

# METRO PICTURES

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GATESHEAD/NEWCASTLE, UK

## Jim Shaw

BALTIC CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART/BALTIC 39

The Jim Shaw retrospective "The Rinse Cycle" successfully represented nearly all the artist's major projects since 1978, the year he received his MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. The exhibition even included the "Thrifty Store Paintings" that Shaw has been accumulating since 1974, though they were on view across the river from the main show, at project space BALTIC 39 under the title "You think you own your stuff but your stuff owns you." There was only one notable absence: that of *The Donner Party*, 2003, a cannibalism-inspired Judy Chicago "tribute" installation. The show thus set out the full, bewildering plethora of Shavian themes, which range from the perennial big topics (sex, religion, myth, the unconscious, cultism, consumerism, advertising, US politics, history, and culture) to a tsunami of minutiae: obscure rock groups, comics, holy imagery seen in pizza toppings, and the complex rigmarole of "Oism," Shaw's homegrown, Mormon-style feminist cult.

"Innocence, domesticity, temptation, deviancy, comfort, sex, death, isolation, fear, religion and humor are all here," as BALTIC curator Laurence Sillars observes in his catalogue essay. And this is just to summarize the references contained in a single small painting, *The Golden Book of Knowledge*, 1989. This sheer volume of associations can make it hard for a critic—and perhaps Shaw, too—to see the forest for the trees. On reflection, though, managing the ratio of forest-to-trees perspective, which is another way of describing the balance of immersion against critical distance, appears to be not so much a consequence of Shaw's manifold interests but in fact the fundamental subject of his work. From the outset, his practice has been to transform raw into cooked—and then cool it down just when one would have expected him to serve it up hot.

Shaw's strategies include humor, fastidious graphic and painting techniques, delegated manufacture, and the consistent swerving of "confessional" material away from the individuated to the generic. Putting your dreams on view for all to see is one way to do this. In 1992, Shaw resolved to document his dreams systematically over a long period; the results were the series "Dream Drawings," 1992–96, and "Dream Object: Paperback cover paintings," 1996–2001. In an inter-



Jim Shaw, *Untitled (U.S. Presidents)*, 2006, acrylic on muslin, 16 x 38'. BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK.

view, Shaw described how the contents of his nighttime visions "dared" him to represent them, as if saying, "See if you can put this on public display!" The resulting works are beautifully realized. Some are also hilarious—I found the totalitarian-yet-cuddly werewolves of *Dream Object: Paperback cover painting (Werewolves)*, 2001, particularly endearing. But they also underline the sheer homogeneity of dreams: Shaw's are no more or less perverse, incoherent, ridiculous, or obscene than mine or, probably, yours. Especially when rendered in a graphic style flavored with a hint of 1960s and '70s comics and pulp fiction, dream-diarizing emerges as the antithesis of the confessional; it's a distancing, generative mechanism that at least partially removes the need to choose one's subject matter.

Shaw often calls on an image repertoire associated with abjection (body parts, deliquescence, hair, zombies, etc.), but his work avoids an abject affect. *D'Red Dwarf, B'lack hole*, 2010, part of Shaw's wonderful "Left Behind" series, 2004–, is a huge image painted on an out-of-commission theatrical backdrop. It features a grove of rubbery, purplish, distinctly anthropomorphic banyan trees, which should be disgustingly grotesque but somehow aren't; in fact, the image has a kind of architectural grandeur. Even more remarkable is the show-stopping "Left Behind" painting *Untitled (U.S. Presidents)*, 2006, which remodels Old Glory, substituting dignified presidential portrait heads for stars and glistening, scarlet, poison-fanged snakes for stripes. The work is stunning in its ambivalence: a terrific response to the pressing artistic challenge of effective mediation between "hot" proximity and "cool" critical distance.

—Rachel Withers