

### ***Phil Shaw's work – humour as a serious matter***

The last exhibition of Shaw's work at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery (March 2010) has continued and furthered his vision. The pieces are always best seen in the context of his other objects and prints which must be read as a humorous reflection upon a body of humorous reflections. But Shaw's humour is particular in that it both delights in puns and contradictions (the hallmark of a joke) but also calls attention to dramatic discontinuities. One of the themes running through Shaw's work, considered from a psychoanalytic (Lacanian) perspective, calls attention to the Real of experience. For Lacan the real is not 'reality' but that aspect of experience that defies symbolization and cannot be fully grasped – it implies a permanent lack amidst the fullness, a cleft, an absence within the presence, a mourning for the experience that can never be completed. This is what links the pieces in this show to many of his pieces over the years, from highly elaborate objects to simply produced ephemera. In the early boots + mirror piece exhibited at the Royal College of Art in 1980 a lacquered worn-out pair of boots was placed on a plinth on either side of a mirror. Perception by the viewer completes the piece.



*One and the same* 1979 Mixed media, 36 x 25 x 28 cm

In effect, there is only one boot, but the notion of a 'pair of boots' precedes the encounter with the piece, and we have to contend with the paradox the work proposes between what is known and what is seen, which appear to be

one and the same but exposed as what is naturalized by language. The joke, in Shaw's work, is not a laugh at the expense of something (although it may at times be confused with a subversive, anarchistic drive also present in his pieces) but it points to a perplexity about the networks of meaning that the pieces establish and disrupt, just like the hieroglyphics on a papyrus cast in the shape of a book ('Artefiction', impressed clay, 2009) which is, therefore, neither and both – and a reference to each other (original–current contraption).



*Artefiction* 2009 Impressed clay, 48 x 39 cm

This is the approach followed in the meticulously produced prints in the 'Fiction' series, amidst which Shaw placed a print depicting a bookcase where books are displayed with the spine to the inside (and therefore showing only the edges of the pages). This appears to be a comment on his own theme, and a deceptive statement, like what can be seen in a picture of a multitude, where the faces are erased and we know that individuality must perforce exist even though the group is perceived as a unit. A crowd seems homogenous (i.e., undifferentiated) but each individual has their own story that (in the print) we neither get to know about because the title or spine information is absent, nor know the individual story itself because the books are shown as unreadable – they are a simulacrum of reality. This is affirmed by the fact that the books and cases in all these prints are shown as life-size representations.



*Untitled 4* 2009 Giclé, 46 x 113 cm

The play of references exists of course across western art in representation as mimesis as seen in the development of oil painting in Europe as *tromp l'oeil*, which John Berger (*Ways of Seeing*, 1972) posited that derived from the wish of the owner to show what they owned – whether land, properties, or family). Magritte's 'The treachery of images' (1928) ('Ceci n'est pas une pipe') is a statement calling attention to the confusion between signifier and signified. This is also evident in the anecdote told by the art historian J. D. Flam (*Matisse: The Man and His Art*, 1987) where one of the painter's patrons, looking at his work when visiting the studio exclaimed: 'But, Monsieur Matisse, this woman's arm is too long!' to which Matisse replied, 'Madam, this is not a woman – it's a painting.' What also impresses when looking at Shaw's prints is the richness, subtlety and density of colour. This is not an accident. It can be posited that Shaw's invention of Phytocromography (the production of colour printing inks from dyes extracted from vegetable he actually grew in a patch in the grounds of the university that awarded him a PhD in 2001) was bringing together the concepts of natural and artificial in the production of a third term – a communication. The existence of the reversed bookcase print ('Untitled 4') amongst the 'Fiction' and other prints showing bookcases with the spines to view (where words have been replaced by homonyms) calls attention to the ripples of meaning in the print(s) and the impossibility of full meaning to be derived from actual books as recording paper-contraptions. The meaning of books (first level) and prints (second level) can never be fully derived because of the irreducible kernel mentioned above.

The (un)real world that Shaw's prints call our attention to expose the (un)real world of the expectation to be had from all actual books or experience, and the paradoxical relationship between potential for frustration and longing for engagement.

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