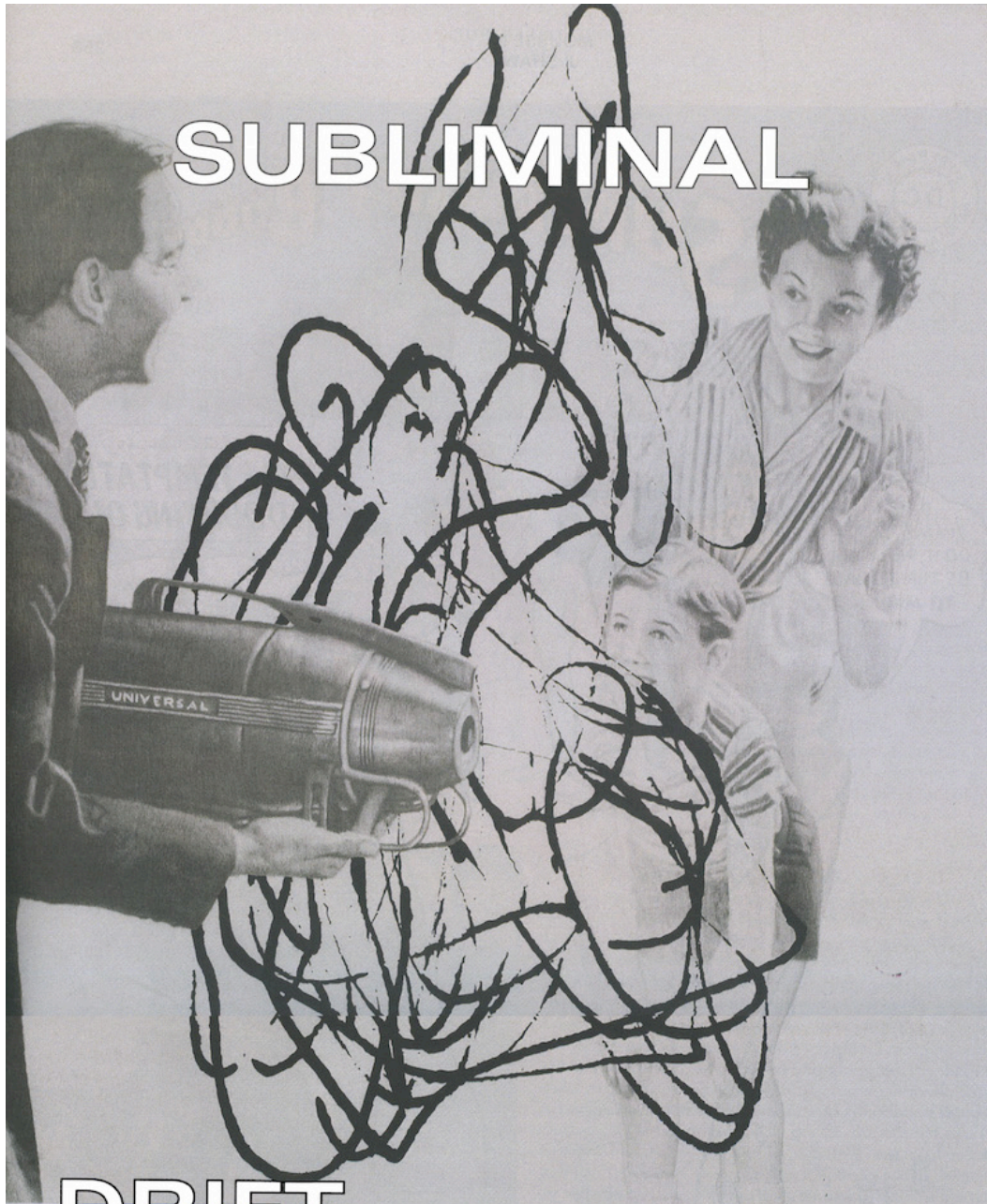


# METRO PICTURES

Bell, Natalie. "Subliminal Drift," *Mousse Magazine* (October-November 2015): 255-267.

## MOUSSE



## DRIFT

BY NATALIE BELL

**Jim Shaw** (b. 1952 in Midland, Michigan) lives and works in Los Angeles. His multifaceted practice spans a wide range of artistic media which all converge in a peculiar visual imagery characterized by a fascination with trash aesthetics. Since the 1970s his research has explored the lower depths of American culture, finding inspiration in comic books, pulp novels, rock albums, protest posters, thrift store items, amateur paintings and advertisements, which the artist combines with elements derived from his own life. His work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, including a career retrospective at the MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY; ICA, London; and Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland. Shaw has exhibited in "The Encyclopedic Palace" at the 55th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy; Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; and the Chalet Society, Paris, France. The New Museum, opening in October 2015, will present his first New York survey exhibition.

Poetry is made of random junctions laden with meaning. The works of Jim Shaw function like poetry, and like it they are unleashed from the subconscious: they exploit bizarre associations, visual and linguistic games. But Shaw's subconscious is not just individual; it is the encounter of a single psyche with American history in the political, social and spiritual sense. The conversation with Natalie Bell touches on the vast American mythology on which Shaw's work feeds, especially that in which vernacular emblems, absurd religions, excessive aesthetics and apocalyptic visions converge, wandering the byways of counterculture to collide in erudite historical and artistic references that enrich a complex symbolism.

**NATALIE BELL**

You grew up in Midland, Michigan, which naturally factors into your works to some extent. In a text for one of your shows, it says you have "a distinctly Midwestern point of view," and I wonder how you interpret that. What do you think makes a Midwestern perspective?

**JIM SHAW**

I'm not sure. I have a Germanic, workaholic ethic from my father and grandfather—they were German-Americans. My father was a good, upstanding citizen. There was the notion of civic duty, hard work, and not much forgiveness for mistakes. It was more like an unspoken thing.

**NB**

A Protestant work ethic.

**JS**

A Protestant work ethic, with a Scottish element from my mother—a stoicism. Not exactly a fun-loving background, let's put it that way.

**NB**

What about in terms of a visual aesthetic?

**JS**

I don't think in terms of the Midwestern... it's a nation-wide thing. You get your information from *Life* or *Newsweek* or the TV. There were certainly some local people who affected me, but mostly influences were from mass media, and eventually art magazines and books.

**NB**

How much did you know of the artists coming out of Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, the Monster Roster or Imagists?

**JS**

I was aware of the Hairy Who, and also Peter Saul, who at the time I assumed was in the Hairy Who, but they weren't given a lot of space. You had to seek the stuff out. But I certainly liked it, and looked for it. I would see a Peter Saul in an art magazine, and my eyes would pop out of their sockets. I know I'm not the only one.

**NB**

A lot of those artists ignored certain categories around high art or low art, or Art Brut, and treated everything as being on equal ground. Was that sort of attitude something you were aware of when you were an art student? Do you remember being aware of a certain dichotomy or hierarchy?

**JS**

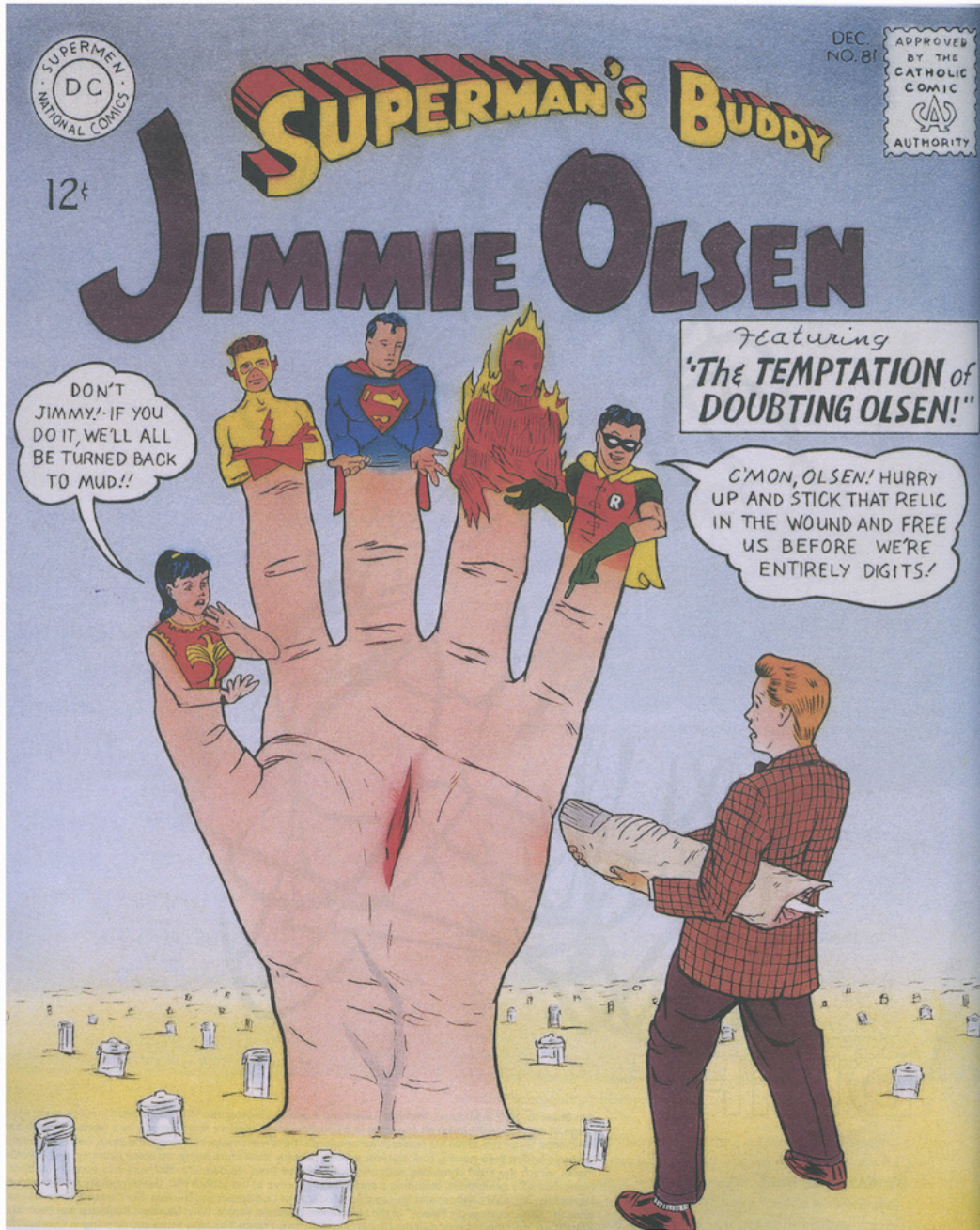
You'd get all these indications. At the University of Michigan I showed a Robert Williams comic to my teacher who was an Ab Ex painter, because I thought it was impressive and, while they didn't throw it on the floor and say, "this is garbage," you'd get their disregard, which can be just as powerful in terms of informing you of how you're supposed to think in the future.

**NB**

Did you have some professors who were more supportive of your interests?

**JS**

Yeah, or you just did it on your own. We had Jackie Rice, and Jerome Kamrowski. One time Mike [Kelley] brought Öyvind Fahlström to give a talk and we went out drinking afterward. First of all, he said he was jealous of people like us because we had an actual art education, and he didn't. Another thing he said was that his favorite artists were the EC Comics artists. Hearing that come from a legitimate, respected artist was something unusual.



*The Temptation of Doubting Olsen - My Mirage, 1990.*  
Courtesy: Marc Jancou Contemporary, New York/Geneva. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen



*Dream Object (Green Lantern) (Description: The Jury)*, 2005.  
Courtesy: Marc Jancou Contemporary, New York/Geneva



*Dream Object (Mystery in Space)*, 2005.  
Courtesy: Marc Jancou Contemporary, New York/Geneva

**NB** I know you were looking at plenty of comics and magazines growing up, and have a long history with the book format in your works, starting with your thesis project for CalArts, *The End Is Here*, a parodic takeoff on the Jehovah's Witnesses' *Awake* magazine infused with eccentric theology and conspiracy theory. What was it that got you interested in the offbeat evangelical groups that inspired that project and later led you to amass the collection of religious propaganda that is *The Hidden World*?

**JS** What first got me interested was having a drunken roommate in Michigan who was a cable installer. I had never seen Pat Robertson or any of those guys before. It was like a secret world because previously they were kept off the mainstream media. But when I moved out to Los Angeles [in 1976] I started finding out about the bizarre, local evangelists like Dr. Jagers and Miss Velma who talked about the cosmos and whether Jesus was one hundred percent God or whether he had any Mary in him, which turns out was the very first controversy of the church—the first heretics were those who said he had human elements—but anyway, they would show footage of the cosmos double-exposed with sperm in motion while talking about Jesus' humanity and would claim to have a doctorate in some kind of genetics, which was probably not true.

**NB** And Dr. Jagers even brought the UFO element to his church...

**JS** Yeah, actually we went with Laurie Anderson's class to see his church [Universal World Church], and I picked up a couple of pamphlets, including one on UFOs. It was this dirt-poor congregation, but large. At one point they would say, "You can now speak in tongues," so people would go, "Alaladalalda," using their tongues. Then they started passing the hat and they kept saying they needed more because they were trying to build this church made out of the precious stones mentioned in the Book of Revelations. And their recessional hymn was a variation of "My Way."

**NB** [laughs] The [Frank] Sinatra song?

**JS** Yes. There was this Liberace-style, glitter-covered piano. I really would love to have exhibited that stuff, but whoever is in control of it now is not conducive to the work being considered art. We went back to the church maybe twenty years ago, when they had this full-page ad in the *LA Times* on Christmas weekend, and they introduced this new painted wood sculpture of Saint Michael with a neon sword that had just come from these fine Italian craftsmen Dr. Jagers was bragging about, which reminded me a little bit of Jeff Koons. And they were also unveiling this golden tree that was based on numerology from the Bible, and hearing them talk about it was like listening to someone describe the symbolism in [Marcel] Duchamp's *The Large Glass*. Oddly enough, that same church later moved into the building that the Marcianos have taken over to turn into a museum of their collection, a Masonic building designed by Millard Sheets, which was a disco for a while before it was this church.

**NB** I want to ask you about another of your early artist's books, *Life and Death: A Non-Narrative Narrative*. I like the double paradox in the title, and I also think it strikes a chord with other bodies of your work. Do you think of your works as paradoxical narratives in some sense?

**JS** I always did want them to be somehow narrative. As a kid, books and magazines were the only way that I could see art—and I was also inspired later by Ed Ruscha's books—so creating a book form or narrative was important for me. Another series I did, "Distorted Faces and Portraits 1978-2007," was published in a book form, with one distorted face after another. One day I got a phone call from this teenage girl who said, "I'm really a fan of your work. I've been looking at your work at the comic store, and I wanted to know if my friends and I were right: is the narrative about a teenage girl who has been raped?" Every face has undergone some sort of violence in a way, but there are hardly any teenage girls in the thing, and that book made no claims, really, to narrative. I realized that people



would invent a narrative under the right circumstances, by seeing one image after another.

**NB** I suppose that's just a facet of human psychology, that we're compelled to do that.

**JS** Like finding faces in abstraction. Something I love doing. I still do that, with whatever I can, wherever I can.

**NB** Bathroom tiles can be good.

**JS** That's where I started. I'm hoping to do some pieces that look like an abstract field, but as you look at them carefully, you just see endless little demonic faces. Because those are easy to find: a field of decalcomania is easy to interpret. Making the piece and looking at the piece is almost the same experience. In both cases, you're getting lost in this thing, if you take the time.

**NB** What about *My Mirage*, your coming-of-age story of an American boy in which you use an encyclopedic range of mediums and styles? That's another work where there's a delicate balance between narrative and non-narrative elements, and real potential to get lost, perhaps even in the making of it. What were you thinking about when you started that?

**JS** There is a song called "My Mirage" by Iron Butterfly, and the lyrics are about a guy who has a vision and wants to paint it on the wall, to show all the people, and I was sort of interested in the evanescent quality of that. The 1960s was a time when people did things with inconsistent greatness; artists and musicians could just come and go. Groups like Iron Butterfly, for instance, did one or two great things, and then just disappeared. I was interested in that as part of the mirage element that came and went, as well as the puritan underpinnings of American culture.

**NB** Your "Thrift Store Paintings" represent another long-term project, a collection of hundreds of bizarre works by amateur painters you've found over the years. Some people might be tempted to read the project as a postmodern critique of fine art, but to me it's more interesting as an archive of marginalized images that won't go away. What sort of intrigue do they hold for you?

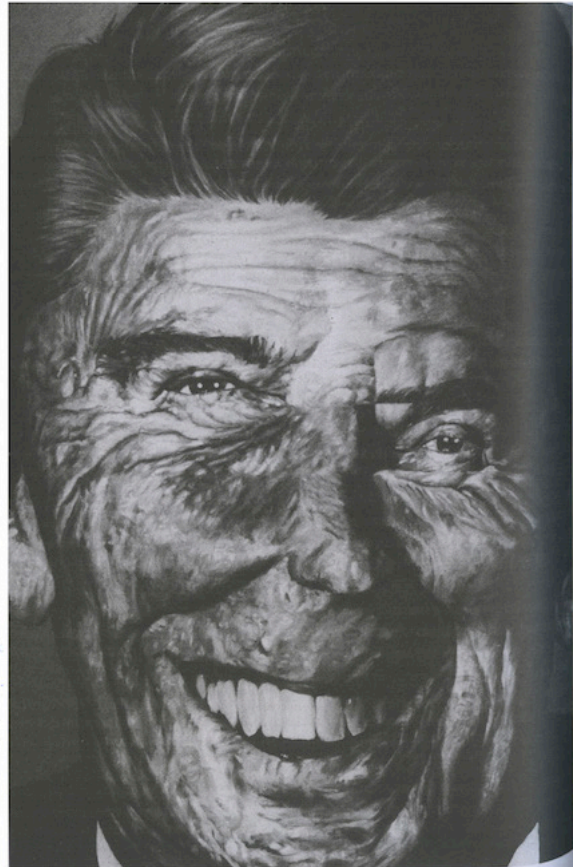
**JS** One thing I like about the "Thrift Store Paintings" is that, with few exceptions, I have no idea why they were made. It basically puts me and everybody else who looks at it in the same place. I can sit there and conjecture, "Oh, this guy was so depressed that his girlfriend broke up with him, so he painted a sad painting of this beautiful girl, and then threw it away." But who knows who put these stab wounds through this particular painting? I am also interested in them as some person's expression of themselves, and what they say about the American subconscious.

**NB** The idea of America's collective subconscious comes up a lot in writing about your work. I suppose that's especially true of the "Thrift Store Paintings", even though each of them is such a distinct articulation. On the other hand, your "Dream Drawings" are a direct portal to your own subconscious. What is it that you relish about the subconscious?

**JS** The subconscious influence is where the poetry is. Random conjunctions that have a meaning. Those happen in dreams all the time—like the cigar that means something else is the classic, but they're all over the place. I think that's how the subconscious works—using visual and verbal puns—and it makes it a good vessel with which to delve into imagery.

**NB** There is certainly a Surrealist influence in your works, but your work also is a reaction to American Surrealism, which you've talked about as a different school with a different set of motives. Who are, or were, its proponents in your mind?

**JS** Lorser Feitelson [an artist active in L.A. in the 1930s and 40s]



Untitled (Distorted Faces Series: Ronald Reagan), 1986.  
Courtesy: the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

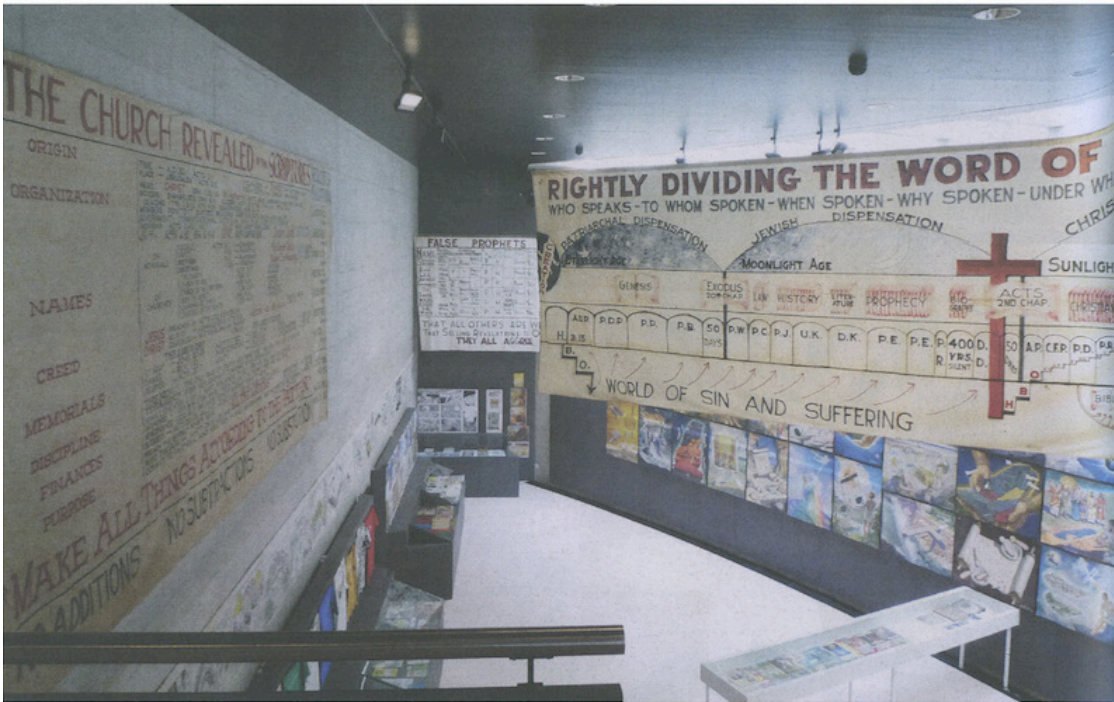
Previous spread - *Capitol Viscera Appliances mural*, 2011.  
Courtesy: the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, London/Hong Kong



*Untitled (Zombie)*, 2009. Courtesy: Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London



*Judgement, 2015.*  
 Courtesy: the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/NewYork/Tokyo



*"The Hidden World"* installation view at Centre Dürrenmatt, Neuchâtel, 2014.  
 Courtesy: Centre Dürrenmatt, Neuchâtel. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Fabian Scherler

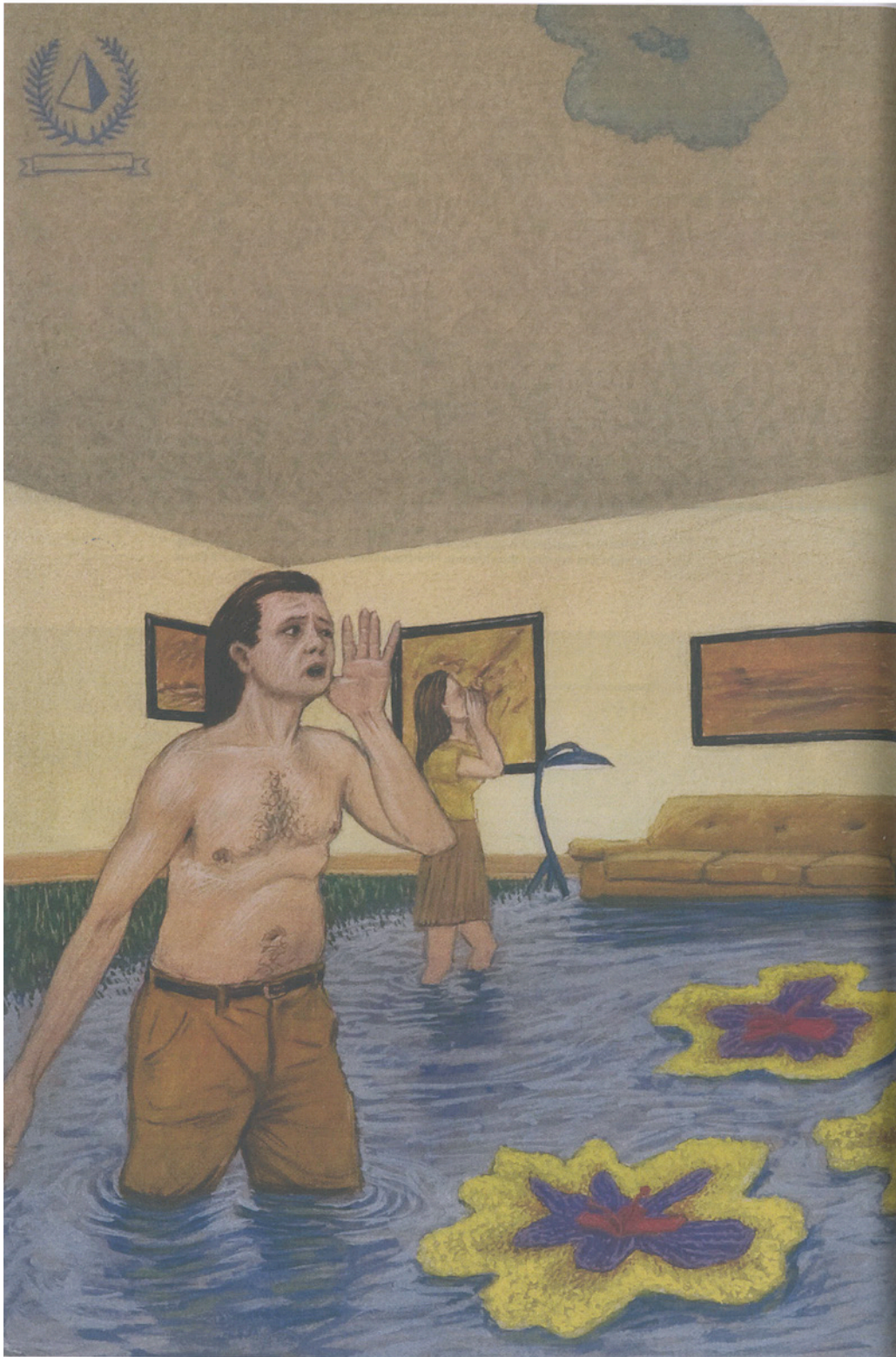




*Labyrinth: I Dreamed I Was Taller Than Jonathan Borofsky, 2009, "Left Behind" installation view at CAPC - Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, 2010. Copyright and courtesy: the artist and Praz-Delavallade, Paris/Brussels Photo: F. Deval*



*Untitled (US Presidents), 2006, "The Rinse Cycle" installation view at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead*



Opposite - *In Wyoming I Walked Without a Shirt Towards a Glowing Cave...*  
1999. Courtesy: Marc Jancou Contemporary, New York/Geneva

started a movement for a rational version of Surrealism, but mostly it was advertising agencies and action film directors looking to make a profit. That's the way I see it. In advertising, they would always want that thing out of place to help make it stick in your mind—that irrational element. Starting with [Alfred] Hitchcock, Surrealist elements get into action stuff, and then with James Bond, it becomes really full-fledged. There are also the Ray Harryhausen films: it was a moment of joyous fun for me as a kid to see this big monster in reality, because back then, you couldn't have a realistic monster other than in one of his films. And back then, reality was quite boring. Now anybody can do it, but then it was a very special thing. Surrealism was intended as a revolutionary force, but then it was co-opted into popular culture. MTV was full of surreal elements. MTV was a voracious maw that had to consume aesthetic after aesthetic.

**NB** But you have a similar magnetism or appetite for images in your works too. In *Labyrinth: I Dreamt I Was Taller Than Jonathan Borofsky* there are tropes from editorial cartoonists like Herblock and art historical references, from Picasso to Dalí, and of course Jonathan Borofsky, and all sorts of imagery that may register only subliminally.

**JS** *Labyrinth* starts with the French Revolution, and I decided it should have something to do with the Spanish Civil War, because it was commissioned [for an exhibition at Les Abattoirs in Toulouse, France] to be in front of theatrical backdrops made by Picasso and Dalí. I had these two artists on opposite sides, caty-corner from each other. The Picasso backdrop had been made for a Romain Rolland play "Le 14 Juillet" [1936] about the power of people to change society. I had already started out by thinking about tarot decks, and Aleister Crowley, and Led Zeppelin. There's this song by Led Zeppelin called "The Ocean," which is about the crowds that they played to, and to me, even though I love Led Zeppelin, that was the end of the politicized version of rock 'n' roll. It started with Country Joe and the Fish, and the MC5, and ended up as this apolitical thing. Some of the theorists in the 1930s and 1940s felt that popular culture, like big band music, was fascist in nature.

**NB** Like [Theodor] Adorno.

**JS** Yeah, what would he think of rock 'n' roll? Clearly fascist in nature. And yet I used images of crowds because the power of the people is confusing. I brought back the tarot elements in the banners that will hang with *Labyrinth* at the New Museum because I was trying to do something that mirrored the Picasso backdrop, which used a tarot figure. But I like things that are rife with symbolism and open to interpretation: the Book of Revelations and other parts of the Bible, like Daniel's dream interpretations.

**NB** The biblical stories and mythology you incorporate in these works also make me think of the myths we encounter in American history and politics. So much of what we learn growing up and hear on the news is composed of morally or politically motivated fables—everything from George Washington and the cherry tree to the weapons of mass destruction invented to prompt the Iraq war.

**JS** Yes. You learn about George Washington and the cherry tree, or George Washington throwing a dollar across the Potomac, more than George Washington the slaveholder—these fables supersede the more complex histories.

**NB** We of course have Hollywood and the television industry to propagate myths, and I like that your work reckons with that. But at the same time, mythologization can be deployed strategically as a kind of resistance, and that's where I think about someone like Sun Ra, whom I know you know well. I wonder if you think there's some liberation potential in myth. Or is it just too dangerous?

**JS** There are all kinds of contemporary myths. There's the myth of the strong-man leader that seems to make Donald Trump the

front-runner in the Republican race, and people also believe in that. They like Vladimir Putin to some extent in Russia. There's this movie called *Berkeley in the Sixties* and I think it was one of the Black Panthers in it who said, "Oh, we did this thing, and we got away with it, and we just thought we were going to keep winning." So they had a hubris that came from this mythology, and I think the Republican Party thinks if they keep doing the same stuff, they'll just win. They can go so far coasting on Ronald Reagan's coattails, and the idea that there is a war worth fighting in the Middle East, and they think it will carry them through as long as everybody else believes in it. But that kind of mythology can be harmful.

**NB** How are you thinking about myth or narrative in your recent banners—are these failed allegories, or accidental allegories?

**JS** There's always some sort of intentional allegory. I'm much like the editorial cartoonists of the past in that regard. I wouldn't spend the time to put a bunch of disparate imagery together if I didn't think there was a reason for it to be together, although I'm not sure that it's necessary for anyone to understand them.

**NB** And what's going on in your most recent works?

**JS** They're getting both more and less complex. I'm going to be layering more stuff in the future, and creating more chaotic, crazy things. I'm continuing to mine the image of the serpent, images of consumer objects, and images out of mythology and the Bible. Some have wrestling with God as a theme. There's a diptych of St. George and the Dragon, which is crossed with this movie shot in St. George, Utah, called *The Conqueror* starring John Wayne as Genghis Khan, where everyone possibly contracted stomach cancer from exposure to radiation because of nuclear testing in the area.

**NB** Wow. Is there anyone still alive who worked on it?

**JS** Probably. It's still another myth. I like good myths. I read on the Internet that someone had decided that Barbara Bush was actually the illegitimate child of Aleister Crowley because her mother has been in England around the time when she was conceived, and she looks a little tiny bit like Crowley. I bet it's not true, but, I like the story, so why not?

Opposite - In *Wyoming I Walked Without a Shirt Towards a Glowing Cave...*, 1999. Courtesy: Marc Jancou Contemporary, New York/Geneva

Next spread - *Dream Drawing ("We were sharing a house with Jody Zellen...")*, 1995. Courtesy: the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo