

METRO PICTURES

Taft, Catherine. "Profession: Dilettante" *Metropolis M* (June/July): cover, 34-41.





Peroep: dilettant

**Interview
met
Jim Shaw**

PROFESSION: DILETTANTE

Interview with Jim Shaw

Amateurism in art is flourishing. Breaking the rules, even knowing nothing about them, ties in with a generally felt need to escape the regime of the market, the professionals, the authorities. The American artist Jim Shaw knows that not everybody can be an amateur. To make a work of art look amateurish, you have to really know what you're doing.

by Catherine Taft



Jim Shaw (b. 1952) is the kind of artist who wilfully seeks out the devil in the details, not only on the formal level – in meticulously executed drawings, paintings, sculpture and videos – but also through an exacting process that reveals a wickedly sharp attention to cultural minutia. Whether culling from dreams, music tropes, cult philosophy, last-century cast-offs or online auction databases, the artist demonstrates a keen understanding of the arcane resonance of everyday things. By resituating common objects and images into complex (and delightfully improbable) situations, Shaw proposes new points of entry into an alternate American universe, one that resembles past and present realities while remaining just slightly off.

In Shaw's hands, popular American history becomes a malleable medium. His nearly compulsive research has turned up compelling historical oddities, coincidences, and pretences, all of which inform his fictional religion, Oism. As a dominant narrative of Shaw's artwork, Oism is largely based on home-spun American belief systems, like Mormonism and Christian Science, and strikes a more mystical chord with Theosophy and Freemasonry. Shaw seems interested in the way such a dogma might spiral out of control, and his depictions of just that are at once earnest and absurd. Oism has served as the nexus for projects including an all-male secret rite, elaborately choreographed cinematic dance sequences, an in-



structional exercise video, an aspirational progressive rock band, and a series of comic books. This last endeavour presently occupies much of the artist's time, as Shaw diligently works on a storyline that, existing somewhere between literary masterpiece and popular adolescent entertainment, might eventually comprise an Oist overview.

Catherine Taft: I want to ask you about two aspects of your practice that seem to be at odds: on the one hand, your work is very concrete, narrative-driven and elaborate. At the same time, it is open-ended and not fixed in any way. How do you negotiate these seemingly conflicting approaches?

Jim Shaw: 'A lot of what I do is in avoidance of doing the next thing if that involves writing, which it does. My next project is a series of comics that delineate four stages of time in my fake religion, Oism. At the same time, I'm working towards doing a prog rock opera set in those four different eras: the first two being a fictitious past and the second two being in the 1800s.

Right now, I'm procrastinating on the actual writing of the comic books, so I'm drawing. I'm populating the world of these Oist comics beyond what is available in the particular stories I'm telling. And one good thing about this is that when I sit down to actually flesh out a story line, then I can come up with the things that are hard to imagine without writing a script, and I'm not a writer. If I were a writer this wouldn't be so hard. If I were a musician, that part wouldn't be so hard. I'm good at drawing.'



Will the opera exist as a performance or a video or film?

'It will exist as an album and we'll perform some of it. Part of my idea is that we could – by using looping and computer editing – make it sound kind of complex, like prog rock. But whether we could ever perform that is another question. I'm the least talented musician in the group. I can sing and improvise okay, but I can't write music. If I imagine a sound in my head, I don't know what it is. If I have something visual, then I know exactly what it is and how to execute

114

it. So, my music becomes much more collaborative. It becomes something between a Jim Shaw thing and a Dani Tull thing and a collaboration thing.'

And you embrace that sort of cross-pollination and the messiness it can produce?

'I got no problem with the messiness. One thing about music, for me, is that there's no way I can have the kind of control over it that I have over a pencil or a paint brush, and that's kind of appealing.'

Would you say you were an amateur musician, even after forming Destroy All Monsters [an anti-rock band from the 1970s, whose members included Mike Kelly - ed.]?

'Absolutely. I'm a dabbler. I'm a dilettante. That's why it's hard to work with real musicians. They're like, "Who is this jerk?"'



A few years ago you were included in a show called *Amateurs* [CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco, 2008]. The irony is that, like you, the seventeen other contemporary artists in the show were very established. Do you think this was a successful premise?

'Well, I never actually saw the show, so I know very little about it, but I was just in a show called *The Spectacular of Vernacular* in Minnesota [Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2011]. I saw the show and it holds up better in reality than it promises to through its name, in terms of it being related specifically to "vernacular" art; it is and it isn't. It includes real artists, not vernacular artists, but it's not the same as say *High and Low* [Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1990-1991] which threw in a few ghettoized "low" artists.'

Your new drawings are filtered through both William Blake and comic books. Do you make distinctions between 'high' and 'low' when you're culling through such sources?





ENGLISH SECTION

'Well, I've been looking at the comic book artists and really admiring what they did. Part of the reason to do this – apart from waiting to write other things – is to get down how to draw in black and white. Another thing I'm really interested in is that the comics I read as a kid were from DC as opposed to Marvel, and they had some really psychologically odd plots. They were always driven toward rationality and yet they used irrational stuff on the covers. So, there would be some impossible thing happening on the cover – essentially, a surreal scene – and then the story would be this rational explanation for that one scene.'

I've spotted you at the Pasadena Flea Market before, and I often see other artists, like Mike Kelley, there too. Is that an integral part of your process?

'I've collected so much crap that I really don't have the motivation to keep going there. But, I went a few weeks ago to find hair magazines. I've been doing drawings based on hairdos that really existed in the sixties, turning them into different forces of nature. And this is all before the tsunami [in Japan, March 11, 2011]. I also bought some magazines online and I also found this website that has all these YouTube videos of 1960s hairdos. They look like turbulent weather patterns. I mean, look at that one; it's impractical! I bet there wasn't much sex going on. This is an ecology that has passed into non-existence.'

Do you think the Internet changed how you access and sift through the cultural clutter – the hairdos, comic books, Christian ephemera, and other source material?

‘Yes, well, you find things that you didn’t think you could find. Certainly it affects the way the collectors of weird shit work. And it has its own frustrations. I found that – unlike with the Christian publications, which no one wanted – there was someone else looking for the hair magazines. So I was getting sniped at many moments and that is frustrating. But then I found this hairdresser website and learned the names of certain publications, so when I typed those into eBay, suddenly these things showed up that hadn’t before. So



there’s some randomness to that aspect. It just takes time.

I’m drawn towards things that are weird – something that shows you something about America. Some things make me think, “I’d really like to make a prog rock opera based on the failure of *Tales from Topographic Oceans* [a 1973 album by the band Yes – ed.]” And that becomes part of the storyline. In that case, I was interested in that moment when someone says to themselves, “I no longer believe in this thing”, whether it’s artwork or religion. I wanted to create a crisis of faith because it is based on a myth, of which Scientology and Mormonism are some of the models.’



And was Oism similarly created out of such myth and crisis?

'That was part of it. I was doing research on Mormonism and other American cults. I had always been interested in the homemade religions of America. One was this woman named the Public Universal Friend, who was supposedly the reincarnation of Jesus in upstate New York in the 1820s. I found out that this took place close to where my grandfather lived and there are still descendents of this cult that live in that area. I also realized that this cult included the birth of feminism and the main people behind the anti-slavery movement. It was the California of its day, and I thought this is where Oism should take place. So I was researching that and slowly piecing together the things I thought the religion should include. Some things came out of dreams, like one theological idea that the way we experience time is actually backwards; we actually start out dead and become sperms. I was also reading about particle physics and the Akashic Field and trying to put together something that a theosophist-influenced person might think of in the

115

1800s. I wrote other things into the story line, like the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.'

Oism is so heavily researched and the opera seems quite involved. Do you think it will ever be finished, or is it about remaining open-ended?

'I could leave it undone, but yeah, it will be finished. I've been postponing writing the actual book of Oism, but I may never have to, once I've done these comics.'

I also made fake thrift store paintings, which were included in *The Spectacular of Vernacular*, which was in part to give my employees something to do but also a way to show the context and historical elements of Oism. And that happens in actual thrift store paintings too.'



Did you learn anything useful about authorship or its value when you were faking the thrift store paintings?

'Well, I learned that people who have graduate degrees in art can make things that look like thrift store paintings and people who only have high school of the arts training are too sophisticated. Their works need to be dumbed-down more. It doesn't look like something you would find in a thrift store. Some people with graduate degrees from fancy-pants institutions don't have those skills. Either that or they're just so smart that they know how *not* to use them.'

Is that indoctrination necessary in order to detect the difference between an amateur and the 'real thing', which in this case is somewhat inverted?

METROPOLIS M N°3-2011

'I don't know. I've been looking at these paintings for so long. I had to do a messing up of the [fake thrift store] canvases anyway because they all looked brand new. They didn't look sifted through, so I scuffed them up by turning them upside-down and walking on them.'

In a way, collecting thrift store paintings seems related to starting a cult religion; each requires you to gather these lost children into your flock. Do you see any relation between the two? Is collecting a kind of ritual for you?

'Well, I liked to go to thrift stores when I was younger. I had specific things to look for, like clothing and paperback covers, and the paintings. And sometimes I'd find things for Mike Kelley, if I came across a stuffed animal. So, it was just part of the process. But when I actually did the first show of thrift store paintings [Brand Library, Glendale, 1990] I thought, "I need to get more of these." And instead of me going out to a million thrift stores, I tended to just go to the flea market because it was faster and I started to earn more money.

But it isn't just the cultural stuff that absorbs me. When my family was in Michigan this Christmas, we drove to Canada, and I started seeing dirty snow banks that were just these amazing looking forms – waves that had dirt gathered on them to emphasize what the melting snow looks like. That kind of thing just sucks me in. There are many things that I can look at and be lost in and it's kind of the same as looking at the inking style of [comic book artist] Joe Sinnott. And I find ways of illustrating this illness that occurs when I look at things.'

Is that a formalist obsession?

'It's something that takes over my brain: the idea of actually making art out of a random occurrence of God combined with the interstate highway. And that is part of the insanity of being a human being that thinks they can do what God does.'

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Jim Shaw,
Splash, 2011,
courtesy
Matis
Pichon,
New York