

Art museum goes 'Beyond Reason' with challenging exhibit



'Soul Snatcher Possession' shows the manipulation of powerless people by the powerful.

PHOTOS BY MAURICE HEWITT

LET'S REVIEW

BY LONNIE BURSTEIN HEWITT

"Tim Shaw: Beyond Reason" is something new for San Diego Museum of Art — a challenging exhibition by a Northern Irish sculptor who grew up during The Troubles (1968-98), a decades-long period of violent conflict between Catholic republicans and Protestant loyalists. On view here are six of his large-scale, surreal portrayals of Troubles then and now, addressing issues like terrorism, power imbalances and freedom of speech. This is the first time his work has been shown in the United States.

Like "Beyond the Age of Reason" across the way at San Diego Art Institute, Shaw's installations are meant to get viewers thinking and talking. They're highly personal, disorienting, disturbing ... and they command attention.

At the VIP opening Oct. 18, the artist spoke about the exhibition's larger aims. "We're living in dangerous times, and I hope my work highlights that fact," he said. "Every individual has a responsibility to put something back into society. How can we effect change? We must not let politicians do it, or we'll keep living in a world beyond reason."

Roxana Velasquez, the museum's director, added her own eloquent comments: "Tonight we celebrate art that awakens us and shakes us to our core. I believe in beauty, but to be challenged, to not walk away from problems when the answers are not easy, is

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Look for the green & gold balloons!!



Artist Tim Shaw with his friend Dina Ipavic, who came in from the UK for the exhibition.



'Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous' — a room-size installation, one of six pieces on view in 'Beyond Reason'

COURTESY

imperative for society to progress. We need to see the night to be able to see the next day."

"Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous" recreates Shaw's childhood memory of a café bombing in Belfast, which may have been part of Bloody Friday, a series of IRA bombings on one Troubled day in 1972. It's a room-size, blue-lit installation with overturned chairs and tables, shadowy figures running along the back wall, trays spinning through the air. But somehow it didn't move me. I expected something more — sound, maybe.

My photographer/husband, on the other hand, got more than he expected. A Vietnam veteran, he found the piece fully immersive — a flashback to the real feel of wartime, when he was 19. "It's that one nano-second, just after an explosion, where everything

freezes," he said. "Things are flying through the air, but there's no sound, nothing at all."

I was moved by the threatened and threatening figures in "Soul Snatcher Possession," where viewers are only admitted two at a time. And I was impressed by the intricate construction of "Middle World" and amused by "Defending Integrity from the Powers That Be," a rocking couple whose mouths were stuffed with money.

But for both of us, Shaw's strongest piece was "Alternative Authority," a tarred-and-feathered woman, tied to a lamppost — something that often happened to women who fraternized with British soldiers in the 1970s. Seeing this figure, shamed and alone, was shocking. Who would do this to someone, whatever she'd done?

Then there's "The Birth of Breakdown

Clown," a life-size, wood and metal robot who offers his own (programmed) 20-minute monologue on the nature of existence. "We got started, and then we got lost. We need to find our way back to the first place," it says. "Does it take a machine to remind you that we never left the Garden of Eden?"

Does it take a robot to tell us how to be more human? And even get us to join together in song — Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns"?

Born in Belfast, Tim Shaw currently lives in England, and is now a Fellow of The Royal British Society of Sculptors and an elected member of The Royal Academy of Arts. His Troubles may be over, but as his work reminds us, we're still surrounded by Troubles, and we should not close our eyes to them but keep them in our thoughts and

conversations. Then perhaps we'll begin to consider how we can help create a world where reason and empathy rule and fewer troubles exist.

■ **IF YOU GO:** "Tim Shaw: Beyond Reason" runs through Feb. 24 at San Diego Museum of Art, 1450 El Prado in Balboa Park, San Diego. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday; closed Wednesday; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission: \$8-\$15, ages 17 and under, free. Discount \$5, 5-8 p.m. Fridays.

Note: Jan. 25, there will be live music by Art of Élan and a screening of "Bloody Sunday," a 2002 film about the events of Jan. 30, 1972, when British soldiers fired on Northern Irish civilians during a protest march. (619) 232-7931. sdart.org ♦



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