

MASONIC BOOM

Jim Shaw gets a long overdue L.A. homecoming at the new Marciano Art Foundation.

BY **MICHAEL SLENSKE** PORTRAIT BY **STEVEN PERILLOUX**

SEATED ON A TINY CRATE INSIDE A vaulted guesthouse-turned-studio, behind a modest two-bedroom Altadena home where he once lived, Jim Shaw is very busy applying tiny black strokes of acrylic to a large white canvas whose two-toned tempest appears to vibrate with doom. Like the painting, the space itself is a case study in controlled chaos; a collector's horde in the early stages of recovery. There are dozens of in-progress canvases tacked to or leaning against the walls and numerous shelves, bins, and boxes brimming with reference materials—be it books on DHEA, the “health hormone,” or William Irish’s “I Married A Dead Man.” In one corner, a makeshift recording studio is covered with purple towels and filled with Fender amps, toy keyboards and a melange of mixers. Across the room, there is a framed and signed photo from the Mexican “King of Space Age Pop” Juan García Esquivel. Beneath it are stacks of CDs piled high atop two grey flat files, one whose drawers are filled with Comics, Special Effects and Other People’s Naive Art amongst other things.

“You know, I get visions or whatever, and those visions often involve chaos,” explains Shaw, who’s been known to wear flashy clothes of his own design (including a vibrant jacket he made with Agnes B.). But on this sunny March morning he is more muted in dress and spirit, wearing olive-colored khakis blotted with rainbow constellations of paint, a loose-fitting blue button-up and two pairs of eyeglasses stacked atop one another—hanging off the tip of his slender nose—as some form of DIY bifocal. His greying mane is decidedly raucous, however, cresting over his ears in a maelstrom of undulating waves and eddies that appear to mimic the painting he has in progress.

This correlation between Shaw’s meticulously rendered images and his hair—however incidental—is somehow fitting given that his biggest solo institutional show in L.A. to date, “Jim Shaw: The Wig Museum,” opening May 25 at the Marciano Art Foundation will attempt to tease out connections between the actual political power of hair throughout history (from British jurist wigs to Trump/Bannon mops). It will also tackle Masonic theories as they relate to the anti-Christ in Muslim and Masonic traditions, STEM (science, technology, electronics and math) as the Instagram era’s anti-Christ, a potential performance incorporating music for the final movement of his decades-old prog rock opera, and the use of props and

backdrops as a vehicle for Boschian allegories of Superman’s fall from grace, atomic war, schizophrenia and spectrum disorders.

“I think I have Asperger’s to some extent,” admits Shaw calmly between brushstrokes. “I don’t think you can make art like I make without having some relative form” of autism. He also believes “without being a psychoanalyst” that he’s a manic schizoid. When you step back and consider the sheer volume and complexity of work that Shaw, now 64, has created over the past four decades it’s hard to imagine that a mind outside the spectrum could keep such an expansive singularity of themes, sub-plots and micro-narratives connected in such brilliant, if any, fashion.

“Any time you go to Jim’s studio it’s like a deep lesson in mythological, esoteric or political history for five minutes or five hours. The guy just has an endless supply of information, stories and threads that he’s pulling through,” says Tim Blum, of Culver City’s Blum & Poe, Shaw’s longtime L.A. dealer which will open its own show of work complementing the Marciano show in June. “He’s like a cipher, it’s just all flowing through him, and he’s obviously hyper aware of the moment.”

The current moment—with North Korea, Syria, Iran, Russia and a post-Brexit Europe all on the brink with a Mad Tweeter in the Oval Office—seems to have coalesced every cunningly comic medium and perverted punk message Shaw has smuggled into his Pop Surrealist playbook over the years, and that is saying a lot. His 2015 retrospective at the New Museum, which was preceded by a large show at MASS MoCA, dug deep but barely scratched the surface. Together these efforts featured Shaw’s canonical collection of thrift store paintings and spiritual ephemera from various cults and fringe groups (including the Mormons, Scientologists and Freemasons); a large number of his epic theater backdrop allegories; videos from a project about his works on a fictional religion he concocted called Oism and his five-years-in-the-making *My Mirage* narrative tracking the life (via 170 labor-intensive paintings, drawings and objects) of Billy, the artist’s white, middle class analogue for his own 1950’s childhood in Midland, Michigan. He catalogued all the pop culture markers—pulp novels, records, toy soldiers—that influenced Billy’s early years before he became a hallucinogen-ingesting rocker/cult member and then a born-again Christian.

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Caption goes here.

in L.A. and it's a huge impact he's had on generations of artists, and we represent a lot of artists who have studied and worked alongside or were influenced by Jim and any gallery you can name in L.A. has artists who have been deeply impacted by Jim's practice." says Blum. "But historically there's been a problem where L.A. artists have to go to far flung places to get recognition and then later in the game they are embraced by the hometown."

One L.A.-based artist who escaped this fate was Shaw's late great friend, Mike Kelley. Shaw played guitar and Kelley played drums in the "anti-rock" band Destroy All Monsters which they founded with filmmaker Cary Loren and the model Niagara at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The two artists lived together in a hippie rooming house (with wild cats) called God's oasis before traveling to L.A. to attend CalArts in 1976. While Kelley scaled the highest echelons of the commercial and institutional art world before committing suicide at the age of 57 in 2012, Shaw toiled for years in the lowbrow ranks with intermittent surfacings for rare air with solo shows at LACMA, MoMA PS1 and an exhibition of his 2012 backdrop *Anal/ISIS* as part of the Encyclopedic Palace survey curated by Massimiliano Gioni for the 2013 Venice Biennale.

"Mike remains such a huge figure in the art world, and Jim just has a totally different personality and way of navigating it," says Blum. "Now maybe that some time has passed there's an allowance to look at Jim as Jim and not related to Mike."

Perhaps the world is listening. Shaw has three gallery exhibitions in 2017—in addition to Blum & Poe, he also is being shown at Milan's Massimo De Carlo and in the fall, will have a solo show at New York's Metro Pictures. To inaugurate the Marciano Foundation in May, Shaw was given free reign over a 35,000-square-foot gallery that once housed the 2,000-seat theater of the old Scottish Rite Masonic Temple on Wilshire. Designed in 1961 by Millard Sheets—which Kulapat Yantrasast has transformed into a four-story kunsthalle for the sizeable collection of Guess co-founders Maurice and Paul Marciano—is nothing short of epic. While it's fitting that Shaw is anchoring the foundation's opening, it wasn't conceived that way. Originally, the intention was to show some paintings of Shaw's as part of the collection, but that all changed when they invited him to the building during its early construction phases while it still contained its large masonic paraphernalia and theatrical backdrops.

"Most collectors don't own an installation that could readily dominate that kind of space," says Blum, who proposed "The Wig Museum" with Shaw, who had wanted to use the space for the installation after seeing the temple. "They were just like, 'Oh shit, what a perfect centerpiece.'"

As we walk to back porch of the main house, where Shaw shows me a maquette of the Marciano installation, he picks up a series of card-sized photocopies of his backdrop murals (some with morality play sets designed by the masons) that he intends to hang from the temple's 100-foot ceilings. "There is a lot of strange angles in all of this," explains Shaw, noting there will be paintings and drawings and towering plywood cutouts of an "obese Brit-politician pederast" as well as a large Electrolux vacuum ridden by George Washington sucking people into a masonic mural of a "double heaven" (with the fiery "double hell" in another section of the space) along with various painting and sculptural references to Barbara Bush and Aleister Crowley, the iPhone as the masonic Luciferian eye which adorns the

back of a dollar bill, and numerous works addressing the institutionalized sexual abuse of such orders.

"In the basement of the original Masonic temple there was a clinic for kids with aphasia and it had something kind of creepy which was two white mirrors so that they could film things as they were happening, whatever therapy the kids were going through," says Shaw, who informs me that it wasn't until he was in his 50's that he learned his father was a Mason, and only after he warned Shaw that he should not collect Shriners hats.

Shaw first became obsessed with wigs in late 2010 when he was plotting *The Rinse Cycle*, a Wagner-evoking mural depicting a chorus of bouffants floating over a surrealist desert-scape and the interior of a washing machine agitator with clothes spinning around during the titular cycle.

"The more I got into finding the images for those wigs I realized, 'Wow this is like an art form in itself, these hairstyles,'" he says, who also began making plaster casts of wigs, including one titled *Lois Lane Wig Edition*, which will appear in the exhibition along with a range of new wigs and others Shaw found in the masonic temple displayed on shelves and plinths inside the titular Wig Museum. He's even looking to tie in his wig fascination at Metro Pictures, where he intends to show paintings about President Trump and his recently-demoted consigliere Steven Bannon. "The wigs were a symbol of power starting with the French kings and Marie Antoinette. It went out of style but they still use them for the tourists," explains Shaw, leading me into the living room of the main house where he shows me various pencil drawings depicting various apocalyptic scenarios featuring Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, Moses and the Egyptian god Horus, Steve Jobs implanting an iPhone into the brain of Lex Luthor and more mushroom clouds than you'd ever want to imagine at this moment in history.

"Hopefully people can spend some time in there," says Shaw, who is also going to shoot footage of a host/curator of the Wig Museum played by an Australian actor he knows from his daughter's school.

Much like Paul McCarthy's orgiastic Snow White extravaganza, WS, at the Park Avenue Armory or Kelley's *Day is Done* musical at Gagosian (and later MOCA), Shaw's Marciano spectacle—which will hover over Adrian Villar Rojas' *Two Suns (II)* installation of a sleeping David being installed in the space below the old theater stage while simultaneously existing a floor below the 2014 Regen Projects film installation shot by Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch at the temple—should offer a total sensory assault like nothing he's ever done before, or what he might call "magical thinking within a manic mindset."

"I've known Jim's work for a long time. He makes sense on a content level because he's so interested in conspiracy theories and in his archive he's been interested in Masonic culture for a long time, and he's never really had a big show in L.A. and it's so overdue. Many people will say it's another private collector opening a museum, but they are doing projects like Jim's that no other institution here will do," says Philipp Kaiser, who is curating both "The Wig Museum" and "Unpacking: The Marciano Collection." "Many of the projects had to be site-responsive because it's so unique that you have a Masonic Temple as a museum so the inaugural show had to address that. And Jim became the perfect person to do it."



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