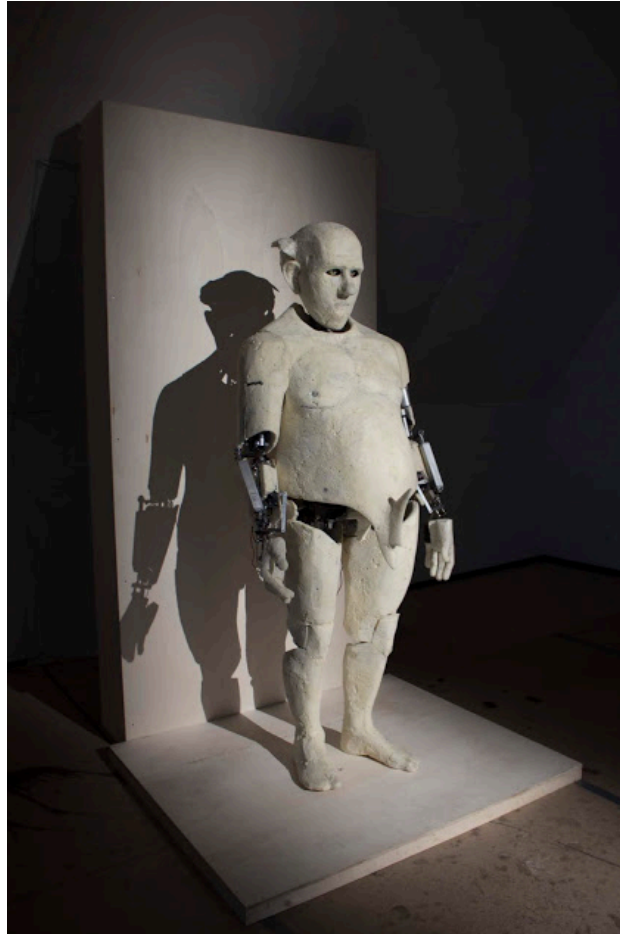


Artful Life By Cathy

Tim Shaw's *Beyond Reason* Holds a Mirror to Our Humanity

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Irish-born artist Tim Shaw's *Beyond Reason* show at the San Diego Museum of Art is his debut exhibition in the United States. Deputy Curator for Curatorial Affairs, Anita Feldman, comments in the exhibition catalog: “*In the daily lives of many of us, there is a sense that we are cocooned from the outside world. We read of terrorist events on our mobile phones, see them in distant-and not-so-distant places on T.V. Shaw’s work draws us closer to the reality of these conflicts and dares us to engage with them, challenging us to ask questions about society’s role or silent complicity.*”

Shaw’s works include six immersive installations. Upon entering the museum spaces Shaw’s works occupy, the overall very low lighting throughout creates an alternative context and brings us into the metaphysical and psychologically charged world of Shaw’s making. The first work we encounter is *Middle Worlds*, (1989-present) a large sculptural installation created with cement, steel and lead. Produced over twenty years’ time, it also includes small figures in bronze and terracotta arranged upon a tall vessel that is part altar, part pinball machine while beneath it stalagmite-looking forms reminding us of geological time. The figures appear to be in front of a large theater stage, or entrance to a grand ancient building, including symbols of various centuries

and ages, where Vulcan bombers and satellites appear adjacent to mythological, Christian and secular symbols. There is a sense of eeriness and gloom, and a suspension of time.

We next encounter *Mother, The Air is Blue, The Air is Dangerous* (2014). This immersive room installation has its roots in Shaw's seven year-old childhood memory in Belfast when he witnessed a bombing in a restaurant along with his mother and sister. Having occurred on the historic Black Friday, 1972 when the IRA set off over 20 bombs over the entire city, Shaw recreates this low-lit deep blue lighted scene with over-thrown chairs and tables, food trays suspended randomly in the air while photos of victims lie on tables and the sounds of intense sirens are heard in the room. Shadows of people running across streets are projected onto the walls of this chaotic scene. As viewers, we share a terrorizing moment with Shaw's experience.

The next work encountered is *Defending Integrity from the Powers That Be* (2017). This mixed media automated sculpture and sound installation includes two life-sized figures created from metal armatures, old clothes, pillows and stockings. The male and female figures are facing one another while rocking back and forth upon curved ski-like metal forms. Their insides are ripped open revealing wires, and old radio speakers and their mouths are stuffed with money preventing their ability to speak. Highlighting their feelings of helplessness, perhaps it is fear, greed, or complicity but Shaw seems to be saying that silence has its price.

Soul Snatcher Possession (2011-2012) is the next immersive installation we encounter which includes eight life-size figures in a low lit fabricated room with well worn damaged walls, a fireplace and lit with naked light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. When entering through a long corridor, we push open an old beat up door and see four figures huddled in distinctive positions around a crowded central hooded figure appearing to be harassed or intimidated. With rough textures of clothing haphazardly sewn, and worn shoes, these figures were created with metal armatures, old clothes, pillows and stockings. One figure is of a blind man in the corner with a cane searches the area, while a female figure reclines against another wall with a stocking stretched over her face, and a syringe close-by on the floor. A nearby man is watching her, and in another corner is a kneeling male figure as if in prayer or asking for help. For the viewer, there is a claustrophobic feeling inside this room as well as a visceral intensity that is both disturbing and provocative. These unsettled feelings provoke questions – Are we confronting evil or fear or both, or our own humanity and the limits of our civility?

Alternative Authority (2017) is a life-size mixed media sculpture of a woman, tarred and feathered and tied to a lamp-post. Created with metal armature, pillows, old clothes and stockings, her face hidden from view, and is slumped downward and covered with tar and tons of feathers. This work references 1970s' Ireland when the IRA punished women who fraternized with police or British soldiers and publicly humiliated them in public squares. Other women and community members were thought to take part in this public shaming and the resulting psychological and physical scarring for life.

Shaw's last work is *The Birth of Breakdown Clown* (2015-2018) which is a robotic life size naked figure with motion and sound, made of foam, steel and aluminum. This performance piece is a "robot" that moves its hands, arms, head and eyes while presenting a monologue speaking to his "audience". During the 15 plus minutes speech the robot comments: "*We are no different. All just wires, soft flesh hung onto hard form. Impulses running down the those stringy bits. And when the life force leaves the form, and the water evaporates, we are dust. You and me....*" In this work, the viewer becomes the subject. After the monologue the robot encourages viewers to ask questions and a short conversation ensues. Shaw searches for the dialogue between where

Artificial Intelligence begins and the place where human beings reside – the space between humanity and machine.

Peering underneath the hood of humanity, Shaw holds up a mirror to our own behavior and psyche in often strange and repugnant ways. There is nothing “pretty” about Shaw’s work. It’s beauty is compelling, in how it reveals our potential self-awareness gained from witnessing these discomfiting installations. With some exceptions, viewers are invited to be in close proximity to the disturbing situations and the grotesque figures he has created. A combination of mythical, political and metaphysical, we are drawn into both historical and contemporary time with Shaw’s large scale works. Some works parallel today’s experiences of physical and psychological terrorism. Shaw asks whether we speak up or remain silent, becoming complicit in the effects of our politically charged world, and challenges us as we grapple with how Artificial Intelligence will co-exist with humanity.



Tim Shaw *Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous*, 2014
Immersive gallery installation (Personal effects including, coats, bags, shoes and photographs. Chairs, tables, revolving trays, projected images, sound and haze)
Room Dimensions H: 10ft x W: 31.5ft x L: 36ft



Tim Shaw *Soul Snatcher Possession*, 2011-2012
Immersive gallery installation (Eight large life-size figures in low lit fabricated room with corridor; old clothes, pillows, stockings, on steel armatures).
Room dimensions (including corridor) H: 8 ft x W: 21ft x L: 23ft
The Birth

<http://artfullifebycathy.blogspot.com/2018/10/tim-shaws-beyond-reason-holds-mirror-to.html>

