

JIM SHAW
STRANGE BEAUTIFUL
12 September - 2 November, 2019

Uncle Sam, sickened by Gremlins from the Kremlin. Checkers, Richard Nixon's dog. Brett Kavanaugh, a judge accused of rape, appointed to the Supreme Court by Donald Trump. Mark Zuckerberg, one of the new masters of the world. Jim Shaw's recent paintings are swarming with grotesque and nefarious figures evoking contemporary American history. Yet, even if these works drip with a sharp satirical intent, we are not dealing with a form of political art, for instance, AgitProp – the creation of an ideological community around a form or an idea. Jim Shaw's historical models are more distinctively anachronistic, closer to History Painting as it was practiced at the end of the nineteenth century. History Painting brought together discursive tools stemming from a critical rationalist tradition, alongside allegorical images. Another reference of Shaw's, older still, is Hieronymus Bosch's hermetic and nightmarish visions, the intent of which remains, even today, half a millennium after their creation, the subject of the most contradictory interpretations.

Jim Shaw's images are aggregates of heterogeneous sources, moments of personal histories and fragments of collective cultural history. If a number of them seem to be the product of hallucinations, shaped by dream logic, they are nevertheless foreign to the heritage of European Surrealism. There is no intent to unveil the inner states of the soul or psyche. Dreams are treated above all as a kind of associative machine, capable of articulating in a single pictorial space, vernacular narratives that up until then were seen as antithetical. While Shaw's non-artistic references remain unknown to a large number of contemporary art viewers, they nevertheless belong to a field that by definition is open to all: that of daily popular culture.

In these paintings, the régime of representation predominates over History writ large. Every idea is above all an image that exists in the world, and precedes its appropriation by the artist. Thus at the center of *The Milk Separator* (2019) is a 1950s domestic appliance that is meant to improve the daily chores of housewives. In Jim Shaw's work, the form of this object is strangely similar to that of the demonic bird in Bosch's 1501 painting, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. According to art historians, this animal symbolized a crooked figure of the Law, a corrupt lawyer in the service of the powerful. This household

appliance with multiple cultural and political meanings is surrounded with a dozen portraits of Brett Kavanaugh, a judge whose career had up until now been distinguished by his radical opposition to women's reproductive rights, and whose nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court required an unfathomable number of ethical contortions. These material deformations allude to one of Shaw's first series, *Distorted Faces* (1978), but also to a formal effect easily obtained with the earliest Xerox machines, a ubiquitous production tool of the anti-establishment visual culture of the late 1970s. As to the background of the canvas, it mimics in painted form the printer ink smears characteristic of the silkscreened paintings of Christopher Wool – an artist readily associated with the graphic counter-culture of that era.

Deeply erudite but also anti-authoritarian, produced out of a masterly process of improvisation, Jim Shaw's paintings continue to incarnate, 40 years on, a uniquely strange beauty.

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(Translated by Charles Wolfe)

#JimShaw
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