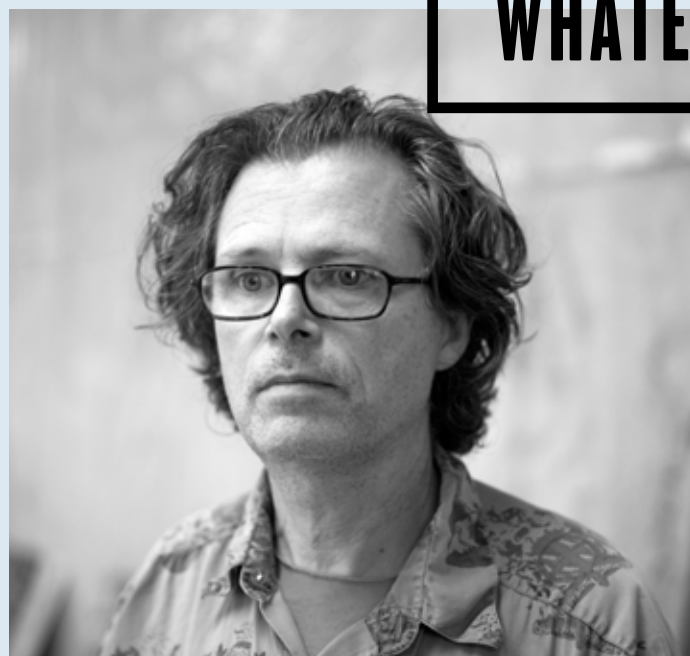


# JIM SHAW — SOME INNER DMT, OR WHATEVER IT IS



The artist (b. 1952 in Midland, Michigan) is seriously funny. He is deadpan. He says 'William Blake' and 'Captain Beefheart' in the same breath without batting an eyelid, and comes off entirely sincere. He lives up to the mood swings and twisted juxtapositions of his artworks, which I've come to regard as kind of high-low mixers on the wrong side of the tracks. On the guest-list: trolls, Max Ernst allusions, and is that a giant butt? Well, if it's going to be this kind of party, I want in. What can I bring? A vintage book of medical illustrations, in which the ailing are, for reasons unspeci-

fied, always depicted in the nude? No. Shaw's already got one of those in his Los Angeles studio, among a banquet of other references (or as the artist calls it: 'crap'). When I visit his workspace, I tell Shaw I could spend a lifetime in there reading up on conspiracy theories, pulp detectives, and classic political cartoons. He shrugs. 'I also had a lot of records in the hallway, but the fire-inspector said "no."'

There isn't room for an awkward silence between us; that seat's taken by music from the stereo, which is always on, and always rather loud. Shaw is a musician himself. In 1973,

along with a vacuum cleaner, artist Mike Kelley and other notables, he founded Destroy All Monsters, an 'anti-rock' band. Shaw still plays the reunion shows.

*'It's about pot,' Shaw says. 'What is? The artwork?'*

*'No. The first four songs are about pot,' he says. Oh. The music on the stereo, that's right.*

*On the topic of tuning in: I remember, roughly four years ago, standing in a museum, just staring at a 22.9 x 30.5 cm pencil-drawn phantasmagoria from Shaw's Dream Drawings series. Though pale against the white wall, the piece raised its hand so much more aggressively than brighter, bigger works by other artists nearby, replete as it was with pop-culture somebodies and everyday nobodies, could-be genitals, hairy creatures and futuristic architectures.*

*Shaw's work doesn't feel forced. It isn't weird for weird's sake, nor savagely pathological. They're difficult pieces — to execute, as well as to digest. I quote Shaw, explaining one work-in-progress: 'There are some variations of Francis Ba-*

*con here, then I somehow work my way over to Blake, also with a lot of references to Led Zeppelin...' Each project is more elaborately pokerfaced than the other: a religion called Oism, collections of largely anonymous thrift store paintings (some fake, some authentic), an ear as functional lounge chair, a nose as functional lamp, muscle-men, beehives and moustaches, legs-for-teats. Shaw is writing a prog-rock rock opera, now. 'I'm working on it, when I have time,' which he's starved for — 'Especially when everybody's expecting something big and impressive,' he says. 'It's crazy. It never used to be this way.'*

**KT** *What was your idea of the artist before you were an artist?*

**JS** Drunk bearded man living in his studio, doing whatever he wants.

**KT** *Did you aspire to that?*

**JS** No. The one night I spent in my studio, I got really sick. I know that fumes aren't good for you.

**Right:**  
*Labyrinth: I Dreamed I Was Taller Than Jonathan Borofsky*  
Installation comprised of acrylic on muslin canvas stretched over plywood panels  
Variable dimensions  
Courtesy Gallery Praz-Delavallade Paris  
Photo credit: CAPC / Mairie de Bordeaux  
Photo: F. Deval  
2009



Still, it was easier to be a broke artist in the seventies than it is now. I mean, I wasn't that bohemian, I wasn't involved in crazy orgies, but I did have plenty of time to dawdle. I didn't think about a career when I got out of school. I went to art openings, I saw a lot of bands. Everything was cheaper back then. L.A. is very expensive now. Being alive is very expensive now.

When I got out of school, though, nobody depended on the market because there was no market. I had no expectations of ever making any money. The moment you have those expectations, everything changes. The moment you get used to having some income, everything changes.

But back then, I assumed I would never make a living doing art. I thought I would always work six months of the year doing Special Effects and if I was lucky, I would make enough from art to pay for time off from my 'day job.' Then the art took over.

**KT** *Can you actually pinpoint the date?*

**JS** Around 1989. I had to make more art for more shows, and I couldn't afford to stop. We bought a house, I had a mortgage payment to make, then the art world crashed. I tried to work in Special Effects again, but after a couple years away, I couldn't. The nature of it had changed too much.

**KT** *Does your Special Effects background inform your artwork?*

**JS** To the extent that I can 'pre-plan' rather than just sit there waiting to see what comes out. It made me more organized. But my current projects are hatching slowly; so much thought goes into them. I'm having to work harder to dig out nuggets of inspiration. It's a matter of not having time to think.

I want to be doing my own comic books that deal with Superman and the mythos of Superman, and bear an absurd relationship to Blake. Instead of being inspired by visions of angels, they're inspired by what eight to ten year old boys might buy. They

have all these cataclysmic elements representing aspects similar to Blake's Ezekiel's Wheel, or The Book of Revelation. Like a corporate vision of fantasies, defined as much by the corporate bottom-line as by individual inspiration. I'm still hoping for that individual inspiration in those books. It will take a while. I've got a lot of bodies of work to do, and not enough time to do them.

**KT** *You sound frustrated.*

**JS** Absolutely. I mean, there is a perverse pleasure to rendering something within an inch of its life, but if only I could just have it be there. Everything takes time. Between this and my daughter, there's hardly any time all.

**KT** *Having a child changes the way you work, I suppose.*

**JS** It changes the way you work, it changes the way you socialize. Once you have a kid, you're cut off from a community of artists, and you become part of a community of artists-with-kids.

I mean, artists were having kids back in the fifties and sixties, but with the advent of the birth control pill, that became an extreme rarity.

There's no money for the arts in the U.S, so we [Shaw is married to artist Marnie Weber] have to go abroad to have shows. I would just as soon Skype my shows and not go anywhere. I don't like taking my shoes off for security and being exposed to diseases on the plane. I certainly don't like to drag my daughter through that. She's ten. We took her abroad for Marnie's show in Paris, and she slept all day long, and stayed up all night every night.

Our daughter has no interest in becoming an artist, and I can't blame her. She sees how much work we go through. Of course, she's going to have to put a lot of work into whatever she does, she just doesn't know that yet. She wants to be a fashion designer. It's all that *Project Runway* she's been watching, though she's not supposed to watch TV when there's school. We actually got rid of our TV so she wouldn't

watch Hannah Montana. I got completely out of the habit of watching TV too.

**KT** *That's a big deal for you, isn't it? I mean, aren't you missing a key source of pop-culture inspiration for your work?*

**JS** Well, I still have super-market tabloids. I've been even more out of the loop since we moved our computer to my wife's studio. Maybe it's a good thing to be. I don't want all that noise infecting my life.

**KT** *But that noise might result in artwork.*

**JS** Yeah, but I need to be away from it sometimes. I go visit my parents in Michigan, they're deaf, so they put the TV on full blast and walk away from it. There's no place in the house where you can think.

**KT** *You go back to Michigan often?*

**JS** In a moment of madness I bought a house in my hometown. It's an architectural monument by Frank Lloyd Wright's former student, and I wish I could live in it every day. I'm going to my fortieth High School Reunion in a month and a half. That will be weird. Sometimes I think about moving back. Now, so much culture comes through Netflix and the internet, that you could be in a place like that and still be okay. I would miss my L.A. friends, but I don't see that much of them anyway.

**KT** *If you left, would you miss the L.A. 'art world'?*

**JS** No, I don't see much of it, anyway. I'm a fuddy-duddy. It's hard for me to even think of a new artist I'm excited about because I just don't go out much to the shows anymore. Occasionally, I have a student who I think is going to become a big star someday, but I'm giving up on teach-

ing. I'm not good at it. I read twenty pages and remember three things. I teach one day a week, spend two days researching my talk, then remember very little of what I've researched. My brain doesn't absorb enough for me to make scholarly pretensions. I do not have a photographic memory. I've got a mind like a sieve.

**KT** *But your work is so packed with detailed memories and information!*

**JS** Still not good enough.

**KT** *There's even writing in your artwork...*

**JS** All the dream images have text. And if I do a comic book, the words and images will be married. Blake is sort of the originator of marrying image and text.

I grew up in a small town where books and magazines were the only way you received art, but I have a fear of writing myself. I always feel like I haven't done enough research or don't have enough inspiration. When inspiration does come, I can sit there and let it flow, but it's not easy to come by. Any good inspiration is inexplicable, I think. Though I do love having conversations with angels on a regular basis.

That's what Blake did. He had a direct line to heaven. In my Oism project now, I'm interested in that moment creators of religion have when they're attacked by some inner-DMT, or whatever it is that makes them hallucinate a flood of images, whether it's a flaming bush or bronze tablets. Certain artists have had moments of inspiration they can't explain later, too. I find that interesting.

**KT** *In old interviews, you've said you're drawn to thrift store paintings for a similar reason.*

**JS** Yeah, to me, the most interesting thing about those works is that I don't know

what any of the artists were thinking. Maybe if I were to find out, I'd think: 'That's not that interesting.' I had a couple experiences like that. One guy saw his painting in the book [Thrift Store Paintings], called me up and said [imitating a Southern Gentleman]: 'Do I sue ya, or ask ya for a copy?'

Someone also came up to me at a show in Hawaii and said, 'Oh, I had given that piece to my sister-in-law. She said it was stolen from her garage!' We agreed the woman would tell her sister-in-law, 'There's a great show in town!' and trap her into seeing the painting there. But I wasn't around for that moment. It would have been nice. Any-

way, I found out more about that painting, too.

**KT** *And were you disappointed by the findings?*

**JS** I wasn't that disappointed, but it did have a mundane reason for existing. That shouldn't keep a painting from being an interesting painting. I guess. I should really stand up straight. All the repetitive motion of working gets too much, my neck and arm get paralyzed. I have to do yoga. It used to be that my eyes would bug out of my head and that would be the point at which I stopped, now my arm just goes on strike. I am a semi-perfectionist ●



**1:**  
*Nose sculpture wall sconce (Latino)*  
Mixed media, light & cord  
88.9 x 52 x 49.4 cm  
Courtesy Metro Pictures,  
New York  
2007

**2:**  
*Untitled (Zombie)*  
Airbrush & pencil on paper  
203.2 x 135.3 cm  
Courtesy Metro Pictures,  
New York  
2007



**1:**  
*Forces of Nature / Multiple Vortexes*  
 Ink on paper  
 35.6 x 28 cm  
 Courtesy Marc Jancou Contemporary, New York and Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris  
 Photo: LeeAnn Nickel, Los Angeles  
 2010

**2:**  
*Blake / Boring*  
 Ink on paper  
 30.5 x 23 cm  
 Courtesy Bernier / Eliades Gallery, Athens and Patrick Painter Inc., Santa Monica  
 Photo: LeeAnn Nickel, Los Angeles  
 2010

**3:**  
*Forces of Nature / Multiple Vortexes*  
 Ink on paper  
 23 x 30.5 cm  
 Courtesy Bernier / Eliades Gallery, Athens and Patrick Painter Inc., Santa Monica  
 Photo: LeeAnn Nickel, Los Angeles  
 2010

**4:**  
*Dream Object: Paperback Cover (Superheroes)*  
 Gouache on rag board mounted on plywood  
 24 x 15.9 cm  
 Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York  
 2009

