

## Tony Oursler Interviews: Jim Shaw

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TO: You have produce an enormous body of mysterious and beautiful objects which spin out of the infernal vortex of your dream interpretations. Dreams are the endless source of your graphics, sculpture and installations. Jim, how did this begin?

JS: Back in the mid to late 80's, when I started having dreams that included very interesting art work, I started thinking geez I gotta make some of these. Initially these dream art works were by other people, different fine and commercial artists of the 60's. By the time I was making art on a full time basis the dreams started being about my own art, so that kinda screwed with that original concept of just presenting a pile of other artists works from my dreams.

TO: Historically, the Surrealists are best known for working the dream into visuals with the advent of the subconscious and psychotherapy. It's not until the florescent wall paintings of Johnathan Borovsky in the late 70's that someone seriously approached this area again.

JS: yeah Borovsky,

TO: Coincidentally he was teaching at California Institute of the Arts when you and I first met there.

JS: I was trying to distance myself from Borovsky, not because I didn't like the work but because I didn't want to be imitating him, or Magritte and Dali. I mean you can't just go out and do Surrealist paintings today, an illustration of the dream in Technicolor. The first works I produced were drawings, they may not have been that different from Borovsky except that they were drawn in a completely different style, and they were more obsessive about the details.

TO: Surrealism referenced the subconscious which was relevant at that time, and Borovsky referenced a sort of dystopic psychedelic hippie culture but they both share identity issues. Your

vision is apocalyptic; you are not using the dream strategy to unlock the self. You present us with the permeability of self, one that has given way to POP cultural elements that become signifiers of identity.

JS: My initial idea was to make the objects I dreamt. They had to be art objects, anything from comic book pages to fine art things to commercial art but they more or less had to be represented as they were in the dream. So if there was a Dali painting I made a Dali painting as it appeared in the dream with holes cut in it. It was an object itself, not a picture of the object in the dream landscape. The idea was to have the dream come true at least in regards the artworks. My intention was to reproduce something as drab as most of the dreams are, like you are walking down the hall at work and you realize you've got an erection and no pants, but you can only draw that so many times... drabness got supported by the more fascinating nightmarish stuff as it was more fun to draw.

TO: I've always felt you've been really present in relation to all things pop, I see in your work a seeping of corporate culture into the subconscious but also in the other direction your project suggests a lot these avant garde strategies are adapted as corporate sales in ways we didn't expect, like you see Carnival cruise ad have the narcotic Pop/Bowie tune 'Lust for Life'.

JS: yeah the first time I saw an ad with Lou Reed in it, it was kinda cool, but William Burroughs, I was like 'Oh God!' well the first time I saw it was kinda cool, by the third time I understood all the ramifications...

TO: What do you think about that Jim?

JS: I've seen things from Marnie's last show end up on a TV commercial. I could swear something from my last show, showed up in a TV commercial: a little moment in some big special effects extravaganza. I know that you're just looking for something to steal when your in advertising because you only have a week of development time and you don't want to come up with some entirely avant-garde idea because no one will be able to understand it in that blink of an eye that they've got to watch the commercial or that billboard, so you want something that's pre-understood or sub-consciously understood. The whole revolutionary aspect of Surrealism doesn't pan out in that process, it's a horrible thing the all absorbing consumer culture. But on the

other hand, speaking as someone who lived a poor Bohemian lifestyle, through the entire 70's and much of the 80's it gets kinda tired after a while, the moment you buy a house or have a kid, you almost have to join that endless gravy train of credit cards and credit card payments,

TO: even the way you say it suggests a dream state, I can see people walking down this long road of credit cards like the Wizard of Oz, but its all AMEX cards, AMEX gold cards stretched to the horizon which leads me to your last exhibition at Metro Pictures Gallery in New York: themes of separation, decapitation and castration, flow through the elegant paintings drawings and sculptures why is this important to you now?

JS: I had less and less time for the recent shows and now that I have a daughter we have very little time, exhibitions ended up being more particularized in the service of various themes, and then as I was working on this bunch of thematized artwork I would have further dreams which would then be in the show if I had the time to get them done, like the bust that was sliced that was dreamt up during the creation of the show, it's basically the same cast that the breathing sculpture was made from. Also the Flash sculpture, they seemed important to that theme.

TO: I always think of castration or that separation of head and body as a product of media culture in general. A cultural fantasy engine pushing the head away from the body into a sort of dream state; faux pleasure to placate an unrequited population.

JS: One thing that wasn't dreamt of was the drawing of the guys in suits; I was in a beta state when I thought of that, at tail end of a succession of a series of particularized body part drawings that sort of gave the aesthetics of color field and abex paintings but they were all made out of figurative body parts. The suit and tie represents the castrations, its symbolic that in order to get paid more money: 'I will adopt this stultifying routine I will go golfing on weekend with my bosses, I will separate myself more and more from my life, my human life, in order to succeed.' Today this separation is complete and our desires are completely channeled into consumption, away from survival.

TO: You did a lot to succeed, before you could support yourself through art, you worked in the animation and special effects industry. There you picked up the skills to produce some wonderful animations for your own work in various styles from new age computer mandalas to Hanna

Barbara cartoons. You and I share the desire to cross over, to make art in contexts outside of the art world, how was the Hollywood experience?

JS: well I always interested in special effects, (I still have on my mirage piece stop motion animation that I haven't finished yet) and I was always anal retentive enough to be good at it, the problem was I couldn't bite my tongue long enough to succeed in advertising. The first six years was spent working on TV commercial, well the first thing I worked on was the most interesting but it never got made, it was Terrence Malick's follow up to Days of Heaven, a dialogue-less movie about creation. Well then there was the love scene that you didn't see in Tron. 'Nightmare on Elm Street part 4' was probably my proudest Hollywood credit. I worked on the 'Hidden' and did a couple of scenes in the 'Abyss' and Japanese thrill ride which ended up Inside the Mind's Eye Part 1. I did some stuff for 'Johnny Quest', that was my last professional job.

TO: Your subconscious is a cultural magnet and your studio is a fantastic personal library. What do you collect now?

JS: well I'm trying to cut down a bit, because we are going to have to cut off our daughter from TV because right now shes pretty heavily addicted, I collect records and Christian comic books and non-christian comic books public access moments, paperbacks, generalized weird stuff and thrift store paintings, lately I've been collecting odd looking dolls that look all wrong.

TO: A few years ago you developed a major exhibition of hundreds art works by artist outside the main stream who produced what you call 'thrift store paintings'. This amazing exhibition toured the US and Europe and was accompanied by a lavish book. Conceptually the project had a great impact on the art public and the high/low dialogue. The issues surrounding this exhibition are important to our generation politically and artistically, and seem to echo around studios today.

JS: well it wasn't exactly conceptual, it was taken as conceptual because I went to Cal Arts, sort of like the dreams it took on a life of its own. Actually, it was inspired by the fact that paperbacks started becoming collectibles and that offended me; they weren't going to 10 cents anymore, because someone had decided to put out a price guide. I thought, I have these interesting paintings and you couldn't really say one was worth more than the other and they were easy to store. Basically, I went to thrift stores driving across the country. I just started finding more and

more strange paintings that suggested perverse aspects of Americana. A Playboy playmate with mysterious stains on her nipples. First a lady I was checking books out from at the Brand art library in Pasadena recognized my name as an artist and she recommended that I do a show in the library exhibition space. So I showed the thrift store paintings there. The most interesting aspect of these works is that the meanings and intentions of the artists are unknown: anyone's interpretation is as good as mine. Ed Ruscha and Dana Rusha saw the exhibition, and they decided to publish the book version of it and at that point I knew something was gonna go amiss, I knew they'd suddenly go from being valueless to having some value. It's my fault...

TO: what makes a POP image, like a smiley face, I guess a smiley face is a good example more POP than other images

JS: you mean something out of the art world that becomes part of the popular culture, or something that is intended to be part of the popular culture, like Blue Dog... God only knows...

TO: I wanna go back to the dreams, there's that tension between constructing identity and a collective unconscious at play in your work. Are you being constructed by your unconscious or are you just morphing the index

JS: I'm constructed, educated by my sub-conscious. Sometimes I'm very dense, I don't get the lesson the first time. A lot of times there is no lesson. Only certain dreams are life changing events, they don't happen everyday. Everyday dreams are a reiteration of neuroses. The idea that dreams are wish fulfillment is bunk, I never get what I want in these dreams, ever. My shrink said that someone did a psychological study that proved worry was the basis of your subconscious; the pleasure principle is extremely secondary.

TO: Makes sense, trying to work things out in there. It's not all a wet dream. A friend once told me he worked harder when he was asleep than when he was awake...

JS: It would be good if you could just record your dreams, so you wouldn't have to do any of this other work, put Hollywood out of business...

TO: Freud, Jung, Shaw. What are your personal theories about the subconscious?

JS: I'm conflicted. I've had flashes of insight here and there but I can't always recall...My subconscious is variable, extremely malleable. Early versions of psycho analysis is probably not true, like in 'Spellbound' where suddenly you remember one thing and it triggers this traumatic childhood memory and solves all your problems. The closest I've come to my subconscious problems is the 'trauma of the gifted child'. It's sort of what your parents, family and society give you every day over and over again especially through withheld, conditional love, that effects your psychology. This is much more important than some traumatic thing. You're fucking lucky if that traumatic thing is what caused your problems, because if your problem has been drummed into your head day in and day out for fourteen years it takes an eternity to get out of your head...That sort of self-hatred I grew up with is endemic to American culture, that is always gonna be there in my psyche.

TO: to hate yourself...

JS: I think America lives on that, at least the commercialized version of that...

TO: can you elucidate?

JS: you wouldn't be buying all these products if you loved yourself; what do we need all this crap for? Back to the mortgage payments, after we bought the house I was doing OK, we were so broke, which was monotonous, but we didn't care. One day I had to go to a mall and I felt so bad that I couldn't afford this stuff that was on display and it was the first time it actually hit me that I was a pauper and my inability to partake in the gravy train meant I was a lesser person. I just hadn't noticed till the mall.

TO: I think this all connects to escapist thinking, compulsive entertainment, addiction and drugs. Your art is very psychoactive.

JS: I never did much hallucinogens. I did ecstasy for the first time when I started My Mirage, it was sort of a turning point. I had so many ideas that day that it expanded the scope of the show and for the first time ever I was happy. Before that I thought people that said they were happy were just lying and I didn't think it was a real state. Maybe there was temporary joy, but

happiness didn't seem like a possibility, but chemically induced happiness isn't quite happiness. The second time I took it, it had half as much impact the first time, the third time it had quarter the impact, so it wasn't very addictive. But I haven't been a drug user since my early special effects days,

TO: Do you see your project inducing an altered state, Dali said he didn't need LSD because he was LSD.

JS: Sometime I'll be walking along and I'll see some pattern on the side walk or moss or peeling paint and suddenly I'll see all sorts of aesthetic applications paintings, sculptures, computer graphic etc. My brain has a facility for that and in my dreams it comes out... I'm sure you've had dreams where you seen something extremely complicated: it relates to the spinal column, DNA, the cosmos, Once you see it that's one thing, to make is another thing. It's frustrating. While I was setting up the show I had this dream about a complicated piece, it was the end all and be all of dream object. I just know it's gonna take at least 2 months to produce this one object that took a split second to dream.

TO: that's what you are working on now?

JS: no, no it's for a future project, it might be the last dream object I do. It was like a shrouded landscape in rectangular elevated form, but it was a junk heap of every dream object I ever made in miniature. On top was this character out of a turn of the century symbolist painting of the whore of Babylon, sitting on a throne on the back of multi headed, multi horned beast with a cup in her hand, which I've only seen collaged into a mickey-mouse psychedelic poster of my youth. I have no idea who did the original.