

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Peter Schjeldahl "America at the Edges, Shows by Jim Shaw and Maureen Gallace,"
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AMERICA AT THE EDGES

Shows by Jim Shaw and Maureen Gallace.



*A revolt against pieties: Shaw's
"Appliance Big Foot Parting
the Red Sea" (2013).*

Courtesy the Artist and Simon Lee Gallery, London
and Hong Kong

Perhaps the strangest of the many strange things about the jam-packed Jim Shaw retrospective at the New Museum is its equanimity. Chipper dispassion plays like dappled sunlight across the Los Angeles-based artist's determinedly freaky works—hundreds of drawings, paintings, collages, doctored photographs, videos—which are accompanied by pieces from his own collections of amateur paintings and crackpot-Christian and conspiracy-mongering tracts, books, banners, and other printed materials. The show's title, "The End Is Here," functions more as a carnival barker's come-on than as the panic button it suggests. This surprised me. Having long followed Shaw's torrential lumpen-Surrealist output, I fancied that it must flow from a

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heart of hysteria, if not of darkness. But Shaw turns out to be an even-tempered connoisseur of eccentricities—including his own, which he mines in comic-strip-like illustrations of his dreams. They are bizarre and often erotic in the way of anyone’s dreams, but he makes no evident claim that they are especially interesting, except as another—and, in this case, cost-free—species of crazy collectibles. (The most economical way of acquiring things is to make them yourself.) I have always deemed Shaw an important artist, although I was never sure why. Now I assess him as an epoch-defining aficionado of the very best in American bad taste.

Originally from Midland, Michigan, Shaw fatefully met the artist Mike Kelley at the University of Michigan, in the early nineteen-seventies. “We were the two weirdest kids there,” Shaw told me, at the museum. They helped start a chaotic rock band, Destroy All Monsters, then enrolled as graduate students at the avant-gardish California Institute of the Arts, in 1976, initiating what might be called the punkification of contemporary art: a plunge into the nerdish, scatological, and abject nether regions of popular culture. They pitted their work against the reigning elegancies of abstraction, minimalism, and conceptual art. “Pants Shitter & Proud,” an early textile banner by Kelley, the alpha of the pair, read. (Shaw told me, “Mike was the Cisco Kid. I was more like Pancho.”) Kelley, who died, an apparent suicide, in 2012, channelled the rage of an unhappy Catholic working-class childhood with phenomenal inventiveness, critical intelligence, and black humor. You can see his masterpiece, an assemblage titled “More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid,” at the Whitney Museum; a show at Hauser and Wirth presents his last major work, a cavernous installation of glowing imaginary cities,

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inspired by Superman mythology, and a hard-to-watch video of a sadomasochistic playlet.

The blast of fetid air from Kelley and Shaw, in association with the older Los Angeles provocateur sculptor Paul McCarthy, shook the art world. Critics vied to name the movement. “Just Pathetic,” coined in 1990 by the curator Ralph Rugoff, caught on, briefly. My proposal, “The New Low,” went nowhere. It is to the art’s honor that it defeated categorization, leading a revolt against the pieties of both art-schooled high art and sixties idealisms. The work exalted misfits, such as Billy, the incurable adolescent who is the hapless hero of Shaw’s voluminous series “My Mirage” (1986-91). Comic strips and psychedelia in a potpourri of styles borrowed from modern art and commercial design—Edvard Munch, Peter Max—track Billy’s excursions into the sixties counterculture, which he ultimately abandons for a wacky variant of evangelical Christianity. Religion is a recurring target for both Kelley and Shaw: bitterly in Kelley’s case, wonderingly in Shaw’s. Shaw went as far as to invent a sect, supposedly contemporaneous with the rise of Mormonism: O-ism, the worship of a goddess who must not be named.

At the New Museum, you can immerse yourself, to the point of exhaustion, in the swampy logics of this and of actual faiths. Want to know the roots of the ill-starred Branch Davidians? They’re here, as are images and exegeses of the relic sacred to J.F.K.-assassination adepts: the Zapruder film. Shaw’s fascination with didactic religiosities, from fundamentalism to cults, only seems satirical. Satire requires an appeal to reason, for which he evinces no use; rather, he empathizes with any

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attempt to slip the material coils of existence, even as he revels in expressing our post-Edenic disarray. He is a Gnostic manqué, perhaps.

But Shaw envisions human grotesquerie and folly with placid detachment, altering photographs of perfectly nice people to turn them into ogres, and making remorselessly vulgar mashups of classical and popular art forms. One big work, “The Deluge” (2014), painted on a stage backdrop of a harbor scene, combines stormy clouds from a Leonardo da Vinci drawing with images of Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint, from “North by Northwest.” The actors blend with a giant hand derived from the old Yellow Pages ads that urged, “Let your fingers do the walking.” Another piece, “Labyrinth: I Dreamt I was Taller than Jonathan Borofsky” (2009)—the title refers to another dream-inspired artist—is a huge installation of backdrops and standing wooden cutouts, painted in an expert pastiche of styles, from Picasso’s, in “Guernica,” to those of the editorial cartoonists Thomas Nast and Herblock.

“Labyrinth” incorporates allusions to the history of political corruption and violence, though the effect is vitiated by such antic distractions as a wafting Casper the Friendly Ghost in the panoramic paintings that surround it. Throughout the show, elements in Shaw’s agglomeration of symbols may excite amused if not queasy recognitions. But their meanings are opaque, secreting things that the artist knows and that we, short of a born-again revelation, will never find out.

I love the tiny landscape paintings of Maureen Gallace, currently on view at the 303 Gallery, so intensely that it worries me. Since the early nineteen-nineties, Gallace, who is from Connecticut and earned an M.F.A. at Rutgers University, in 1983, has been refreshing jaded art-

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world eyes with slightly abstracted views of New England cottages and barns, empty roads, and unpeopled beaches. She won fans early on with her work's retro look and exaggerated modesty. Though the appeal seemed self-conscious and a bit fey, it was fun, on days of gallery-going in Chelsea, to find yourself looking at her pictures of blocky, featureless little houses in vestigial, woodsy terrain. Then, in recent years, something started to take hold: a charm so powerful that it reordered my sense of what contemporary painting can be. The crux is a mind's surrender to—for want of a more precise word—nature, both external and internal to the artist.

Gallace's means are narrow: she employs uniformly quick, daubed brushwork and colors kept to a mid-range of tones that makes whites jump out. Her end is description, not of how things look but of how they seem. What is a breaking ocean wave like? Gallace answers with stabs of creamy off-white and gray-blue shadow. It's her best guess, as is the specific blue of the sky on the given day. In one picture, single blue strokes approximate tidal pools. Elsewhere, a slight touch of green in the sea hints at fathomless deeps. Qualities of light, too, feel gamely speculative. (To me, they tend to evoke morning hours, when the visible world, well rested, has something almost eager about it.) The houses often lack doors and windows. Gallace is plainly shy of anyone or anything that might even seem to return her gaze. She conveys a vulnerable aloneness wholly given over to absorption in appearances. Looking at the paintings, I feel that I am always just beginning to look.

Besides suggesting kinships to Edward Hopper's scenes of solitude and the meditative still-lives of the Italian modern master Giorgio Morandi,

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Gallace's way of painting—it hardly seems a style—has affinities with a New York tradition of painterly realism that was developed in the nineteen-fifties by Fairfield Porter and pursued by, among others, Jane Freilicher and Lois Dodd. But Gallace seems less to revive that impulse than to arrive at its basis, in a view of modern art that values the visual poetics of life observed in the living of it. (Porter, a superb critic as well as artist, liked to argue that modernism went astray by hewing to Cézanne rather than to Vuillard.) This accounts for the surprising force of her pictures. The effect is like a fresh invention of perceptual landscape painting, as if there had been no thought of it before. My joy in it may abate with time, but right now I want to launch a small, considerately quiet firework in Gallace's honor. ♦



Maureen Gallace, "October" (2014). Courtesy the artist and 303 Gallery