Thrift Store Paintings

Julian Stallabrass

'Collector's Pieces' [Jim Shaw's *Thrift Store Paintings*, ICA], *New Statesman*, 16 October 2000, pp. 42-3.

Wander into a smart West End gallery, and see paintings showing the patterns of suburban wallpapers and fabrics, or hand-made replicas of mass-produced statuettes, or photographs—by Martin Parr, say—of the doings and the possessions of comfortable but (say it sotto voce) somewhat vulgar folk. From the same cloth as these works are woven,

come the 'Thrift Store Paintings' collected by US artist Jim Shaw, currently on show at the ICA.

With a well-developed sense of eccentricity and absurdity, Shaw has long been collecting these paintings sold off cheaply by their owners. Many 'thrift store paintings', avidly collected by many people and swapped like bubble-gum cards, have no appeal for him. It is the weird ones that attract him. Shaw has found some truly strange things: a picture of a toilet roll and a little flower floating in a patch of suffused light, a little in the manner of mid-1920s Léger; animated statues and rebel robots, a giant lemon on a chain, an artist being shot at by a hunter. Each item has been endowed with a literal, deadpan title (originally, says Shaw, only so curators could tell which was which): 'Pink Poodle and Hydrant with Text', for instance, or 'Savage Warrior with Newsprint Face Holds Ears Clamped Shut'. Sometimes the titles carry a hint of interpretation. An admittedly grisly portrait of a woman throwing what looks like it is meant to be a winning smile over her shoulder is entitled 'Psycho Lady'. Often, however, the eccentricity of these works is less to do with their subject matter than the way it is handled. There are clumsily painted displays of adolescent fantasy, sweet pictures of animals—pets, endangered or extinct charismatic beasts—and ill-advised attempts to emulate expressionist, abstract and surrealist works. Yet there is something else here too, less commented upon: a consistent conceptual inventiveness. Eccentricity is one of the regular paths to artistic success, after all, and if pursued with more training, material and consistency, many of these visions could find a place in the contemporary art world. If the ambitions of these painters are punctured by a lack of specialist skill, by poor materials, or by being confined within too small a frame, it is because their makers lack resources, not intelligence or inventiveness.

While Shaw's published statements show little trace of condescension towards his collection of oddities, over the years his project has shifted in meaning, partly through being displayed in galleries, rather than libraries where it had its first airing, partly because the collection is now offered for sale as if it was Shaw's singular work. His method of appropriation denies Shaw contact with the painters, and it is no accident that such procedures are common to artists who draw their material from the general populace. Both matters push the collection away from its origins and towards the art elite.

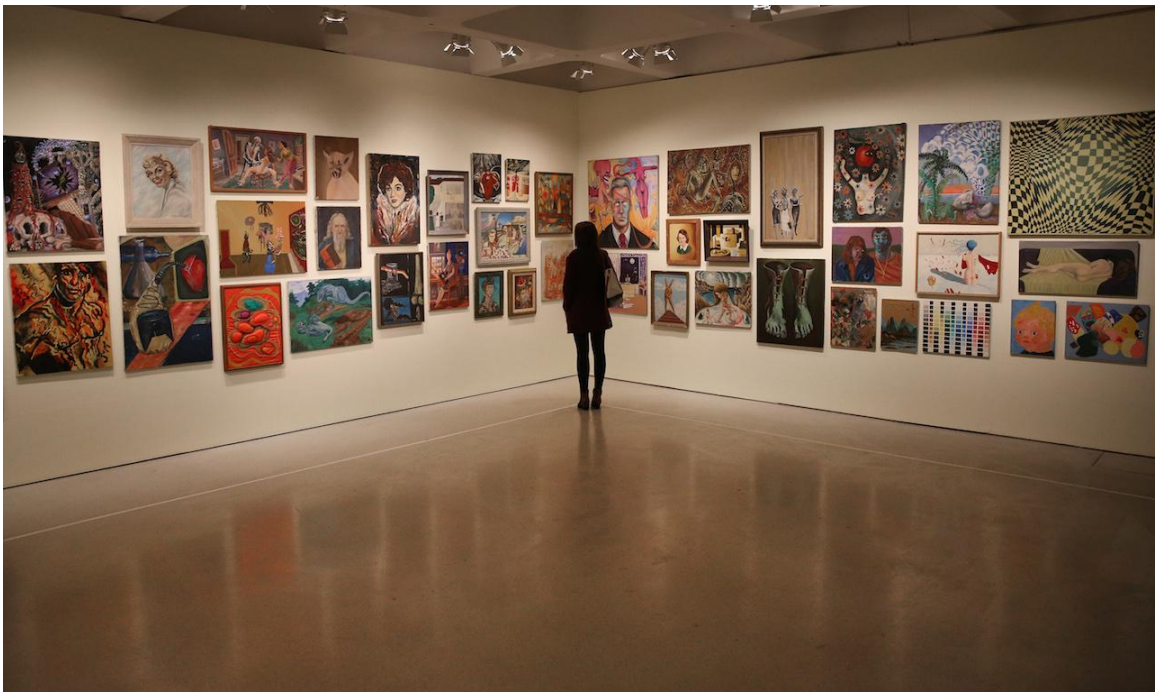
The pictures, though salvaged from low-level circulation and hung in a prestigious high art space, are not treated kindly at the ICA. They are evenly and gloomily lit, lending their surfaces a murky, seedy air. They are hung, hundreds of them, closely together in ranks, so viewers must strain their necks to look at some, stoop for others. This was the method of hanging used in nineteenth-century salons but it is remote from contemporary display in which each work is given a generous hinterland of nothingness, and is picked out with its own custom lighting. The works are loosely grouped by genre, so that all the cod-surrealist paintings, for instance, are herded together, reinforcing the impression that these works are mere examples of a type.

A clear assumption lies behind the display of this collection: that the well-informed, visually adept ICA visitors will treat these fetishes of the popular psyche with amazement, condescension and amusement. Those who believe that the division between 'high' and 'low' culture has been disposed of in an egalitarian, postmodern compact might take heed of this show which functions by bringing the two poles into contact, offering those who have scaled the cultural heights a thrilling glimpse into the abyss of the average.

Normally, these viewers would be suspicious of such an ethnographic method of display, and swift to condemn it if applied to the products of an alien culture, yet that perspective is hidden when the method is turned upon a fragment of our own (though for some particularly patronising UK commentators, North Americans take on the guise of a freakish 'Other'). The assumption is that these paintings are the products of Sunday painters who fondly believe that they can make Dalís for their living rooms, of pitiful petit-bourgeois and suburban aspiration, of the strangeness that lies beyond tidy front yards, odd flowers grown in the culturally stifling air of endless provinces.

There is an obstacle to looking at these paintings, though, which trips up every thought—we know nothing at all about those who made them: nothing of their identities, intentions and knowledge, their degree of self-awareness, their sincerity or irony, not even in some cases whether they are children, adolescents or adults. So who is to say whether some passage of clumsy painting is simply that, or part of a laborious joke? Whether the extraordinary images

on display are really fantasies or critiques of fantasies? Whether these painters are genuine primitives (as some have dubiously claimed) or faux-naïve practitioners? Knowing nothing of these artists or their projects, these abandoned or misplaced artefacts remain dumb.



Faced with these paintings we can, of course, choose our own interpretation. Here is another reading, as ungrounded as that encouraged by the ICA display: that many of these pictures demonstrate a simple yet self-conscious utopian yearning for common pleasures unsullied by the demands of mundane, labouring, administered life—for the enjoyment of children, pets, flowers and the bodies of beautiful women. Drawing on elevated examples (including Brueghel and Manet), Ernst Bloch, theorist of the utopian, wrote of painters' yearning to create worlds that escape daily toil and summon up an eternal 'Sunday pleasure'. If the visions Jim Shaw has collected seem deformed or even monstrous to sophisticated eyes, this is precisely because the demands of working life deny the resources of time, training and material to their makers.

Though it says nothing about popular taste, this exhibition is instructive in other ways. It speaks eloquently about the dependence of art on explanations which must be added to the work itself, a task normally shouldered by artists, writers, sales people and gallery educational

staff, and of how much those explanations lean upon views about the intention of the artist. Shorn of that method of elaboration, these paintings become vacuous and fugitive things. Filling that vacuum of interpretation, however, is reliable art-world snobbery, which this show tellingly exposes. Adrian Searle writing in the *Guardian* was disturbed to think that those painters not already (in his imagination) 'gibbering on street corners', incarcerated or awaiting execution, 'have the vote in the Land of the Free'. Thus a prominent art-world voice patronises these unknown painters, and makes light, not only of the pressures of ordinary life upon ordinary people but of the two-million-strong gulag that is the US prison system. Like sexism and racism before the rise of feminism and anti-colonial movements, such snobbery is effective not because it is strident and pushed towards the front of the mind, but because it is retiring and unexceptional, a steady drizzle of assumption that saturates discourse. The first step in disposing of it, once again, is to flush it out into the open, and make it loudly declare itself.

Jim Shaw's *Thrift Store Paintings* is at the ICA until 5th November.