Jim Shaw's My Mirage series, which was begun in 1985 and is nearing completion, comprises over one hundred identically scaled (17 x 14") works in a wide variety of media. This exhibition marks the first time that the series has been shown virtually in its entirety.

My Mirage is structured as a loosely knit but highly complex narrative divided into five sections or "chapters." Shaw's story revolves around the life of a character named Billy, who first appears as a rather innocent small-town American kid growing up in the 1960s. Through an extraordinary sequence of images and texts, Shaw charts Billy's youth and adolescence, marking the ever more bizarre disruptions of Billy's moral foundation.

Sexuality and spirituality are the primary arenas in which Billy's struggle between the forces of "good" and "evil" unfolds. Having become involved with psychedelic drugs, Billy eventually comes under the influence of a quasi-satanic cult, which Shaw describes as "a carnival-mirror version of the Manson family."

Finally, in a state of repentance, Billy turns in the cult leader to the police and becomes a born-again Christian. The story nears its conclusion as Billy takes to the pulpit himself as a newly ordained televangelist.

Although undeniably parodic and humorous in its intent, My Mirage can equally be taken as a serious allegory on the search for the meaning of life, albeit in the artist's words, "with a particular adolescent quality, whereby you search for meaning in rock 'n' roll lyrics." The title of the series itself, "My Mirage," is borrowed from a song by Iron Butterfly, a lesser-known band from the 1960s, which, in the story, is chosen by Billy's cult as a source for "wisdom" and psychic instructions. The song, says Shaw, "is about a guy who had a vision and paints it on the wall for all the beautiful people to come and see. That summed up my feelings about creativity. I'm interested in those fleeting moments of creative realization that can seem so ridiculous in retrospect. Like, 'Oh my god, the universe is like a molecule, the solar system is like an atom!'"

Shaw's My Mirage resembles the work of a number of other young L.A. artists such as Jeffrey Vallance and Mike Kelley, in which one finds an attempt to articulate a kind of vestigial spirituality through symbols drawn largely from the spiritually bereft arena of American vernacular culture. Billy's alter ego can be found, for example, in Vallance's frozen supermarket chicken, Blinky, for whom Vallance performed and documented an entire funeral ritual, complete with a coffin and a coroner's report citing cause of death. Kelley, who was Shaw's classmate in college and graduate school, has also been concerned with the psychic potency of frequently dismissed imagery such as that found in underground comics or children's toys.

Jim Shaw was born in 1952 in Midland, Michigan. He studied at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and California Institute of the Arts, and now lives and works in Los Angeles.

Lawrence Rinder

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Zero Zero Club, Los Angeles, Jim Shaw: Life and Death '81; Dennis Anderson Gallery, Los Angeles '89; Feature Gallery, NYC '90; Linda Cathcart Gallery, Santa Monica, CA '90.
Selected group exhibitions:

MIT-List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, LA: Hot and Cool: The Eighties ’87 (catalog); The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, IL, Cal Arts: Skeptical Beliefs(s) ’87 (catalog; traveled to Newport Harbort Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA); Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, L.A. Six ’89; Hallwalls, Buffalo, NY, Amerikarma ’89; Simon Watson Gallery, NYC, Erotophobia ’89; Berlin Film and Video Festival, Berlin, W. Germany ’90; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Video and Dream ’90; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Recent Drawings: Roni Horn, Charles Ray, Jim Shaw, Michael Tetherow ’90 (catalog).

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Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs listed under exhibitions):


