

METRO PICTURES

Johnson, Ken. "A Kaleidoscope of Giddy Delirium," *The New York Times* (October 16, 2015): C28.

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Part of the installation "Labyrinth: I Dreamt I Was Taller Than Jonathan Borofsky," from the "Jim Shaw: The End Is Here" show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

Religious fundamentalists might accuse Jim Shaw of working for Satan, and they would be right if the Devil is imagined to be a tricky rebel against all forms of authoritarian orthodoxy. In Mr. Shaw's gleefully demonic art, form follows polymorphous perversity. A chameleon possessing an amazing range of skills, he's able to track and render the vagaries of his extraordinarily fertile imagination with unabashed acuity.

As viewers will discover in "Jim Shaw: The End Is Here," a mind-blowing show at the New Museum, Mr. Shaw does Surrealism, Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism, Conceptualism, cartoons and comic strips, psychedelic posters and kitschy illustration styles with an endlessly inventive comedic twist. His works range from huge to miniature and encompass political allegories and drawings documenting his dreams. They are by turns mythically resonant, laugh-out-loud funny and shockingly blasphemous.

The way the show has been organized by the museum's curators, Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari and Margot Norton, helps clarify the bewildering delirium that is Mr. Shaw's art. It's like a layer cake. The exhibition's top floor (the museum's fourth) features a single installation pertaining to United States history and politics. The lowest of the three floors presents scores of works relating mainly to personal psychology. And sandwiched between those floors are paintings and religious materials that Mr. Shaw has collected over the past three decades. The overall theme connecting these three levels may be construed as the search for truth in a world bereft of epistemic consensus.

The top-floor installation, called “Labyrinth: I Dreamt I was Taller Than Jonathan Borofsky” (2009), consists of three enormous antique theater backdrops strategically altered by Mr. Shaw and an arrangement of free-standing, cutout paintings constructed like theater flats. (The title refers to a fellow artist whose work is in some ways similar to Mr. Shaw’s.)

“The Jefferson Memorial” (2013), one of the backdrop works, is particularly emblematic. On the lovely, faded image of the neo-Classical temple in Washington, Mr. Shaw overlaid a black-and-white cutout of elastically elongated comic book superheroes who are trying to seize a plane in midair, apparently a reference to the Sept. 11 attacks. The contrast between the serene monument and the surrealistic action is key: Contemporary violence and paranoid fantasies override Enlightenment ideals of democratic sanity.

“Judgement” (2015), another of the theater backdrop works, resembles an illustration for Aaron Copland’s “Appalachian Spring.” Silhouetted figures relax on the porch of a rustic cabin in a bucolic landscape. Over this scene, Mr. Shaw painted a giant praying mantis and semitransparent ghosts, including three Ku Klux Klan figures — spectral nightmares of genocide, slavery and other psychopathologies haunting the American dream.

The free-standing paintings look as if they were made by an unhinged political cartoonist. One depicts an anthropomorphic vacuum cleaner sucking up terrified businessmen. Another updates Picasso’s “Guernica,” including the screaming woman, the wounded horse and, in remembrance of the Vietnam War, a colossal Richard M. Nixon hovering above and wielding, like a club, an aircraft that might be a B-52 bomber.

Skipping down to the exhibition’s bottom layer, you go from the broadly political to the idiosyncratically personal. One room presents selections from “My Mirage” (1986-91), a kind of graphic novel consisting of nearly 170 paintings, drawings and collages whose teenage protagonist, Billy, struggles with sex, drugs, rock ’n’ roll, cult membership and Christian rebirth. A pathetic alter ego of Mr. Shaw, Billy lives through most of the crazes that percolated through the American sociocultural matrix during the 1960s and ’70s, the time of Mr. Shaw’s own adolescence.

Elsewhere you find Mr. Shaw’s dream drawings. Penciled in comic book frames in a deadpan, illustrative style, they detail banal and bizarre episodes with an equal lack of affect — as if they were made by a police sketch artist. Most involve some form of bodily function or sexual activity — hetero-, homo-, sadistic, masochistic, masturbatory, scatological and otherwise. They are delightfully creepy. Each has a descriptive title, like “I was elsewhere working on a folding paper puzzle & got a parking ticket with my sister & her kids & my folks & I swore.” Another is described as “A comic book by Tom of Finland in his early heterosexual days, about a disaffected college student.” A psychoanalyst would have a field day with these drawings.

Mr. Shaw’s collections on the exhibition’s middle floor tell a lot about his sources of inspiration. One side presents “The Hidden World,” a fascinating installation of vernacular religious materials including eerily bland Christian magazines and vinyl record album covers and big and small charts representing esoteric readings of the Bible. The collection intimates the existence of a subcultural underground promising peace of mind and supernatural knowledge for the gullible and the superstitious.

The gallery’s other side displays offbeat paintings by amateurs from Mr. Shaw’s collection called “Thrift Store Paintings,” which caused a sensation in New York when it was exhibited at Metro Pictures in 1991 (and is now on loan by a German collector). Originally found in flea markets and secondhand stores, these paintings render all kinds of goofy, strange and scary fantasies often imitative of more famous artists like Dalí and Magritte, but without the art-schooled skills and sophistication. Lurid sexual and apocalyptic visions abound along with curiously mundane images like “Purple Toilet Paper and a Flower,” a luminous still-life painted in shades of purple with a sweetly tender touch on an 8-by-10-inch canvas.

Both the “Thrift Store Paintings” and the “Hidden World” collections can be regarded as works of art in their own right. As such, they reveal something that Mr. Shaw himself probably profoundly believes: that most people possess a capacity for visionary imagination whether or not they try to develop it consciously, and that electrifying forms of aesthetic and mystic beauty may be found in the lowest and least likely of places. Art, for Mr. Shaw, is a kind of religion, but it’s the opposite of dogmatic. It’s a way of opening up without prejudice to the unknowns and the unknown unknowns of the universe. He proffers an infectiously expansive, ecumenical generosity whose equal is hard to find anywhere else in today’s art world.