

# PORTRAIT Jim Shaw

## The Rinse Cycle

Jim Shaw's dreams and waking visions tap into the deep reservoir of the American unconscious, which runs through his oeuvre and inspires his neo-surreal sculptural objects and installations. His most ambitious project is the ongoing development of a religion that revolves around a goddess known only as "O". It was allegedly founded around the same time as Mormonism, but time runs backwards in it. In conversation with the artist *Stanya Kahn*, Shaw talks about the high priests of evil, his band Dred Dwarf, the end of the world, and, of course, the true meaning of O-ism.

Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



*The Ties that Bind*, 2017  
Acrylic on muslin, 142 x 122 cm



**Stanya Kahn:** When I think about magic, I think about that which can't be fully understood or named, about ghosts and vehicles that allow altered states, like art, music, intense physicality, improvisation, plant medicines, oracles, communal actions, pain, duress, under- or over-stimulation. Of course some cultures have whole systems for reaching other worlds, pasts and futures, the dead, pantheons of spirits and gods and goddesses. I'm not utopic, but I appreciate pagan earth-based spiritualities, invoking magic for common needs in community. I like witches and psychics and healers. I also like weird moves teenagers make in music, dance, fashion, and language. Magic seems to require room for the unknown, breaks in rules, departures from norms.

In late capitalism, in the West anyway, sometimes magic enters through ruptures created by stress, anxiety, manic states, what we call mental illness. For artists, when it comes in this way, at least it has somewhere to go. People look for groups and figureheads. To me, leaders and gurus can be a real buzzkill. Power-sharing and resisting hierarchy takes a lot more trust and risk which makes me think magic has a better chance in anarcho-visions of social organisation than in others. I was just in Singapore, where they have surveillance technology that senses groupings and their emotional energy and calls the police if it reads too hot. We need hackers for counter-magic, to invite mischievous ghosts into the machines. Technology is now so fundamental to connecting, but in the noisy chatter of social media, where meaning has never been more up for grabs, I'm not sure how to locate agency let alone magic. Where do we look for it, in the "digital age"? Where do you see it? If people invent new religions as a way to create a sense of coherence out of fear and chaos, what are some we see today?

**Jim Shaw:** I don't have much faith in the digital age; maybe algorithms will become the new gods. In the build-up to the end of the Mayan calendar in 2012, there was a fair amount of conjecture that it was predicting a speeding up of time. And that does seem to have occurred. The present is insanely sped up, and I can only hope our children, by being in tune with the online world, will be able to transcend to a higher plane instead of becoming the robots I fear. To the extent that religions feed superstition, I suppose QAnon represents a kind of digital urban legend model that

will become the new normal and could be refigured for religious purposes. There's also a fan-fiction aspect to these digital back-fence-gossiping binges that could be interesting in the development of new religions.

**SK:** Yeah! Fan-fiction and right-wing conspiracy theorists as potential religio-social forms is spot on. The frenzy over #Russiagate seems eerily faith-based as well. In digital spaces there's burgeoning "blind faith", in hyped, fanatic tones. And Republicans are increasingly fundamentalist, their fear so florid, Biblical, their dogma so tight. Can we read Trump as a high priest of evil? Or is he just too dumb?

**JS:** I googled a crackpot documentary that posited that the beloved British TV host and paedophile Sir Jimmy Savile may have been a warlock and that his repetition of catch phrases, such as "Now then, now then, now then" were possibly spell-casting. In my work *Beware the Eyes that Hypnotize* (2017), this became a portrait of the be-knighted pervert, but also gave me pause to consider Trump's incantations, such as "Lock her up!", "Build the wall!", and "Drain the swamp!" Perhaps that could explain his inexplicable (to us coastal elitists anyway) charisma. It also brought to mind a fellow student at CalArts in 1977, who refused to be videotaped because her coven had used a photo to put a curse on Nixon a couple of years earlier, and she was afraid that she could similarly be cursed through her image. So perhaps Trump would also be vulnerable to curses. And internet memes. We need our own versions of Pepe the Frog.

**SK:** We have [the Philadelphia Flyers' mascot] Gritty, claimed as a radical cipher whose mere image seems to rattle the cage. I love the "possession" of an American sports mascot by Antifa.

**JS:** I'd like to get back to the concept of evil here, as I see some varied forms of it. There are those who see a status quo they disagree with, and interrupt it with a consciously evil act – the Manson murders, the shooting up of the congregation in a church, synagogue, or mosque. It's hard to imagine Trump seeing himself as that sort of evil "disruptor" – he seems mostly to be a malign narcissist bully who wants attention in an extreme way and views himself as a saviour, not a perpetrator. The alt-right, Steve Bannon, Pepe, 4chan crowd that are

Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



*Paintings Found in Oist Thrift Stores, 2008*  
mixed media, variable dimensions





Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio. Courtesy: New Museum, New York

“Jim Shaw: The End Is Here”, 2015/16, New Museum, New York  
Exhibition view

aligned with him are consciously “evil”. But there are other forms of systemic evil that are harder to see, as all of us are wont to maintain systems we are part of even though they may be corrupt. When museums or schools support us or our art careers, it’s easy to turn a blind eye towards who funds them. And if the titanic prices of paintings at auction are another version of the money laundering that is such a crucial part of Trump’s business model selling over-priced luxury units, where does this leave us on the evil spectrum? If AI is anything like the algorithms used by Amazon, then the “evil” tendencies of rational decisions that corporations routinely make will be infecting every level of society but subsistence farming.

**SK:** And subsistence farming is already under the threat of GMO proliferation. When we talk about the “lesser of two evils” with regard to Democrats and Republicans, the phrase really works. Nice banks or Nazi banks? No banks. I do think Trump is as violently evil as Bannon, 4chan Nazis et al. (he literally calls for violence against journalists, immigrants, protesters, or anyone dissenting; he dog-whistles to white supremacists), but yeah, since he enacts it through policy, in accordance with traditional GOP platforms, he gets to normalise it for himself.

I like that your invented religion, O-ism, seems to be an amalgamation of American anxieties, the treacheries of capitalism and patriarchy, along with people’s enduring desire for transformation, for magic and the idea that there’s a greater power beyond. O-ism, seems to compress history and reflect back to us the caricature of American Christianity’s entanglement with money and state power. Drawing from an anthropological understanding of how the advent of agriculture gave rise to capitalism (surplus) and patriarchy (armed storehouses for the surplus), O-ism encompasses the industrial revolution, and the post-World-war II wave of machinic invention for a consumer market, through the continuum of the religious right’s entrenchment in politics all the way up to today. But instead of functioning as a treatise, your artwork gives us bodies, strange spaces, and the distortions of compressed histories while engaging subconscious aspects of belief and the desires and repressions that come with it. I’m excited by the way you alchemise these ideas using pop forms and formalism: commercial graphics with surreal visioning. Are you spell-casting? Do you think of

you/the work as possibly facilitating altered states in a viewer? Is there a spiritual or religious aspect to the installations themselves?

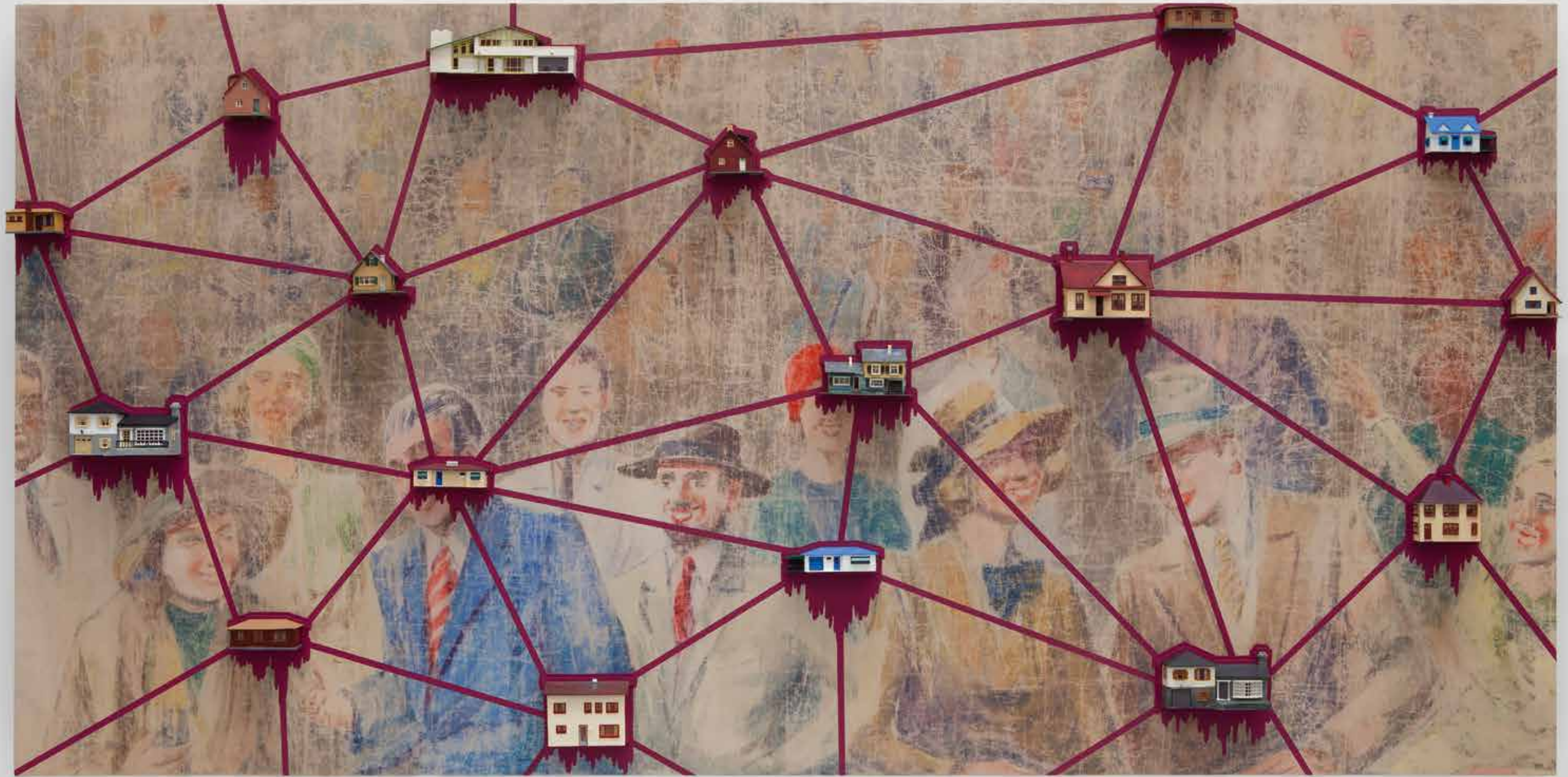
**JS:** I get into a state making music with [my band] Dred Dwarf. Since it’s in the grey zone between noise music, Krautrock, and prog, I don’t know if the audience gets as involved as the band members. Most of us have some experience with ayahuasca rituals, and it informs the music. DMT may well be something like a doorway to other worlds, and there are elements to the healing “feeling” that I imagine are the same as ecstatic Christian states of mind I’ve read about. I was interested in the experience from the perspective of an artist trying to formulate a new religion who had no experience of the divine. Also, I made a few smaller grey panels that I called “The Devil Is in the Details” (2011), which are made up of random patterns, like decalcomanias, into which I’ve drawn every demonic face I can find in the grey patterns. The effect on the viewer is essentially the same as it is on the artist getting lost in a maze of imagery. Not exactly magic, but interesting.

**SK:** . . . which is generative for a viewer and can stir magical thinking. I’d say the pleasurable disorientation I experience when looking at your work is because I’m simultaneously being asked to consider histories of ideas from our world and also an uncanny, alternate universe. Do you experience altered states or magic as a maker, either in the conceptualising or the making process, or some other way? If so, can you describe it?

**JS:** I have self-diagnosed myself as being sort of bipolar, and the manic state for me is the having of ideas, which usually occurs when I’ve had plenty of rest and am waking. This is where magical thinking comes in handy, as ideas and images, following whatever theme I’m obsessing about, begin to collide and froth up into semi-coherent images. There’s a lot of visual and verbal rhyming at work, and I feel, after drawing hundreds of dreams, that these “puns” are a basic component of dream imagery.

**SK:** In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud says punning is “the lowest form of joking.” Ha. But like improvisation, puns rely on immediacy, the mind pinging across references in real-time. Like if every image or word has a mirrored side showing other things if we turn it.





*Crowd, House Web, 2013*  
Acrylic, plastic model homes and magnets on muslin, 122 x 244 x 7 cm





© Jim Shaw. Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo

*Judgement*, 2015  
Acrylic on muslin, 610 x 980 cm

I imagine the real future will be similar to that in the film *Soylent Green* (1973), with superfluous people in mobs rioting due to



Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio. Courtesy New Museum, New York

"Jim Shaw: The End Is Here", 2015/16, New Museum, New York  
Exhibition view

global-warming-caused droughts, while the elite live protected and well fed on the upper floors of high rises in soul-crushing cities.



**JS:** My hope is that in each artwork there are enough elements that the ideas I'm trying to convey are recognisable to any viewer willing to stop for a second, but not presented in a didactic manner. This way, there is room for any interpretation on the part of the viewer.

**SK:** Do you draw visions from your mind or are you working with collages and projections of found images, or both? Does drawing take you into a transformative state?

**JS:** I do a certain amount of work from my mind in the form of thumbnails to crudely work out ideas, but less than I'd like in the finished work, which I'm trying to remedy. Usually, I do a lot of research, photograph models, trace from xeroxes for all the precision inherent in what people seem to expect in a "Jim Shaw" artwork. And there's a lot invested at that point, so I'm loath to muck it up ... and all the time spent rendering fulfils the "depressed" end of my manic depression, so it's therapeutic. I'm trying to work towards a less preconceived methodology. Collage is another parallel route to coming to irrational yet "poetic" ends in my never-ending quest to fill the world with more imagery.

**SK:** You've done a lot of work connected to your dream life. Aside from representing images from the dreams in the work, do the dreams operate in other ways when you're making? Do they function like an oracle might? Guiding certain moves, choices, interests? Do they help you understand the work and where it needs to go?

**JS:** If I'm well rested – something that was rare for the twelve years our daughter was in school – I can have insightful dreams, the kind that seem important, to be remembered and acted upon. I've gotten a bit lazy about recording them all, but they still come through. There are also occasional waking visions that break through.

**SK:** What's it like for you when you have a waking vision? Are there any that stand out in your memory, that made it into your work?

**JS:** It's usually a full-fledged object or image. If there is too much psychedelic filigree, I can't really reproduce it. There was a sculpture that I and my assistants made from a "vision" that was shaped like a dog-chew bone, but with the bone interior

structures encasing the outside. When Brian Wilson is having audio hallucinations in "Love & Mercy," it's kind of similar to my occasional vision. I'm jealous of William Blake's ability to be in those states on a regular basis, conversing with ghosts.

**SK:** I just returned from Southeast Asia where I'm working on a collaborative project based in part on research I did years ago about spirit possessions that occurred on the factory floor amongst women making microchips for cell phones in Malaysia. One anthropologist read this phenomenon as a direct response to the stress of capitalist and patriarchal discipline, which makes sense, but of course there are also elements we can't understand as outsiders, things Western constructs like Marxism and feminism can't explain. I like the doubling of mystery in this situation. Are there spirit possessions in O-ism? If so, are they invited through ritual or spontaneous and aberrant?

**JS:** As far as I ever got in the creation of O-ism's history, an escaped slave would have brought ecstatic elements of African religion to 1840s upstate New York, and helped shape a culture of dancing and chanting as a way to other realms. Kind of like when we improvise. I did a number of photos, back when we had a large studio, of us all in tattered white clothing, dancing to a great Yes track (among other things), but I haven't really used them for anything. I may be too old and creaky for ecstatic dancing now.

**SK:** I like the way your work seems to erode the West from inside itself. On the outside, the O universe is a mostly white, male, American-looking universe, but you use the problematics, the illnesses of that world to destroy itself from within, in often hilarious and satisfying ways. Can you talk about how you see the world of O-ism now? Will you continue indefinitely or do you see an end? A fiery end?

**JS:** I think intermittently about the O-ism body of work, which is now focused on the long delayed Prog rock opera *The Rinse Cycle*. It contains four apocalypses to cover the pre-history, history, and future of the course of O-ist civilisation. We, Dred Dwarf, have performed most of the first two sides, which end in earth and water apocalypses. The next movement covers the founder's struggles in the 1800s to shepherd the faith and ends in a fiery

© 2007 MoMA PS1



*The Donner Party, 2003*  
Theatre backdrop painting, covered wagons, tabletop sculptures and campfire vacuum cleaner  
Installation view, MoMA PS1, New York, 2007

Our old model based on worker solidarity won't function in a world where workers and jobs are obsolete. Our new jobs could be to dream up new ideas.



Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

*Miss Universe, 2017*  
Acrylic on muslin, 101.5 x 135.5 cm

apocalypse, during the great Chicago fire. The final movement takes place in the future, which, due to the fact that it's a prog-rock opera, sets it in the late 80s. I imagine the real future will be similar to that in the film *Soylent Green* (1973), with superfluous people in mobs rioting due to global-warming-caused droughts, while the elite live protected and well fed on the upper floors of high rises in soul-crushing cities. I hope for my daughter's sake that the world comes to a happier point than the one the present trends are charting.

**SK:** I'm reminded of science fiction writer Octavia Butler's invented religion Earthseed, introduced in her 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*, which has as its leader Lauren, a fifteen-year-old African American girl who writes its gospels and teaches that God is not an entity but change itself. It's a little corny at times, but Butler's project seems conscious of the dire need for change and for agency. The fictional near-future world in which Lauren lives is a Los Angeles engulfed in flames and beset by violent apocalypse. Drought, migration, and fascism set a brutal stage for its multicultural, multi-generational characters to survive. Butler was ahead of her time in researching climate change, the genetic modification of seeds, and devolution into unbridled authoritarianism. Do you have a stake in developing O-ism into something with redemption or hope? Do you feel any drive, in

relation to our current predicaments, to create visions of a viable future in your work?

**JS:** Since O-ism was created to examine the social and aesthetic influences of religion, I don't think it's up to the task of giving redemption, but maybe there will come a Saint Paul to completely disfigure it into a functional religion. I have struggled to find some hope in the world. There is a wealth of creativity and brainpower out there, poised to become the grassroots of a good future. At the moment, fascists and totalitarians seem to have the best grasp of how to control the dark forces that roboticisation, global warming, and forced migration out of drought-ravaged lands will bring. On a nonspiritual plane I really think that an entirely new progressive politics needs to be forged to thrive in the likely future, as our old model based on worker solidarity won't function in a world where workers and jobs are obsolete. Our new jobs could be to dream up new ideas. In some ways, the actions of the totalitarian leaders of the moment, in destroying all the past structures and elites, could be like a forest fire out of which a new growth can form. Unfortunately, a lot of people will suffer, as in a forest fire, from this particular bloody swath of change.

*STANYA KAHN is an artist. She lives in Los Angeles.*

JIM SHAW was born in 1952 in Midland, Michigan, and now lives in Los Angeles.

Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong and London; Metro Pictures, New York; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles; and Massimo de Carlo, Milan. "The Wig Museum" was on view in 2017 at the Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles; in 2016 the survey exhibition "The End is Here", was held at the New Museum, New York. Group shows in 2018 included "West by Midwest", Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; "Everything is Connected: Art and Conspiracy", Met Breuer, New York; "Unexchangeable", WIELS, Brussels. In 2013 Shaw participated in the 55th Venice Biennale, and in 2000, the ICA in London showed his collection of mostly anonymous thrift-store paintings. He founded the band Destroy All Monsters with Mike Kelley in the early 1970s.

Jim Shaw is represented by Simon Lee Gallery (London, Hong Kong, New York), Metro Pictures (New York), Blum and Poe (Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo), Massimo de Carlo (Milan, London, Hong Kong), Praz-Delavallade (Paris, Los Angeles).