itself was flooded, and Venice will be, and all coastal places will have problems with flooding," he said, "but it also relates to human endeavors"), as well as physical deformities—like those chickens, and a Saint Sebastian with eight locomotives bursting out of his body.



The Rhinegold's Curse, 2014.

“That’s me as Albrecht the Dwarf,” Shaw said, as he pointed to a little capped man in a three-panel painting, who is examining a gem of some sort. “He forsakes love for the having of worldly goods.” (“I am a workaholic and one aspect of being a workaholic artist is that the painting itself, it kind of calls to you,” he explained at another point. “It has a siren song.”)

There are also repeated allusions to murder, corporate greed, and environmental degradation (Shaw grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and his father was a product designer for Dow Chemical), though they are always couched in immaculate cartoon language—Americana, pop culture, mythology, Renaissance art, and quite a bit more combining in all sorts of piquant ways.

But listening to Shaw’s careful, detailed explanations for the iconography in his works, you can sense that there are other, hidden narratives that he’s not sharing—stories, memories, and secrets that would be impossible for anyone but him and perhaps his very close friends to tease out. (The Land O’Lakes character, for instance, was used by his late friend Mike Kelley, which Shaw mentioned and then brushed aside as a reference.) Consequently, they’re rich with images that are likely to trigger all sorts of personal responses from viewers.

As I was getting ready to leave, Shaw brought up Marcel Duchamp’s *Large Glass* (1915–23) and his *Étant donnés* (1946–66), the artist’s final work, which both pretty handily elude any attempts at explanation.

“They have secret meanings that I’m sure that Duchamp could have explained,” he said.

“So, if you don’t explain any of this, that’s fine by me,” he continued. “If I didn’t have that secret meaning for these things, I could just start sticking things together randomly and I’d feel guilty.”