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Jim Shaw

Blum & Poe, Los Angeles 1 November – 21 December

Anyone who has visited Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California, could tell you that in the United States, the aesthetics of death and its variety of transitions can be a confusing parade of kitsch. At Forest Lawn, you can sit in an auditorium while a curtain reveals the largest religious painting in the world: a 59-metre-long effort by Polish artist Jan Styka titled *The Crucifixion* (1897). Around the cemetery's enormous manicured grounds you can find an assortment of classical copies (including Michelangelo's *David*), patriotic mosaics and full-size replicas of European churches. You can walk between a mock signing of the Declaration of Independence and a pet cemetery, always in the view of Hollywood.

Jim Shaw's studio is relatively close to Forest Lawn, and his take on death and the afterlife, on view at Blum & Poe, seems to have a great deal to do with the collective psychological soup that determines an American's final place of rest. Our houses and our dreams are tombs, and upon dying, our lives take on bits of spectacle and theatre that lend our death a strange animation. At least this is Shaw's view. His personal set of symbols are painted on movie backdrops, sculpted from wood, paper and even hair: massive scenes of the Mississippi River conjure Shaw's own memories, a mix between the rivers Lethe and Styx. Shaw is an artist, and his new work is a meditation on an artist's death.

The House in Mississippi (all works 2013) speaks most clearly to his effort. Shaw, through an image of a repeating phantasm, progresses from youth to old age while his home becomes a floating houseboat on the Mississippi. The freedom of Huckleberry Finn's raft is shown here as something between a baptism and a ritual drowning, an ambivalence towards the American dream that has been a constant in Shaw's work over the years. It is a tender work, simple but deeply resonant. That Shaw's younger self looks a little like William Faulkner is an unintended bonus: an edge of Southern Gothic enters this painting. It's a world of porches, where sons not only pay for the sins of their fathers but, surprisingly, have to commit those same sins for themselves.

Shaw's fathers are artists too – details from William Blake's drawings, Jacques-Louis David's paintings and Eugène Delacroix appear – and his sins seem to flow from the expectations of what being an artist means. In *Seven Deadly Sins* (2013), these artists combine with Disney and Norman Rockwell to become a series of spoofs on the heroics of creation that literally chart what it means to be an artist. The suggestion is that the freedom to create is challenged by the need to build a career, pay a mortgage and fulfil quotas – basically all the commitments that own us as we get older. The show would seem angry if not for Shaw's (perhaps in spite of himself) obvious and massive love for making objects. An artist's death will be his only death. *Ed Schad*