

METRO PICTURES

Rexer, Lyle. "Jim Shaw: Dad's Drawings," *TheBrooklynRail.org* (October 2020).

BROOKLYN RAIL



Drawing by W. Mark Shaw for the Famous Artists Correspondence School with instructor critiques.

Can art be taught? The consensus now would seem to be that it probably cannot. But there was a time for about 500 years in Western art when art production was all about learning the game—techniques like chiaroscuro and vanishing point perspective—and through these, the norms of representation. How should things be rendered in order to look “pleasing” or “true to nature?” Codified most prominently in the *École des Beaux-Arts* system of the 19th century, the pedagogy of the studio class was mainstreamed in the United States, in part, through the commercial enterprise of the Famous Artist’s Correspondence School. Each week, for a fee, students from far flung corners of the republic—places like Midland, Michigan, where Jim Shaw grew up—would send in drawings and receive often detailed critiques via overlays attached to their work. Shaw discovered—after his father’s death—that in the 1950s the elder Shaw had been one of these correspondents.

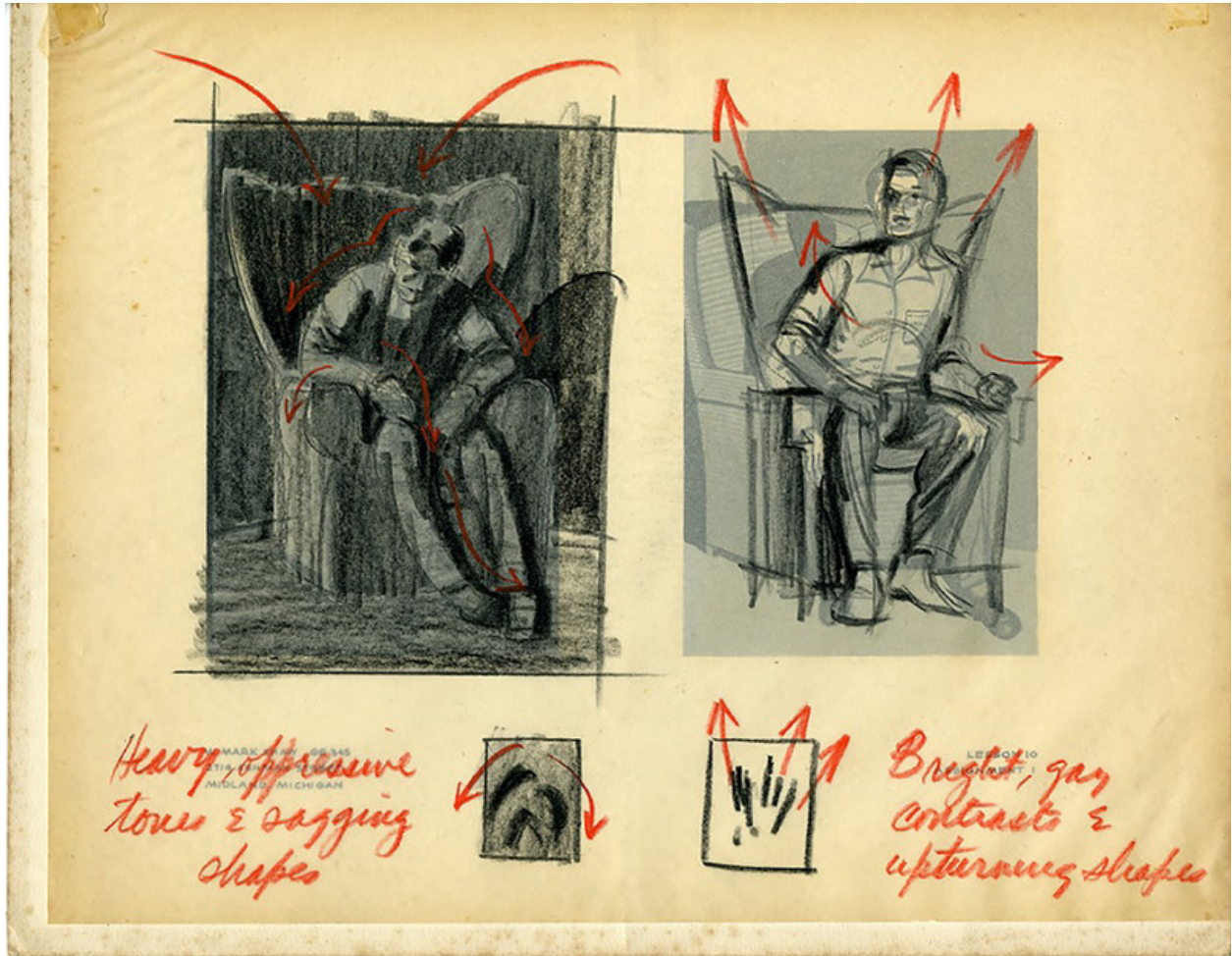
Dad’s Drawings, an online exhibition, presents images of Mark Shaw’s originals, the critical overlays, and palimpsests of both together. For more than 40 years, Jim Shaw has been a guide to the American optical unconscious, exploiting and exploring the popular forms of representation that have shaped many Americans’ perception of everything from nuclear war and organized religion to sex and domesticity—and, it almost goes without saying, beauty. The kind of irony Shaw’s work often displays is just the sort of attitude that would likely have annoyed the earnest amateur student of the Famous Artist’s Correspondence School. But the relationship Shaw explores by presenting these drawings is a good deal more complex than a jaundiced view of naïve creative desire.



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Mark Shaw's originals, done in response to specific assignments, whether of houses, animals, landscapes, or domestic scenes, are by turns awkward, determined, and odd. The drawn overlays, on the other hand, are fluid, succinct, and familiar. They are annotated with admonitions such as "Mark, restudy lesson 5 on head construction." Whatever the Famous Artist's Correspondence School eventually became by the 1960s—cheerleading hokum at a price—the comments Mark Shaw received might actually have helped a student learn something practical about drawing.

But what? That question seems to be Shaw's central preoccupation. Whatever Mark Shaw and other customers were seeking, they received in the mail a kind of instruction manual for achieving certain effects, applicable regardless of the content of the drawings: how to show happiness in an upturned face, or the speed and movement of a trotting horse, or the light and shadow on the architecture of a suburban house (much of Midland was designed by Alden Dow, an epigone of Frank Lloyd Wright and member of the family behind Dow Chemical, Midland's largest employer.) If the overlays appear cartoonish, it's worth recalling that the word "cartoon" derives from the Renaissance underdrawing for a fresco: the plan. In an art world that continues to emphasize individual expression, we tend to dismiss such an approach as cliché and reductive, but Jim Shaw has not.



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Raised on comics, cartoons, and *MAD* magazine, and having worked as an illustrator himself, Shaw is haunted by what lies behind such formulaic strategies: an almost platonic idea of perfection. The anonymous critiques imply that certain formulae can bring the artist closer to the goal of rendering the essence of both optical vision and aesthetic experience. Shaw's many flirtations with vernacular art, including his legendary collection of thrift-store paintings and his own attempts to paint like an amateur, can almost be seen as a reaction against classical formal mastery that informs so much of his work. The critic Dave Hickey has written that one of the main motives of art in the West—from Caravaggio to Mapplethorpe—has been to valorize the most outrageous content, to put the highest standards of craft in the service of the devil, so to speak. Shaw has been doing that since the 1970s, rendering subjects that are cliché, stupid, crass, and manipulative and making us not only love them but also acknowledge their beauty. So finding his father's drawings, so earnestly engaged in the pursuit of perfection, must have come with the shock of recognition.

If, on the other hand, Shaw's father had actually been able to follow the rules, it would have neutralized the deviations that make some of the drawings distinctive, not to say downright weird. In one assignment, a neatly dressed man sits in a living room, watching as an older woman in a housecoat and brandishing a rolling pin chases an older man toward a doorway. Without its mechanical stiffness, the scene would have become a cartoon. But with its earnest, failed naturalism, it carries the charge of the surreal—a truth that lies on the other side of perfection.

The problem with art school is that it can't teach desire, which makes art possible, nor mistakes, which make it interesting.