



Sculptor Tim Shaw Serves Up Immersive Installation 'Beyond Reason'

Northern Irish artist has first U.S. exhibit at San Diego Museum of Art

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Northern Irish sculptor [Tim Shaw](#) has the first U.S. exhibit of his immersive installation "[Beyond Reason](#)" at [San Diego Museum of Art](#). His psychologically charged environments raise questions about terrorism and abuse of power. Entering Shaw's "Soul Snatcher Possession" at San Diego Museum of Art is like going into a disturbing haunted house designed by Amnesty International where what's scary is the fact that it's completely rooted in the horrors of the real world. Shaw describes the installation on his website as: "a metaphor for the violent extraction of soul, the manipulation of mind and the taking of life by the powerful, in order to perpetuate the myth that those with the power want to portray. It relates to the street, the corridors of governance and commerce." I spoke with Shaw as he was finalizing the installation of his exhibit at the San Diego Museum of Art earlier this month, and he guided me through "Soul Snatcher Possession."

"You enter the gallery, and you see a corridor with a dim lit light bulb, and you walk down a corridor, and you turn, and there's a door that's ajar, and the first image you see is the Blind Whistler.

"Then to the left is a scenario where, in the middle, somebody has been hooded and tied up, and they are surrounded by three other figures," Shaw said. "These three other figures are doing something, but you don't quite know what they are doing because there's no knife or gun, but you know there is a sense of impending threat. Then off in the corner is another figure kneeling and tied with a set of ears stuck onto its head, then over in the other corner is a man that is overlooking a

woman against the wall who appears to be drugged in some way, and you don't quite know, and this is the ambiguity of the work is that you don't really know what is going on. There's a sense of ambiguity in the whole atmosphere as well, but you know that something is going on that's not quite right."

One of the figures in Tim Shaw's "Soul Snatcher Possession" immersive installation piece that is part of "Beyond Reason" at San Diego Museum of Art. The construction of the piece forces the viewer to engage in the scene depicted. The first thing you see is the blind man, which by itself is striking but not disturbing. But then as you enter the room and are confronted by a scene that is ambiguous yet intensely ominous, and it challenges you to consider if you will be the blind man, unaware of what is going on next to you or if you are willing to address the issues before you. To intensify that feeling, you can hear the normal sounds of the world outside while walking through the installation.

"Within these walls, something terrible could be happening whilst out beyond the walls normal life continues on," Shaw said. "But I do want to make the point that there are those that exist in life whose lives can be ruled by and be manipulated by fear. And those in power can use fear and the threat of violence in order to manipulate individual or society even. If you don't do the things that are expected of you then there may be consequences to that."

Even the materials Shaw chooses to work with add layers of meaning to the piece as well.

"It's eight figures in a room," Shaw explained. "They are fabricated from old clothes and pillows and metal frames. And the piece is really very much about how truth can be fabricated to suit the needs of those in power."

For Shaw, art needs to be interactive.

"Interaction is very important," he said. "I would call it engagement, and I do believe in creating art that in some way captivates the imagination and engages the viewer to a point where they look at something, and it's got a life force of its own."



PHOTO BY [ROLAND LIZARONDO](#)

The robotic sculpture "The Birth of Breakdown Clown" by Tim Shaw. This is especially true of his sculpture "The Birth of Breakdown Clown," a mesmerizing mix of artificial intelligence and robotic sculpture that's part of the "Beyond Reason" exhibit.

Although Breakdown Clown makes no attempt to hide its wires, pistons and

armature, you quickly forget you are interacting with a robot. There's undeniable humanity in its eyes that seek you out in the small room.

"Look at me and look at you," Breakdown Clown says to visitors. "I am standing here with all my wires, soft fleshy bits and metal frame, and you there with your stringy bits too, flesh warm and bone frame."

"It's really about using modern day technology, robotics, AI to ask the big questions, it doesn't have the answers, but I would like to think that it inspires thought," Shaw said.

This existential clown holds us rapt with questions that touch on terrorism, abuse of power and what it is that makes us human. Being in San Diego, Breakdown Clown can't help but talk about the Wall and the unwanted that it hopes to keep out.

"But I think the robot asks, 'well, what side are the unwanted on? Are they on that side or this side? Is it about keeping them in or keeping them out?' The robot is a bit perplexed by this," Shaw said.

The robot also suggests there's a bigger wall than the physical wall being proposed for the border.

"And that's the wall or the distinction between the rich and the very poor so this is all coming from the robot, this individual that is aside from humanity but observing it and trying to make some distinctions and points that hopefully one can take away and think about," Shaw added.

That's the brilliance of Shaw's art — it demands that the viewer participate in some way. It's not entertainment, but it's gripping and provocative in ways that stay with you long after you have left the exhibit.

Take another piece in the exhibit, "Mother the Air is Blue, the Air is Dangerous." Again Shaw keeps the immersive experience intimate and only allows two people at a time to enter a room that essentially gives you a kind of frozen moment in the midst of a bomb blast. You are inside a foggy cafeteria, tables and chairs and turned over, and silhouetted figures run away in projected images on the wall. The only movement is the slow spinning of trays suspended in midair. It is a chilling and eerie scene.



PHOTO CREDIT: TIM SHAW

The scene depicted in the immersive installation piece "Mother the Air is Blue, the Air is Dangerous" part of Tim Shaw: Beyond Reason exhibit at San Diego

Museum of Art.

"This particular piece is based on an experience called [Bloody Friday](#) and it was the day in which the IRA planted 26 bombs, at least 19 of which went off," Shaw said. "I was in a restaurant with my mother and friend and his mother when a bomb went off below the restaurant, and it was a firebomb, and we all got out. It's based on memory that being, when the bomb went off, it felt like the atmosphere, it went larger and tight like a balloon ready to burst. And this is blue air, and you could hear the clatter of trays as they flew through the air so everybody ran and so that's what the shadows relate to. So it's very much about trying to explain that sense of mind that is beyond terror, a world where things are occurring and sense of hypnosis so the trays slowly revolve around."

With this piece in particular, Shaw has a clear message he wants people to consider.

"What happened then still happens today all around the world, this is what happens when talks break down, and people walk away from the table, and I guess it's also about the importance of being at the table and not walking away from it till an agreement is sought," Shaw said.

Shaw said it is vital for artists to look to what is going on in the real world and to make sure power does not go unchecked: "Otherwise, I do believe that civilization crumbles."

"Beyond Reason" uses bold, immersive art to jolt viewers out of passivity and complacency as it questions our humanity. Kudos to the San Diego Museum of Art for showcasing politically charged work to illuminate the darkest depths of society.

The six installation pieces of Shaw's "Beyond Reason" will be on display through Feb. 24 at the San Diego Museum of Art.

<https://www.kpbs.org/news/2018/oct/26/sculptor-tim-shaw-serves-immersive-installation-be/>