

METRO PICTURES

Indrissek, Paddy. "Jim Shaw On Dream-Drawing, Happiness, and Art School," *Blouin.ArtInfo.com* (October 7, 2015).

BLOUIN ARTINFO



A detail of Jim Shaw's "The Judgement," 2015, currently on view at the New Museum.

"The End Is Here," a survey at the New Museum in New York of Jim Shaw's output from the 1970s until today, is a stunning, bewildering affair. There are finely detailed portraits he made as a cohort of schoolmate Mike Kelley, while performing in the group Destroy All Monsters; an insanely varied series of paintings, "My Mirage," which bounce rabidly from one aesthetic to the next; selections from his curated collection of amateur-level, thrift-store-acquired canvases; a recent triptych exploring the seven deadly sins; and many, many drawings of his own dreams, often ripe with an absurdist sexual energy. I sat down with Shaw on the eve of his opening to discuss attention-deficit disorder, Surrealism, and the pursuit of happiness.

I don't know if *appropriation* is the right word, but it's clear that you freely borrow from just about anywhere. Do you think about having one style, or is it more about plural styles?

I didn't want to have a style — it was never a goal of mine, and I never thought that the "signature artist" was a good thing. And I'm also pretty sure I've got A.D.D. Even when doing work in the '90s, like "My Mirage," I always thought of it being more like MAD Magazine or National Lampoon, in the sense that you're working in a style and using it to comment on specific things that are of interest to that artist. It's a mimicking, or in some ways it's a "Method art." I do research. Lately I've been doing more art-historical things, dealing with Picasso, or Michelangelo.

Have you always been a good mimic?

Yes. It's a perversity, something about when your parents give you conditional respect and love — it brings out the perfectionist. Which is a self-hatred-based thing. I'm not exactly the most secure person in the world, but I do feel that I can render things within an inch of their life, if I have enough time. But I'm sort of better off not having enough time, since things are better off when they're not rendered within an inch of their life.

Can you force that imperfection?

There's usually a deadline, so I don't have time to mess things up. And sometimes I'll just give myself a task: "I want to do a triptych based on a Brecht/Weill opera, in relation to my own weird relationship to consumerism and the ownership of houses." And that leads to research, to a task that needs to be completed within a set of time.

Sometimes you're waiting for the inspiration on X part of it. I have things I've been waiting for the inspiration to go the next step with, like Oism — my pseudo-religion — for 20 years. Or I'm making dream objects from my dream drawings of the '90s, and working on Oism, and then suddenly this whole other Americana-based political stuff happens. All these other little things evolve — like working on William Blake crossed with Wayne Boring, who was a D.C. Comics Superman artist.

With that mix of references — whether they're historical, or personal, or pop-cultural — is there a situation point, where the work doesn't always make sense?

It depends on what you call "making sense," because nothing ever really makes sense. It's all related to magical thinking. If you really go in and analyze things carefully, you may say, "This is all just a bunch of crap!" It could fall apart. And in some ways it's better off not explaining it all. I wouldn't be able to make the work if I didn't have reasons to make it that made sense, in a magical-thinking manner. But not knowing what all those things are is O.K. by me. I don't know all the reasons why Duchamp made "The Large Glass," and if I did, would it be as interesting a thing?

Does this somehow tie into the logic of dreams?

As somehow who drew and made artworks out of their dreams, it dawned on me: So much of what's going on in dreams is a form of visual punning. I'm not sure if your subconscious does that in order to be occult — to occlude the actual meaning — but I'm interested in that aspect.

I love the dream drawings. Normally, if a friend says, "I want to tell you about my dream," you groan. You never want to hear about someone else's dream.

Well, it depends on the dream.

Yours seem especially interesting.

I wanted some of them to be boring, because that's the way most of them are: I'm walking down the hallway at work... even though I haven't worked in a hallway in 10 years. One of the goals in the dream drawings was to de-Europeanize dream imagery, all that stuff the turn-of-the-century Surrealist youths made that got glommed onto by Hollywood. "That is what a dream looks like: Columns, piazzas, women with their hair blowing in the wind, perspective lines!" So mine looked like offices that were maybe flooded, or there was something unusual. But after a while the more lurid things started getting my attention; it became a perversity — that I was working while I was dreaming. I would dream of things so nasty that the dream would be like, "See if you can draw that." There were three or four years when all I did was dream and draw dreams. But after 1999, I had a daughter, and didn't have time anymore. I still have dreams, but my daughter has to get to school on time. I've had to find other ways to access the randomness of dreams.

Like what?

Walking down the street with no particular objective. Or listening to this recording that puts you into alpha or beta states — that's helped a lot. It was a way of catching up on sleep, but eventually I realized it was putting me into this sort of DMT-ish. I've never wanted to be in a waking dream situation, but here I'm not really messing with the dream, I'm just utilizing the flow of ideas. For it to really work, I have to have problems to solve, I have to be figuring out the correct solution to a visual problem.

You've always been interested in fringe groups — rightwing political groups, born-again Christian groups. What's appealing to you about these groups, even if you might not like the philosophies they espouse?

In the '70s, I had friends who had become born-again Christians, after going through all the Dionysian stuff of the '60s. That was intriguing to me. And then I started seeing all this rightwing Christian stuff on cable TV that had never been a part of American culture we knew about. It was a suppressed part. When I was working on "My Mirage" I researched some of the self-declared American religions. One of the most intriguing was this woman Jemima Wilkinson, who called herself the Publick Universal Friend. Without saying it, she represented herself as the reincarnation of Jesus. One day she died, and her number-two guy hid that fact from her followers, since she was supposed to be immortal. Eventually the thing fell apart. I found out more recently that they were located within a 10-minute walk of my grandfather's cottage on the Finger Lakes. I was really enchanted by the idea that you could make up a religion, like Mormonism or Scientology.

Are these religions fascinating as oddities? Do they depress you?

Only when they took political power. I was happy that they existed, I just didn't want them starting Armageddon. But now ISIS is ready to do that.

Your retrospective's title is "The End Is Here." That seems almost optimistic — happy for the end times.

Back when I did the piece [that lends the show its title], it was the '70s, a time of disaster films and UFO sightings. I had this idea that these things were so popular because people didn't want to go on living a mundane life all the time. Life has since gotten less and less mundane with the advent of cheaper, faster computer graphics, or on-demand videos. [Back then], if you wanted to see a Ray Harryhausen movie, it had to come to the theater. "The Wizard of Oz" was on once a year. There was a dullness to life that was not a bad thing, but you were constantly looking for something more interesting — and usually not finding it — which puts you in need of your imagination. Now you have less need for your imagination because all of this stuff just pops up. Television shows have more sophisticated special effects than the most sophisticated monster movies of my youth.

What's your working day like? You produce... a lot.

Well, I had assistants. It wasn't all done by me. I did all the drawings that things were based on, and I'm trying to do more and more myself. It's impossible to convey exactly what you want something to look like, and I have to go over everything anyway. I'm heading toward retirement age. Who knows what's going to happen to the worldwide economy, to the 1 percent that buys art?

There's that phrase from Duke Ellington: "If it sounds good, it is good." Maybe if it's so bad it's good, it actually is good. Look at "Plan 9 From Outer Space" or "Glen or Glenda," famously bad movies, but there's something crazy special about them. The horror comics of the past were on this production line, they'd churn these things out. Within that context, sometimes accidental works of genius came along. Or pulp writing — that was churned out by the pound, and some of it was genius.

Your work has been inspired by a lot of material that's come out of a commercial background, or out of illustration — art made by people who are being paid to make it, but who are playing within those boundaries and adding something weird...

I met this woman, Ramona Fradon, who was a Silver Age artist at DC Comics. She produced these utterly genius comics — "Metamorpho," she did six issues and then they handed it off. They were sophisticated, the page-design was amazing. It was a conscious genius. People like Jack Kirby were able to churn out stuff at a fantastic clip that had aspects of genius. It wasn't coalesced into a painting, it took place over a lot of issues. And one of the odd thing about illustrators is, when you see their own art, it might be boring. I've seen paintings by the top matte painter of the '60s, and his own paintings are... landscapes. They're not very interesting. But the matte paintings are really cool — like ones from "The Birds," which used to be on display at Universal Studios.

Would you say your work has a great sense of humor?

Sometimes there's a pun at the center of the piece. A good pun can be a seed that bears roots and branches. Humor is definitely there, but it's usually very bleak. My worldview is actually very bleak. Politics, my life, no matter. Me being happy — does that ever happen? There's a line in "8 ½" where Marcello Mastroianni meets the Cardinal and says, "You know, I'm not very happy." And the Cardinal says, "Who ever said you were born to be happy?" At 14, I thought: That's really true! I wasn't born to be happy. I didn't realize it was sort of a sardonic moment in the film.

What was your fallback plan if you didn't make it as an artist?

We bought a house, and suddenly the art market crashed in the early '90s. I thought, I'll go back into special-effects work. But the special-effects world, in the five years I'd been out of it, had found a whole bunch of younger people with computer backgrounds. There was no place for me, and that was my back-up plan. I realized, I'm going to have to become a paid artist who can make a living. Or the other [option] is not to care whether you make a living — the William Blake methodology.

That or Redbubble...

That's the back-up plan. The other plan, now that I own two houses and an empty lot in Los Angeles, is to leave town, sell everything. Which is also the typical artist thing: You're property. The artists are often the gentrifiers. That's our part in the evil process of capitalism.

Do you think if you were happy you'd be making work? Or is there something in your discontent that helps create it?

God only knows. Clearly the self-hatred and perfectionism affect the work. I don't know what beyond that. I'm happier now than I was 20 or 30 years ago. Happy being a father, being a husband. Happy having an art career. If I didn't have a career I'd be more miserable. There's always something to complain about, though.