

METRO PICTURES

Boucher, Brian. "Jim Shaw's Mass MoCA Extravaganza Takes on Superman, Father Figures, and Norman Rockwell," *artnet.com* (April 13, 2015).

artnet



Jim Shaw, *The Miracle of Compound Interest*, 2006

"I had a mediocre dream last night," Jim Shaw told artnet News by phone. "We were building a three-story office building for our 15-year-old daughter, but it was out of sight because there was a gas station between her building and ours. Why were we constructing a space that we wouldn't have been able to see her in?"

They say that there's nothing more boring than listening to other people's dreams, but Shaw has built a career betting on the opposite, making dream-inspired works in various mediums for decades. Since the '70s, he has also found inspiration in countless artifacts of American high and pop culture, and ephemera and folk art like album covers, comic books, movie posters and pulp novels.

The phone conversation came a few days after the opening of "Jim Shaw: Entertaining Doubts," the LA-based artist's largest U.S. museum show to date, at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA), in the Berkshire Mountains. Taking advantage of the space offered by a sprawling former industrial complex (see *Expansion Makes Mass MoCA Second-largest Exhibition Space in the US*), it spans some 15,200 square feet over two floors to include 115 works, many of them large.

That makes it 25 percent larger than "Jim Shaw: The End is Here," a career retrospective that opens in October and will encompass three floors at New York's New Museum. (But who's counting?)



Jim Shaw, *Mississippi River Mural*, 2013

Among the first works to greet the viewer are giant painted banners that resemble stage backdrops, recalling Shaw's longtime dream of composing a prog-rock opera inspired by models like the band Yes. The one facing the entrance shows an assortment of retro women's wigs floating in midair before a desert landscape. Other wigs swirl inside a washing machine, referring to his as-yet-unrealized rock opera *The Rinse Cycle*, a tongue-in-cheek reference to Wagner's *Ring Cycle*.

The work also refers to an entire fictional religion Shaw conceived, Oism, based on religions and cults from Mormonism to Scientology. Oism was supposedly founded by Annie O'Wooton in the 1840s and centers on a virgin who gave birth to herself at the dawn of history. But while Oism might seem purely like a jab at religious belief, Shaw said it's more nuanced than that. "It's hard to be ironic and sincere at the same time but I try to be," Shaw said.

William Blake, Mike Kelley, Superman

Just as Shaw draws on his own actual dreams, he also gets inspiration from the more visionary sort of dreamer. A number of works on paper riff on works by the great English artist William Blake, translating his iconic images into comic book-style scenes in the manner of artist Wayne Boring. Blake's *Elohim Creating Adam* (1795–1805) gets the Superman treatment in *Blake/Boring*, in which the superhero is forced out of the spiritual realm and into physical existence—the moment that Blake pinpoints as the fall from grace.

Another high-low cross-fertilization takes place in a set of banners depicting Superman plummeting through the air and then sprawled on the ground. The central image shows him in the pose of the so-called Icarus logo used for Led Zeppelin's record label, Swan Song. That image, in turn, is based on a work of fine art: William Rimmer's 1869–1870 drawing *Evening (The Fall of Day)*, and thus serves as a great example of the exchange between high and low.



Jim Shaw, *The Issue of My Loins*, 2015

The intermingling reflects the way Shaw consumed visual culture while growing up in Michigan. “I got all my information through reproductions, whether those were Frank Frazetta covers for comic magazines or Wallace Wood comic books or Pop art or Surrealism,” he said. “It all seems very similar when you look at it at that scale.”

Shaw formed the legendary band Destroy All Monsters with his fellow Michigan native and artist Mike Kelley, who committed suicide in 2012. “His spirit lingers on and certainly informs my ways of thinking,” Shaw said. “He had an encyclopedic knowledge of art history, whereas I have the children’s encyclopedia version.”

Kelley, too, mined pop culture and had a Superman fixation, though Shaw sees a distinction. “My use of Superman is about a father figure and a place to project what you might call a castration complex, which I would call the loss of power complex, and a place of pervertedly stunted emotion. I think his was more a form of strange, ironic nostalgia.”

Father Figures, Norman Rockwell, and the Family Jewels

One small gallery features a rich and funny exploration of Shaw’s artistic family heritage through the vehicle of the compromised superhero.

After Shaw’s father died recently and he was clearing out the house, Shaw discovered, to his surprise, extensive exchanges with the Famous Artists School, a correspondence course that counted Norman Rockwell as an early supporter and faculty member. Shaw had no idea his father had taken the courses. Numerous drawings by Shaw’s father are on view, often with overlays and notes by instructors (“Look for more variety in your use of line. Thick and thin lines offer contrast for instance”). Lengthy typed letters from instructors to Shaw père are also on view.



Jim Shaw, *The Issue of My Loins*, 2015

Shaw's grandfather, he told artnet News, was a commercial artist, his father a package designer. Both men also painted watercolors, the elder with better results, he said.

"My father felt competitive with his father and also with me," Shaw said. As for the fulsome criticism of work Shaw deems pretty good, he said of the piece, "It's a commentary on the need of schools to change people whether they need it or not." (Art schools also came in for skeptical treatment in Kelley's work.)

The drawings and letters line a gallery at whose end is a full wall devoted to a rendition of Superman's crotch, titled *The Issue of My Loins*. As museumgoers draw close to the wall, it becomes clear that they're not looking at a wall painting, as it originally appears; in fact, the black mass representing Superman's crotch is cut out of the wall, which is backed by a dark alcove in which rest several glowing crystals that represent various forms of Kryptonite. They're right near where Superman's testicles would be.

You have the feeling of being hit over the head in the best possible way by this encapsulation of oedipal competition, paternal weakness, and multigenerational artistic striving.

Dan Quayle, Barbara Bush, Christopher Wool

Other parts of the show are more lighthearted. Several paintings depict a dream involving a former vice president. The title, in part: *Dream Object* ("A later room contains murals of Dan Quayle glad handling rich white people at an art opening and now I'm Paul Drake (from 'Perry Mason') and a Sandy Duncan like woman gloms onto me."). One of the canvases shows a gallerygoer studying a painting that reads "sad dad/bad had" in black on a white ground, à la Christopher Wool. Also on the theme of public figures, a nearby sculpture depicts Barbara Bush at the center of a shrub-shaped burst of flame—a burning Bush.



Jim Shaw, *Not Since Superman Died* (detail), 2014

Part of another gallery looks like the work of a demented interior decorator, with a giant wall sconce in the shape of a nose serving as a light fixture, overlooking a massive blue settee in the shape of a human ear.

Shaw has museum solos behind him at institutions like the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, in Gateshead, UK, the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and others. His works reside in collections from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and many others.

What's more, he's represented by three powerhouse galleries: in New York by Metro Pictures, in London and Hong Kong by Simon Lee Gallery, and in Los Angeles and Tokyo by Blum & Poe. Representatives from all three, including both of the founding owners of Metro Pictures, Janelle Reiring and Helene Winer, came out for the opening.

All the same, Shaw's market, at least at public auction, is modest, with his high at just \$656,000, set in 2007 at Christie's New York. Shaw doesn't have kind words for a market that hasn't lionized him. He's even enlisted that visionary artist, William Blake, in a critique.

"In an unsustainable world, eventually the status quo will kill us all," he told Tony Oursler in an interview published in the catalogue for his 2012–2013 show at Baltic, referring to the threat of global warming.

He sees art market parallels.

"The art world is going to get killed by its practices," he told Oursler. "It's like during the housing bubble. . . . If you're part of a system that needs to generate money in a certain way, they all become like drug dealers in the end. Because the drug dealer knows that the product will kill the consumer eventually."