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Misrepresented: The Portraiture of Jim Shaw

Jim Shaw is a victim of mistaken identity. Lumping Shaw's *oeuvre* into a long lineage of American Post-Pop is a common error - an understandable one, considering that formally Shaw's work is often graphic, colorful, and eye-popping. Yet "Pop" is not the right label to describe his work. Pop is too rational, too mainstream, too much about surface. It speaks in short sentences-like Lichtenstein cartoon bubbles's "*Blam!*" or "*KaBoom!*", Warhol's laconic one liners "*I think everybody should like everybody.*". Visually and conceptually easy to consume, the seductive power of Pop art operates according to the same logic as commercial advertising.

Shaw is not so easy to digest. He eschews a signature style, preferring to deliberately stylize his paintings, sculptures, and drawings all over the map. His cultural references are found on the fringes of the popular and often require specific research or explanation to appreciate the depths of their significance. Countercultural strains of Americana capture Shaw's attention-psychedelia, sci-fi, UFOology, conspiracy theories, exploitation films, religious cults, outsider art, thrift-store kitsch as well as the unbounded weirdness of his own dream life. The jingle-like language of Pop has been transformed into rambling, run-on sentences that describe fragmented ideas, associative thoughts and schizophrenic images. Too strange, too perverse, too lurid, too precise: Shaw is an elusive character that defies categorization.

Yet in the end, Shaw likes mistaken identities. A consummate portraitist, Shaw has foiled the traditional expectations for this genre. Not only are artists anticipated to render the subject's true likeness, they are supposed to be able capture the sitter's "inner" qualities. Since beginning his *Distorted Face* series in 1978, Shaw has diffused these representational conventions in favor of a practice of painting and drawing that mirrors, according to the artist, the great Beatnik writer William Burroughs' cut-ups, imitating his "fractured style." Shaw has made large-scale, oil paintings (as well as works on paper) of recognizable celebrities as John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood as well as figures in his own art world coterie such as friend and LA colleague Mike Kelley, art dealers such as Hudson, or patrons such as François Pinault. More extreme than standard caricature, Shaw focused on creating a detailed, full frame rendering of the subject's face, morphing, stretching, twisting and displacing the features so that they become almost alien, yet their original identities remain legible.

The *Noir* series emerged in parallel to the *Distorted Faces* portraits-the closest thing to pure Pop in Shaw's *oeuvre*. The artist made exquisite portraits using pencil and airbrushed paint of "stock" Hollywood characters such as the femme fatale, or the hard-boiled private eye. While not deformed in any obvious manner, these images are composed to intensify the expression of fear and foreboding on the depicted characters' faces. It is as if these two series were engaged in an imaginary exchange-the *Noir* characters look upon the *Distorted Faces* with horror. In later portrait series, Shaw invented other elaborate means of subverting conventional representation. In 1992, Shaw began made photo realistic portraits of sitters such as *Untitled (Giant Face Painting)* (1992) in a style reminiscent of Chuck Close, and then broke up the paintings into a grid of 616 squares that were mixed up and recomposed into a monumental, garbled portrait. Shaw was interest in seeing if "there was anything left of a personality when its decomposed and mixed with another face."

Shaw has described his practice of portraiture as being "violent," even "sadistic"-and has connected his early interest in the genre with such B-movie paraphernalia as the *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine covers and the sensationalism of *The National Enquirer*. Portraits seem to incarnate the fantastical or gory special effects used in the cult films documented in these types of publications-even subliminally referencing Shaw's actual experience working on special effects for horror and science fiction flicks such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (1988) and *Earth Girls are Easy* (1989).

These three decades worth of intriguing portraits might reveal more about the artist who is behind them than the sitters themselves. Shaw's obsessive preoccupations with distorted forms of representation has appeared in numerous later bodies of work such as his series of *Dream Objects and Drawings*-and most particularly in his ensemble of found Thrift Store Paintings in which the artist initially collected "the fuck-up portrait". Like these found pictures-painted by anonymous amateurs and bought from the Salvation

Army-it is crucial for Shaw's art practice to allow for unintended meanings, and even mistaken identities. As he has said of his own process, "A lot of times my misinterpretations would give a more mythic quality than the 'intended' meanings. Like misunderstood song lyrics, as a kid, my interpretations of them meant more to me than a normal reading." Without the lofty, psychoanalytical pretensions of European Surrealism, Shaw has proposed his a homegrown version of this avant-garde movement-recycling the eccentric flotsam of Middle America and mixing it with his own unconscious. Uninhibited by the constraints of naturalism or conventional logic-thanks in large measure to his propensity for associative thinking-it is only natural that Shaw's approach to portraiture would revel in what most would consider misrepresentation. This collection of portraits might only showcase one aspect of Shaw's heterogeneous oeuvre, yet they aptly reflect his general life ethos, " to understand the meaning of life through misinterpretation."

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All citations from Jim Shaw have been taken from a conversation between him and Mike Kelley entitled "Here Comes Everybody" (1999)