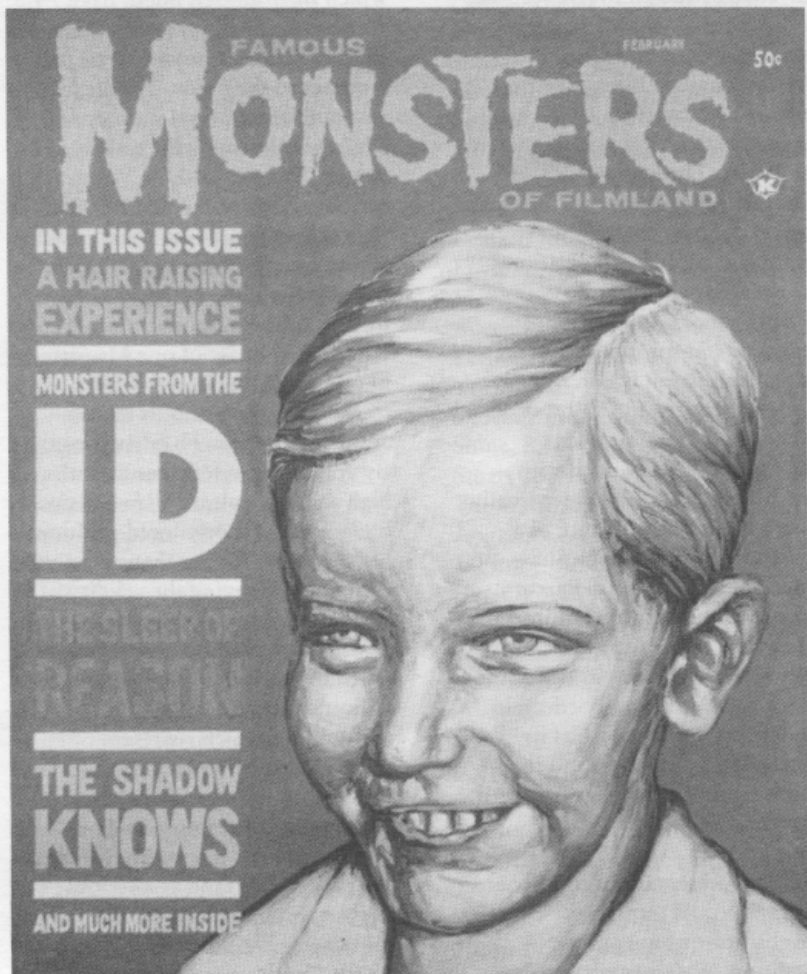


Jim Shaw
MATRIX/BERKELEY 141

University Art Museum
early November - late December
1990

Billy's Self-Portrait #1, 1986



Jim Shaw's *My Mirage* series, which was begun in 1985 and is nearing completion, comprises over one hundred identically scaled (17 x 14") works in a wide variety of media. This exhibition marks the first time that the series has been shown virtually in its entirety.

My Mirage is structured as a loosely knit but highly complex narrative divided into five sections or "chapters." Shaw's story revolves around the life of a character named Billy, who first appears as a rather innocent small-town American kid growing up in the 1960s. Through an extraordinary sequence of images and texts, Shaw charts Billy's youth and adolescence, marking the ever more bizarre disruptions of Billy's moral foundation. Sexuality and spirituality are the primary arenas in which Billy's struggle between the forces of "good" and "evil" unfolds. Having become involved with psychedelic drugs, Billy eventually comes under the influence of a quasi-satanic cult, which Shaw describes as "a carnival-mirror version of the Manson family." Finally, in a state of repentance, Billy turns in the cult leader to the police and becomes a born-again Christian. The story nears its conclusion as Billy takes to the pulpit himself as a newly ordained televangelist.

Shaw's representations of Billy are as unstable and transmogrifying as the character's own psychic condition. We are never given a clear chain of events by which to piece together Billy's story, only scattered clues, which if followed carefully from image to image yield ever-deeper insights into Billy's mind. One will notice, for

example, that while Billy is usually recognizable as a rather mundane looking blond figure, he occasionally appears as another character entirely. "He's got a martyr complex," reveals Shaw, "so he can appear as Charlie Brown or Jesus."

Throughout the series, Shaw maintains a meticulous consistency in drawing only upon imagery which Billy himself might have seen or personally created at that specific historical moment, America in the 1960s. Among the vast number of visual sources are 1960s political and psychedelic posters, Peanuts and Dr. Seuss cartoons, the apocryphal Bible, a high school yearbook, rock 'n' roll album covers, *Time* magazine, the board game Life, and works of art by Magritte, Rauschenberg, and Kline. In the case of one Magritte-like painting, the imagery has been transposed into symbols taken entirely from Jimi Hendrix songs. By combining references to both high and low culture Shaw's series undermines the privileged position of "fine" art. Rather than completely denying the validity of fine art, however, Shaw simply weaves such manifestations into a much broader web in order to indicate the common sources of the symbols which represent our society's collective unconscious.

Although undeniably parodic and humorous in its intent, *My Mirage* can equally be taken as a serious allegory on the search for the meaning of life, albeit in the artist's words, "with a particular adolescent quality, whereby you search for meaning in rock 'n' roll lyrics." The title of the series itself, "*My Mirage*," is borrowed from a song by Iron Butterfly, a lesser-known band from the 1960s,

which, in the story, is chosen by Billy's cult as a source for "wisdom" and psychic instructions. The song, says Shaw, "is about a guy who had a vision and paints it on the wall for all the beautiful people to come and see. That summed up my feelings about creativity. I'm interested in those fleeting moments of creative realization that can seem so ridiculous in retrospect. Like, 'Oh my God, the universe is like a molecule, the solar system is like an atom!'"

Shaw's *My Mirage* resembles the work of a number of other young L.A. artists such as Jeffrey Vallance and Mike Kelley, in which one finds an attempt to articulate a kind of vestigial spirituality through symbols drawn largely from the spiritually bereft arena of American vernacular culture. Billy's alter ego can be found, for example, in Vallance's frozen supermarket chicken, Blinky, for whom Vallance performed and documented an entire funeral ritual, complete with a coffin and a coroner's report citing cause of death. Kelley, who was Shaw's classmate in college and graduate school, has also been concerned with the psychic potency of frequently dismissed imagery such as that found in underground comics or children's toys.

Jim Shaw was born in 1952 in Midland, Michigan. He studied at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and California Institute of the Arts, and now lives and works in Los Angeles.

Lawrence Rinder

Works in MATRIX:

Due to the unusual number of works in this exhibition, works in MATRIX are listed separately. We wish to thank the lenders to the exhibition:

Paul Anderson, John Baldessari, James H. Balsam, Flora and Sidney Biddle, Wendy and Robert Brandow, Peter Bransten, Linda Cathcart, Linda Cathcart Gallery (Santa Monica), Cherise Chen, Dennis Cooper and Mark Ewert, Edward Downe, Jr., Michael Findlay, Michael L. Finney, Arthur and Carol Goldberg, John Hughes, Fredericka Hunter and Ian Glennie, Dr. Stan Josephs, Jeffrey Kerns, Larry Kovar, Brian Leatart, Joseph K. Levene, Sherry Levin, Metro Pictures (New York), Mary Milton, Margaret Nielsen, Eileen and Peter Norton, Heidi Perlman, Petersburg Press (New York), Alan Power, Andrea Rosen, Danna Ruscha, Jim Shaw, Joel M. Shine, Barry Sloane, Judy and Stuart Spence, Jack and Connie Tilton, Emily Leland Todd, Los Angeles Councilman Joel Wachs, Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), Eric Wise, Thea Westreich Associates (New York), and other generous lenders who wish to remain anonymous.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Zero Zero Club, Los Angeles, *Jim Shaw: Life and Death* '81; Dennis Anderson Gallery, Los Angeles '89; Feature Gallery, NYC '90; Linda Cathcart Gallery, Santa Monica, CA '90.

Selected group exhibitions:

MIT-List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, *LA: Hot and Cool: The Eighties '87* (catalog); The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, IL, *Cal Arts: Skeptical Belief(s) '87* (catalog; traveled to Newport Harbort Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA); Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, *L.A. Six '89*; Hallwalls, Buffalo, NY, *Amerikarma '89*; Simon Watson Gallery, NYC, *Erotophobia '89*; Berlin Film and Video Festival, Berlin, W. Germany '90; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, *Video and Dream '90*; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, *Recent Drawings: Roni Horn, Charles Ray, Jim Shaw, Michael Tetherow '90* (catalog).

This exhibition is co-sponsored by Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco. Special thanks to Feature Gallery, New York City, and Linda Cathcart Gallery, Santa Monica.

MATRIX is supported in part by grants from the Paul L. and Phyllis Wattis Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, The LEF Foundation, and Art Matters Inc.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs listed under exhibitions):

Weissman, Benjamin. "Jim Shaw at Saxon-Lee," *Art Issues*, no. 1 (Jan. '89), p. 23.

Knight, Christopher.

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