

Techno-Gothic Sculptures of Violence

In his latest exhibition, Belfast-born sculptor Tim Shaw explores the troubles of Northern Ireland, global terrorism, abuses of power, and artificial intelligence.

Lucas Justinien Perez, November 30, 2018

SAN DIEGO — As a child growing up in Belfast in the 1970s, sculptor Tim Shaw survived an Irish Republican Army bombing on the top floor of a cafe. In his latest exhibition, *Beyond Reason*, on view at the San Diego Museum of Art, Shaw recreates the scene of this trauma. Two people at a time are allowed to enter “Mother, the air is blue, the air is dangerous,” a foggy blue-tinted space modeled after the bombed cafe. Meandering through overturned furniture and food trays suspended in midair, you spot hats, glasses, and lit cigarettes, presumably left behind by the shadowy evacuating figures projected on the walls. More experiential than theatrical, the room traps you in a moment of shocked alienation.

This deeply personal installation is featured alongside five other techno-gothic works that reflect on global terrorism, free speech, abuses of power, and artificial intelligence. In the vein of Goya’s satirical series of engravings “Los Caprichos” (1797-1798), Shaw’s pieces critique contemporary systems of oppression in a visual language of grotesques and homunculi.

Entering the exhibition, you first encounter “Middle World,” a massive steel-reinforced concrete altar-slash-pinball machine, centered in a dimly lit room, surrounded by seventy cavorting figurines. In his artist statement, Shaw describes the work as “a limbo state... the meeting place, a waiting room, the still procession where life and death, joy and despair, light and darkness intersect as chaotic disorder.” The unfinished sculptural installation, begun in 1989, introduces the artist’s blend of medieval kitsch and contemporary morbidity.

The next gallery houses “Defending Integrity from the Powers that Be,” comprised of two larger-than-lifesize standing figures, made from old pantyhose and bits of cloth, with American cash stuffed in their mouths. A soundtrack of cracking whips and heckling voices plays as they sway back and forth on curved rockers. The message here is slightly heavy-handed: these two bodies are the apparent stooges of Capitalism’s propensity to stifle free speech. Still, they’re visually striking and subtly haunting, and they mark Shaw’s embrace of a mode of expression driven less by individual memory than by an ideology of the oppressed.

What follows are sculptural tableaux of gruesome punishments peculiar to Northern Ireland during the Troubles. “Soul Snatcher Possession” portrays a ritual gangland killing: three lifesize male figures sculpted from cloth move to embrace their victim before they complete their homicidal mission. A female figure leans against the wall, her face turned away, one arm raised overhead and her other hand covering her crotch. Although inspired by gang violence in Belfast (including many murders), Shaw writes of the work on his website: “The installation is 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.” Despite the artist’s stated intention for the work, it is difficult to see how this scene is critiquing the commercially powerful.

In the final gallery, the poor female figure of “Alternative Justice” is tied to a lamp post, tarred and feathered, her head slumped over. She could be Martha Doherty — a 19 year old woman who survived just such an attack in Northern Ireland in 1971, after a group of vigilante Catholic women arrested her because she had secretly married a British soldier. There is an especially overt sexuality in Shaw’s representation of this violent act — the figure’s dress is torn at the crotch — that seems a bit too gratuitously humiliating for women.

For this reviewer, the shift in Shaw’s approach toward the stories he tells — from eyewitness to editorializing narrator — points to a predilection in the art world to rely on easy representations of victims, victimhood, and victimization to prove ideological points. In 2010, for example, Ai Weiwei came under scrutiny for overly aestheticizing the Syrian refugee crisis in his work “F. Lotus.” Dana Schutz’s incendiary painting of Emmett Till, entitled “Open Casket”, was widely condemned at the 2017 Whitney Biennial for glorifying black death, and Banksy’s painting of a child laborer, “Slave Labour” (2012), just sold at auction this month in the UK for £561,000 (USD\$ 720,000). Such images can certainly spark outrage in empathetic audiences, but for the victims depicted, this kind of art brings little change. The selected artworks in *Beyond Reason* probably come from a place of compassion, generated from lived experience, but compassion is difficult to spot in these abused effigies. Shaw’s technical prowess as a sculptor is unquestionable, and his works can be emotionally provocative, but what do we walk away with? Perhaps we learn to ask: when do images of victims become exploitative?

Tim Shaw: *Beyond Reason* is on view at the San Diego Museum of Art through February 24th, 2019. The exhibition was curated by Anita Feldman.