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THE SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF ART

Tim Shaw Beyond Reason

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Edited by Anita Feldman

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The San Diego Museum of Art

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Tim Shaw Beyond Reason

Tim Shaw in his studio, Cornwall, 2017

Director's Foreword

Tim Shaw: Beyond Reason marks the first US exhibition of this groundbreaking sculptor's work, and the latest project for The San Diego Museum of Art heralding a new era in presenting solo exhibitions for contemporary artists of international acclaim, adding to the recent showcases of Nancy Lorenz, Brenda Biondo, Richard Deacon, Pan Gongkai, Lalla Essaydi, and Ron Nagle.

As part of much wider and varied programming, this institution is proud to take on the challenges of Tim Shaw's work—immersive installations at the forefront of current global issues, such as terrorism, abuse of power, silencing of free speech, and the future of mankind's relationship with artificial intelligence. Underneath it all is a common thread of questioning our humanity and the depths of darkness wherein society is capable of dwelling.

Shaw's work references the horrifying events that unfolded in his native Northern Ireland during "The Troubles," the period of sectarian conflict that lasted roughly thirty years, from the late 1960s to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. At the same time, his work is universal in scope and relates to the past, present, and future of humankind worldwide in thought-provoking and disturbing ways.

Included here are six intense, immersive experiences that invite participation rather than mere viewing. In this context, the museum visitor becomes an integral part of each installation; we are compelled to question our role, whether it be that of an antagonist or silent observer.

The exhibition and accompanying publication is made possible due to the kind collaboration of the artist, his assistant Claire English, and the generosity of Taffin and Gene Ray. The project was organized by Anita Feldman, assisted with staff support from Paul Brewin, Noell Cain, Joshua Culver, John Digesare, Sarah Hilliard, Stacey Loomis, Kari Kovach, Cory Woodall, and the invaluable contribution of many others.

Roxana Velásquez Martínez del Campo
Maruja Baldwin Executive Director
The San Diego Museum of Art

Introduction

Tim Shaw's work lays bare notions of our humanity—from abuses of power and the threat of terrorism to the use of money to silence free speech and the rise of artificial intelligence. These are works charged with the politics of our times, our role in society, and our future as human beings.

Although it is tempting to explain Shaw's work by drawing solely on his extraordinary personal experiences, in fact the results are timeless and universal. The most autobiographical is *Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous* (cat. 8), an immersive installation in which the museum visitor wanders through a blue fog, with tables and chairs upended and trays spinning through the air to a muffled soundtrack of ambient noise. Random personal effects—a handbag, a glove—are strewn on the floor, while figures in shadow run aimlessly. This scene places the audience in the immediate aftermath of a bomb blast in a Belfast café during Bloody Friday, July 21, 1972, when nineteen bombs exploded within three miles of Belfast city center, most within the space of thirty minutes. Shaw, then aged seven, was out in the city with his mother. The experience is harrowing, yet it is not so much a recreation of the event as it is a journey through a child's traumatic memory.

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 television. 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.

These themes also underlie another immersive installation, *Soul Snatcher Possession* (cat. 2). Here the visitor enters a long, distressed corridor to an open door, through which lies a small room crowded with several disturbing figures. The figures are composed of old clothes, pillows, and burlap, the detritus of abandoned lives given menacing new form with grotesque distortions. Such surreal, nightmare-like figures are not representative of individuals but rather they are indicative of a universal darkness; they are the potential we all have within us as human beings to enter a world of depravity, our propensity to abuse power over others. We wander among them, trying not to brush up against them, yet in our engagement we become a part of the assemblage itself.

Now limbo will be
A cold glitter of souls

—Seamus Heaney, "Limbo," 1972

Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous
(cat. 8, detail)

Defending Integrity from the Powers that Be (cat. 12) likewise raises issues of abuse of power. The figures have been literally silenced with money. Unable to speak, they utter unintelligible spurts of mutterings in anguished voices. Disconcertingly attached to curved blades for feet, they pitch backward and forward, unable to maintain a position. Lack of free speech has reduced the beings to something other than human. As we hear today about the closure of newspapers, the suppression of journalists in many parts of the world, and the proliferation of disinformation or "fake news" in social media and on the internet, are we so far removed from these beings?

Abuse of power is further investigated in *Alternative Authority* (cat. 13), which explores how communities can turn on themselves, ostracizing and dehumanizing their own members. We are perhaps familiar with tarring and feathering as something that happened historically, as a barbaric punishment that began during the Crusades, and was carried out in the United States as early as the eighteenth century. As the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice opens this year in Montgomery, Alabama, honoring the 4,400 African American victims of lynching, we are reminded of the many twentieth-century incidents of tarring and feathering that occurred in the United States. One instance in particular was committed by the Ku Klux Klan against seventeen men from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in Oklahoma in 1917. In this work, Shaw references incidents that took place in Northern Ireland during and after The Troubles, mostly in the 1970s, in which women were also complicit in the kidnapping and tarring of other women in their neighborhoods (usually these attacks were not fatal), for fraternizing with police or British soldiers. The most recent incident occurred as recently as 2007 when a young man accused of drug dealing in Belfast was tarred and feathered by local vigilantes.

Discussing his work with me in the cluster of rural agricultural barns serving as his studios, Shaw referred to his childhood in Belfast as a place where the spiritual, religious, and political dimensions were seen very much in black and white—good or evil, Protestant or Catholic. In rural Cornwall, however, Shaw first became aware of land having a sense of magic and timelessness. *Middle World* (cat. 1) reveals a place that is somehow situated in between religion and mythology, history and legend. Here Shaw recreates a lost world, like the English pre-historic ruins of Stonehenge or Avebury (a few hours' drive from Shaw's cottage), sites where pagans such as Druids worshipped many gods rather than one, and had a close affinity with nature—personifications of the moon, the sun, the winds, the sea, of birds and animals. Such iconography also harkens back to the ancient Egyptians, and Greek and Roman mythology. It is a shared history, our collective subconscious, uncovered here as the archaeological ruins of Stonehenge stand before us, shrouded in mystery, places of pilgrimage even today for contemporary Druids during the summer solstice. Here the figures are assembled in a cathedral-like setting, recalling the tension of the Middle Ages when Christianity struggled to suppress paganism by incorporating pagan festivals and

ABOVE:

Defending Integrity from the Powers that Be (cat. 12, detail)

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Alternative Authority (cat. 13, detail)

symbols within their own iconography (hence the rabbits and eggs of fertility at Easter). The duality of religion and mythology is placed on a stage flanked by life and death, with carefully detailed skeletons, clockworks, and modern aircraft to invoke a Surrealist sense of arbitrary time. The work is a culmination of many years, stemming from the artist's recollection of Masons who, after the death of his father when he was a child, enrolled young Shaw in the Masonic Boys School in Dublin. This work touches on childhood anxieties—that you are without control over what happens to you, that you might not be safe. Out of these fears mixed with unrestrained imagination, more mysterious worlds emerge, worlds on stalactites, where time collapses, and that echo his life as a boy in Belfast when neighbors would disappear, where nearby homes were bombed, and where bullets pierced the windows of those who practiced the "wrong" religion.

Another way of delving into the depths of what it means to be human is explored in *The Birth of Breakdown Clown* (cat. 11). When I first encountered the "clown" it was in Shaw's studio. He lifted a sheet from the figure, which sat upright and turned its head, its eyes moving from person to person in the barn. Then it spoke, a deep voice, breaking into German at random interludes, questioning what makes humans distinct from beings such as itself, which are also composed of a solid structure, "stringy bits," energy, and skin, and can also reason and answer questions. The clown provokes disturbing and conflicting thoughts about the future of humanity and robotics, the seemingly inevitable rise of artificial intelligence, and how our world is becoming increasingly automated. Do we as a species have any control over our uncertain future?

The duality of religion and mythology is placed on a stage flanked by life and death, with carefully detailed skeletons, clockworks, and modern aircraft to invoke a Surrealist sense of arbitrary time.

Middle World (cat. 1, detail)

Catalogue

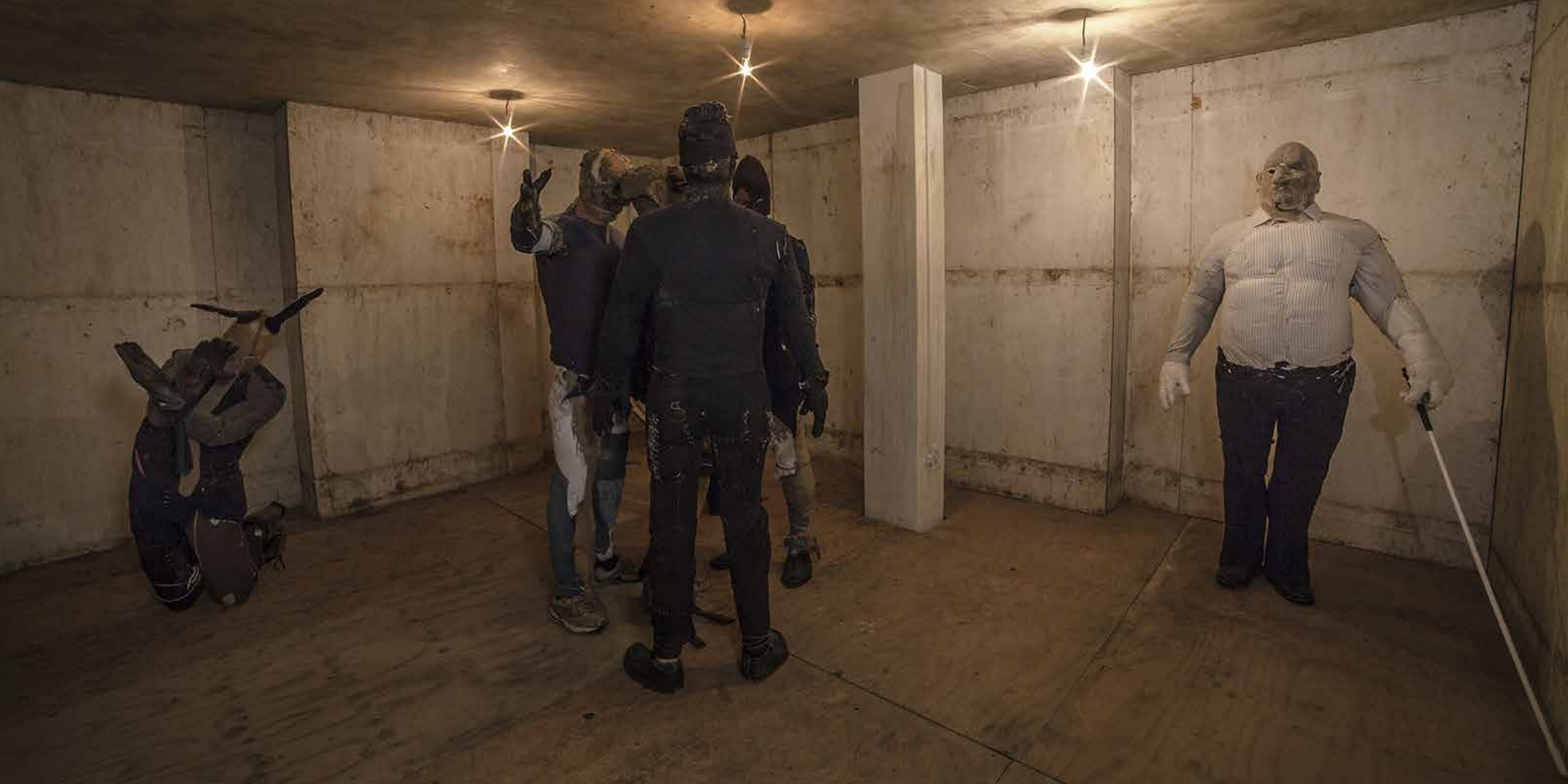
Soul Snatcher Possession, (cat. 2, detail)

1. *Middle World,* 1989–ongoing
Cement, steel, lead, small figures in bronze and terracotta
109 x 75 x 56½ in. (276.9 x 190.5 x 143.5 cm)

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE:

Middle World (cat. 1, details)

Middle World (cat. 1, detail)



PRECEDING PAGES:

2. *Soul Snatcher Possession*, 2011–12
Immersive gallery installation; eight large life-size figures in low-lit fabricated room with corridor; old clothes, pillows, stockings, on steel armatures
Room (including corridor): 96 x 252 x 276 in. (243.8 x 640 x 701 cm)

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Soul Snatcher Posession (cat. 2, detail)

ABOVE LEFT:

3. *Snout Face,* 2017
Bronze and stocking
8 x 4¼ x 2½ in. (20.3 x 10.8 x 6.4 cm)

ABOVE CENTER:

4. *Hooded Figure,* 2017
Resin and stocking
8 x 2½ x 2½ in. (20.3 x 6.4 x 6.4 cm)

ABOVE RIGHT:

5. *Rocking Figure with Flowers,* 2017
Resin and stocking
9 x 4 x 5 in. (22.9 x 10.2 x 12.7 cm)

ABOVE:

6. *Kneeling Figure,* 2017
Resin and stocking
6¼ x 2¾ x 3½ in. (15.9 x 7 x 8.9 cm)

RIGHT:

7. *The Blind Whistler,* 2017
Bronze
11 x 7 x 5½ in. (27.9 x 17.8 x 14 cm)

PRECEDING PAGES:

8. *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
120 x 378 x 432 in. (304.8 x 960.1 x 1097.2 cm)
(installed in Kappatos Gallery, Athens)

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE:

Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous
(cat. 8, details)

PRECEDING PAGES:

Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous
(cat. 8, detail)

ABOVE:

9. *Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous, Working drawing I*, 2015
Ink, charcoal, and collage
46¾ x 30¼ in. (118.7 x 76.8 cm)

ABOVE:

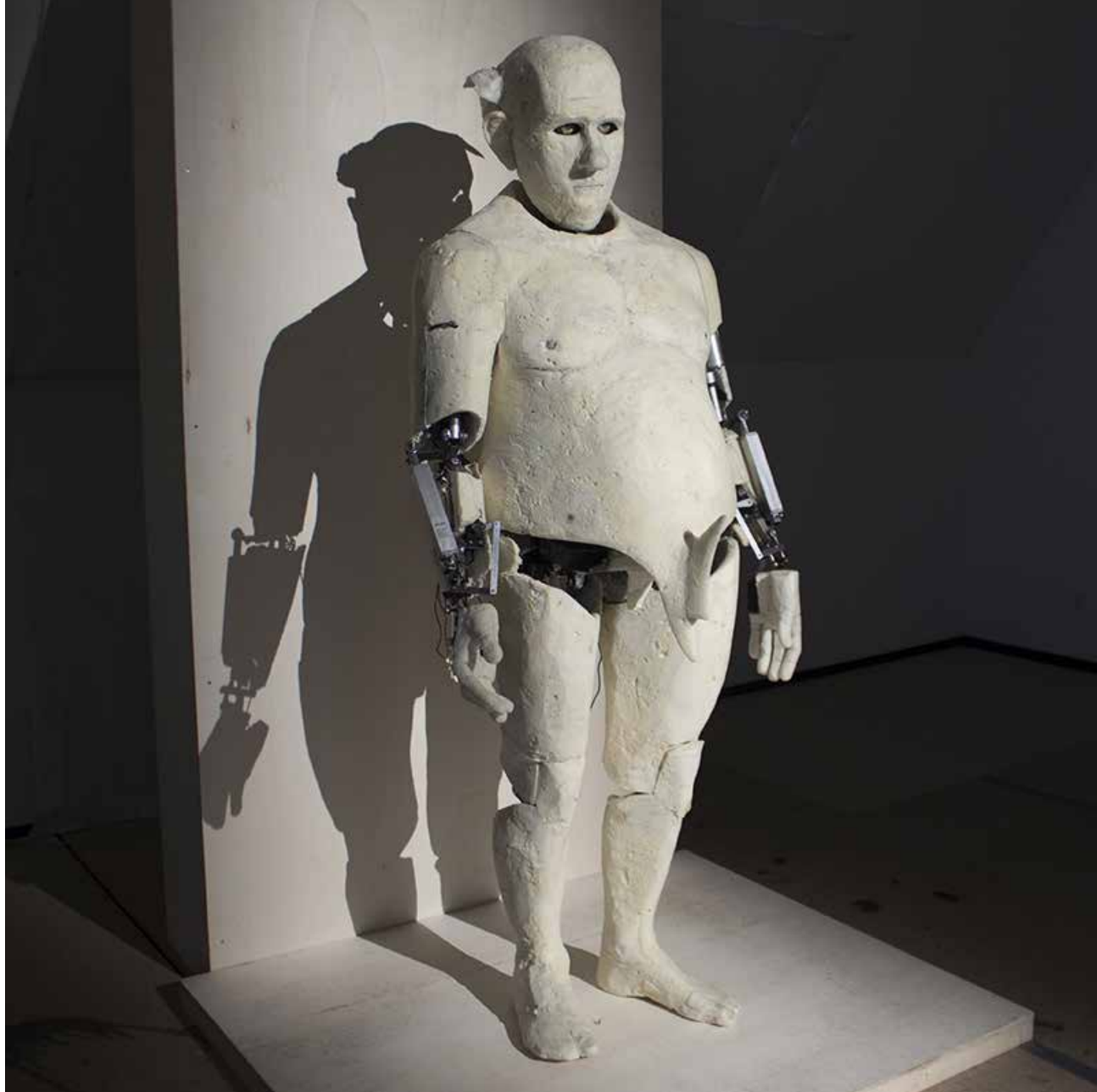
10. *Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous, Working drawing II*, 2015
Ink, charcoal, and collage
46¾ x 30¼ in. (118.7 x 76.8 cm)

OPPOSITE PAGE:

11. *The Birth of Breakdown Clown*, 2015–18
Robotic figure with motion and sound; foam, steel, and aluminum
80 x 32½ x 21 in. (203.2 x 82.6 x 53.3 cm)
Wooden platform: 96 x 48 x 48 in.
(243.8 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm)

FOLLOWING PAGES:

12. *Defending Integrity from the Powers that Be*, 2017
Mixed media automated sculpture and sound installation; pillows, old clothes, and stocking on metal armature
82 x 73 x 31 in. (208.2 x 185.4 x 78.7 cm)



ABOVE:

Alternative Authority (cat. 13, detail)

OPPOSITE PAGE:

13. *Alternative Authority*, 2017
Mixed media sculpture
Pillows, old clothes, and stocking on metal armature
65 x 30 x 36 in. (165.1 x 76.2 x 91.4 cm)

Tim Shaw Living Between the Black and White

Tim Shaw still clearly recalls the moment he first saw the fifteenth-century west front of Tours Cathedral. It was February 1987 and he was a second-year art student on a three-month exchange in France. He felt overwhelmed as the vast precipice of carved stone rose up before him; its delicate tracery and crocketed niches forming a dramatic middle ground between the secular space of the public square and the sacred space of the Cathedral.

Stood in front of this dramatic vertical stage, where saints and sinners, realistic portraits, idealized figures, and distorted grotesques made visible the medieval belief that human life exists between the poles of heaven and hell, Shaw was overcome by a sense of awe, mingled with fear and an awareness of his own mortality.

While the Catholic imagery of Tours Cathedral was very different to Shaw's own experience growing up in a Northern Irish Presbyterian family, where even crucifixes were absent because of the church's belief that Christ is risen, the focus on judgment was at least familiar. The real culture shock had occurred the previous year, when he had begun his undergraduate degree at Falmouth School of Art. In contrast to the polarized, sometimes extreme positions he was used to in Northern Ireland, Cornwall had felt profoundly different. It was alien and mysterious: a gray, "middle world" whose pagan customs and natural spiritualities challenged everything he had once believed.

During his time in France, Shaw began to feel anxious and weighed down by mortality, sensing the ominous drum beat of time and overcome by the feeling of too much to do and too little time to do it. He only felt at peace swimming in deep water, and when he wasn't swimming, he found wearing a fish hat helped remind him of the sensation. He decided to take a year out of his studies and began to make small, strange bronze figures as totems for these feelings: a man with a fish head, a drummer, a caged man. Like the figures of medieval marginalia, they represented a transitional space: unreal and fantastical in appearance, yet deeply rooted in Shaw's own experience of reality.

Shaw continued to make these small figures when he resumed his studies, building them up into a procession of individuals and groups: men and women, hooded,

Middle World (cat. 1, detail)

Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous (cat. 8, detail)

horned, and masked, kneeling and standing, their costumes and poses evoking the carnivals of Catholic Europe and the May Day Obby Oss rituals of Padstow, Cornwall, where folk and pagan beliefs mingle with traditional religion. Eventually they became the inhabitants of *Middle World* (cat. 1), a monumental sculpture Shaw began soon after he left art school.

In *Middle World* Shaw blurred the personal with the universal, the past with the present, mingling medieval references with modern attitudes. This is a world where the "old gods" have gone, but they are not forgotten. Hell has become an empty subterranean realm, a shadowy abyss filled with bronze stalactites. The gothic façade is no longer filled with the citizens of heaven, but satellite dishes, a Vulcan bomber, and an electric chair. The consoling presence of the Son that usually dominated cathedral façades has been replaced by four elongated faces whose benevolent gaze offers a secular benediction, while in a similar way images of the moon and stars pay subtle homage to the support given by the Freemasons after the death of Shaw's father at an early age. Pendulums and drummers beat out time and warn of impending doom, but their warning is of human evil rather than divine judgement.

Middle World's resemblance to a pinball table and the figures to playing pieces isn't accidental. Many of Shaw's figures are pawns in a game: moved, manipulated, and programmed by forces outside their control. Like the victims of war, terrorism, politics, religion, villainy, hatred, corruption, and fear, they live in a world of suspicion, surveillance, and unease, where Big Brother is watching and danger may come at any moment.

The origin of these themes might be traced to Shaw's childhood and particularly memories both he and his sister have of being caught up in the IRA bombings of Bloody Friday, 1972. His sister remembers both of them running with their mother through the streets of central Belfast on that day, although she is unclear of whether they were running away from or towards danger. Shaw's own memories are equally graphic although a little less specific, focusing on the effects of a bomb: the sounds, the sight of people running, the blue haze filling the air, and the sense of imminent, unseen danger.

Despite living in Cornwall for more than thirty years, Shaw continues to reflect upon the Troubles in Northern Ireland—contemplating the lives that were dramatically changed by those years of violence, and the obvious resonances with contemporary acts of terror. Yet it was only in 2014, during his residency at the Kappatos Gallery in Athens, that he directly addressed these memories and concerns. *Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous* (cat. 8), crystallized these experiences, memories, and concerns into an immersive and deeply affecting multi-media installation that engulfs the viewer.

As viewers, we enter a darkened room filled with a blue haze from the multiple projectors required for the work. Suddenly our senses are assaulted by a sinister soundscape shaped by the noise of many sirens and clips of contemporary news reports. In the gloom we are forced to negotiate our way through the detritus of hurried flight:

overturned tables and chairs, trays spinning through the air casting shadow onto walls bathed in blue light, the silhouettes of men, women, and children fleeing in fear. Shadows mingle with solid forms, projections with shadows, so that like our memories we discover ourselves in a blurred middle ground between mystery and reality.

In this darkness, among these woven shadows, Shaw confronts us with one of humanity's primal fears: that we are the "playthings of the gods," with life a game of chance that can change without warning. Even though the gods of Olympus and Valhalla may have gone, buried beneath the concrete and Enlightenment secularism of the modern Western world, their place has been taken by governments, global corporations, and large institutions spying on us from their lofty towers, and terrorists hiding in plain sight, waiting to wreak unexpected carnage. The fear remains that our lives are not our own, and danger lurks around the corner.

Shaw's work forces us to face these fears, but never more directly than in the installation, *Soul Snatcher Possession* (cat. 2). We open a door into a small, seedy room, lit only by three naked light bulbs. In the center of this claustrophobic space stands a hooded figure, hemmed in and encircled by three figures whose proximity and body language appear intimidating and aggressive. In front of us, a blind man extends his white cane, searching his environs. In the far corner a young woman leans against the wall, her hand resting near her knickers, her head looking away, pinned back by a streak of stocking

Soul Snatcher Posession (cat. 2, detail)

Soul Snatcher Posession (cat. 2, detail)

that distorts her face so that it is impossible to tell whether her expression is one of horror or of drug-induced ecstasy, implied by the presence of a syringe on the floor. A man watches her. In the other corner a man kneels, his hands outstretched in either prayer or pleading.

These slightly larger-than-life-size figures are made from what looks like a collection of old clothing and torn material picked up from the roadside and fashioned around metal armatures into lumpen human forms. They loom over us in a sinister claustrophobia of complicity that turns us into involuntary voyeurs, forced to stare at stocking flesh, pillows, and items of clothing that are still stained in our minds by the intimate contact they once had with their wearers.

The distorted, exaggerated features of Shaw's figures reflect the influence of medieval grotesques and marginalia, Pieter Brueghel, Francisco de Goya, Otto Dix, and Auguste Rodin. With feet made from broken shoes and shards of metal, and overfilled bodies straining at the seams, they combine the looseness and spontaneity of a two-dimensional sketch with the three-dimensional presence of sculpture. This is what makes them so disturbing: for while their raw incompleteness can provoke a sense of disquiet, uncertainty, and terror, their classical human proportions evoke feelings of empathy.

Shaw wanted an undercurrent of threat to run through each of these vignettes, but there is nothing explicitly violent in them. The unseeing central figures could be playing blind man's bluff, fumbling in the dark, arms outstretched. The man watching the young woman could be a bystander, a voyeur, or her dealer, and we cannot know whether the kneeling figure is praying or pleading. Shaw remains completely neutral, leaving it to the viewer's imagination to decide. Are they victims or protagonists, or are they all just innocent playthings of some external power?

The viewer's response is central to Shaw's work. He wants us to be aware of our hesitation at their eerie, unsettling forms; to admit our repulsion at their jumble sale manufacture and broken, shattered elements. He forces us to realize that the evil we perceive isn't always real and "out there," but can come from our own reading of a situation. We find ourselves making assumptions when we look at his figures, jumping to conclusions, reacting in fear and loathing without any evidence. This is what Shaw's art confronts us with: the evil and fear that isn't in the world, but in our heads.

It is this evil that faces us in the tarred and feathered woman of *Alternative Authority* (cat. 13). After reading several newspaper articles describing the employment of this archaic punishment during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Shaw became intrigued by its use, which continued even into recent years, and what it was that made it such a powerful and disturbing form of retribution and punishment. As we look at her slouched, bound, and pathetic figure, covered in viscous black tar, sawdust, and a cloud of white feathers, we see a chimera. She is no longer human, but a human-bird hybrid. And as we

stand in the place of the jeering crowd, Shaw invites us to consider the ritualized act of exclusion that has set her apart from society and normality and made her an ostracized, outlawed figure.

The idea that even the "innocent" can be complicit in horrific acts is another central theme in Shaw's works. It forms the subject of *Defending Integrity from the Powers that Be* (cat. 12), in which two precariously balanced figures rock backwards and forwards on vicious metal skis. Their mouths are filled with wads of cash that silence them both physically and metaphorically. For Shaw, these represent all those victims of injustice who are unable to speak out because of their own acts of unwitting collusion and collaboration. Emerging from these figures we hear distorted sounds, attempts at explanation mangled by money, in a pitiful attempt at justification.

Shaw's underlying themes of complicity and moral ambiguity are reflected in his materials and working methods. While his small bronze figures are highly finished moments of frozen transience, his larger sculptures, made from found or mundane materials, plaster and metal, roughly shaped and assembled, reflect his search for subject matter in the interstices of life, where things are never black-and-white, but shadowy and gray. Yet, in order to make them, Shaw has had to hold them and manipulate them. He has had to choose and work with materials that have been thrown away. He has had to massage and caress distorted forms until they appear "right." These untouchable figures are therefore the product of touch and have come about through deliberate choice and selection. From dissolution, Shaw makes something new.

ABOVE LEFT:

Alternative Authority (cat. 13, detail)

ABOVE RIGHT:

Defending Integrity from the Powers that Be (cat. 12, detail)

Shaw gives us hope without ever showing us hope. He takes abandoned clothes and remakes them. He shows us that what appears objective is in reality subjective. He turns the viewer into the subject and makes his sculptures the observer. He highlights the ambiguous nature of the world, making us realize that a victim might be the perpetrator and the perpetrator might be the victim. At one point in the monologue given by his animatronic sculpture, *The Birth of Breakdown Clown* (cat. 11), the grotesque figure faces the viewer and says: "We are no different. All just wires, soft flesh hung onto hard form. Impulses running down those stringy bits. And when the life force leaves the form, and the water evaporates, we are dust. You and me . . ."

In fairytales, and in real life, the world can often be polarized between dark and light, good and evil. Shaw, however, refuses to be that simplistic. When he moved to Cornwall more than thirty years ago he discovered a middle world iridescent with the rich spectrum of gray that exists in the real world. He reminds us that for every act of evil, horror, and terror we have witnessed, there is an also an act that is only evil because we have named it as such through our own preconceptions, judgments, biased attitudes, or silent complicity. Here is the key to Shaw's work; the underlying conviction that makes it so compelling and real. Like his clown, Shaw stands us on the edge of the abyss, where our solid body meets the world beyond, which we can never fully know. He makes us face the space of separation that exists between all individuals and objects, reminding us that we are all different, and yet making us realize that despite our apparent differences we are the same: none of us is perfect. Shaw's is an art of protest, a cry to the world to think again, but he does so not through haranguing or preaching, but by showing: making visible the invisible without commentary or prejudice but with the objective neutrality that allows his viewer to truly see.

Shaw gives us hope without ever showing us hope. He takes abandoned clothes and remakes them. He shows us that what appears objective is in reality subjective.

Soul Snatcher Possession, (cat. 2, detail)

In Conversation with Tim Shaw

Anita Feldman: We're sitting in your cottage in Cornwall—I'm wondering if you could say something about how a sense of place has an impact on your work.

Tim Shaw: I've lived in this cottage since 1993, but I first took up residency in the main farmhouse in 1987 as a student. I then left art college and lived in Bristol, working across southern England as a restorer and conservator of old buildings and sculpture. I returned to Cornwall to make *Middle World*.

AF: That certainly seems like it has roots in this part of the world.

TS: I grew up in Belfast. We went to a Presbyterian Church. The politics at the time, the religious beliefs, were set in stone and in a very black-and-white way, and the boundaries were very marked-out. Coming to Cornwall things seemed much less clear. For the first time I was starting to feel that sense of the past walking with the present moment.

AF: You mentioned before that your father was a Mason. Do you think some of the iconography in *Middle World* comes from that?

TS: I really do think that. My dad did take me into a Masonic hall. I was such a small kid, and I remember seeing symbols of the sun, the moon and the stars, and the candles on the table and the Bible on the table between the candles and being very captivated. It captured my imagination, not in a comfortable way, slightly disconcerting, because it was foreign and you were walking into something that you had never seen before.

And you've got to remember that in a Presbyterian Church, where we went every Sunday, you didn't have the symbol of Christ on the cross, and all the ornate things that you encounter in a good many different denominations—Roman Catholicism, for example. It was very stripped back. There was the symbol of the cross, but because Christ had risen, there was no body on the cross.

AF: And were there stories that went with those images?

TS: No, I don't remember any stories. I just remember the picture of that, and it's stayed in my head. Even at the Masonic Boys' School, we never talked about the symbols. There was never a conversation about what this meant or what that meant. But when I returned to the former school many years later the symbols were all around.
It became important when I did an exchange to Tours in my second year at art school—with the journey to France, and seeing Tours' grand medieval cathedral and going all

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Tim Shaw outside his studio, Cornwall, 2016

ABOVE:
Middle World (cat. 1, detail)

...feeling stuck rigid to the restaurant seat, then there was this almighty bang and then the silence. The atmosphere appeared blue and seemed to expand and tighten like a balloon ready to burst, then things went flying through the air. I remember the clatter of trays...

around the Loire Valley and seeing great buildings of the past that it all started to awaken something in me. And of course, here in Cornwall, the moon takes on more importance, it appears more prevalent, because there's more sky to look at.

AF: And you're reminded a lot more of history here too, because there are so many older buildings and walls and fortifications around?

TS: Yes, and I would say, in ancient history in terms of geology of the place too; Cornwall is also known for its beautiful coastline. And there's something about it; it feels old, the land feels old. Many artists have come here and talked about the quality of light, or talked about the region's artists. You know, Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, the Newlyn painters before them—to be honest, this hasn't been important to me, my influences have been elsewhere—it's that sense of the feeling of the past. Maybe it's the standing stones as well.

AF: Growing up in Belfast has obviously had a big impact on your work, in particular in those times of serious upheaval.

TS: Then it just seemed normal, because it was kind of all you knew. Certainly by 1970, the Troubles[1] had well-established themselves. So at that age—what was I? Five or six . . .

AF: And you were right in the middle of Belfast?

TS: Three and a half miles from the center. Belfast is a small city, so twenty minutes, or less, of a bus ride to where I lived. But the thing with the Troubles is that everybody was exposed to them; it happened everywhere. We lived in a nice house and in a nice place, but there were still things happening very close by. For example, the man opposite was killed in his house, and nobody ever talked about it, nobody ever—other than, oh, he died—but he was murdered in his house. And it all seemed quite normal.

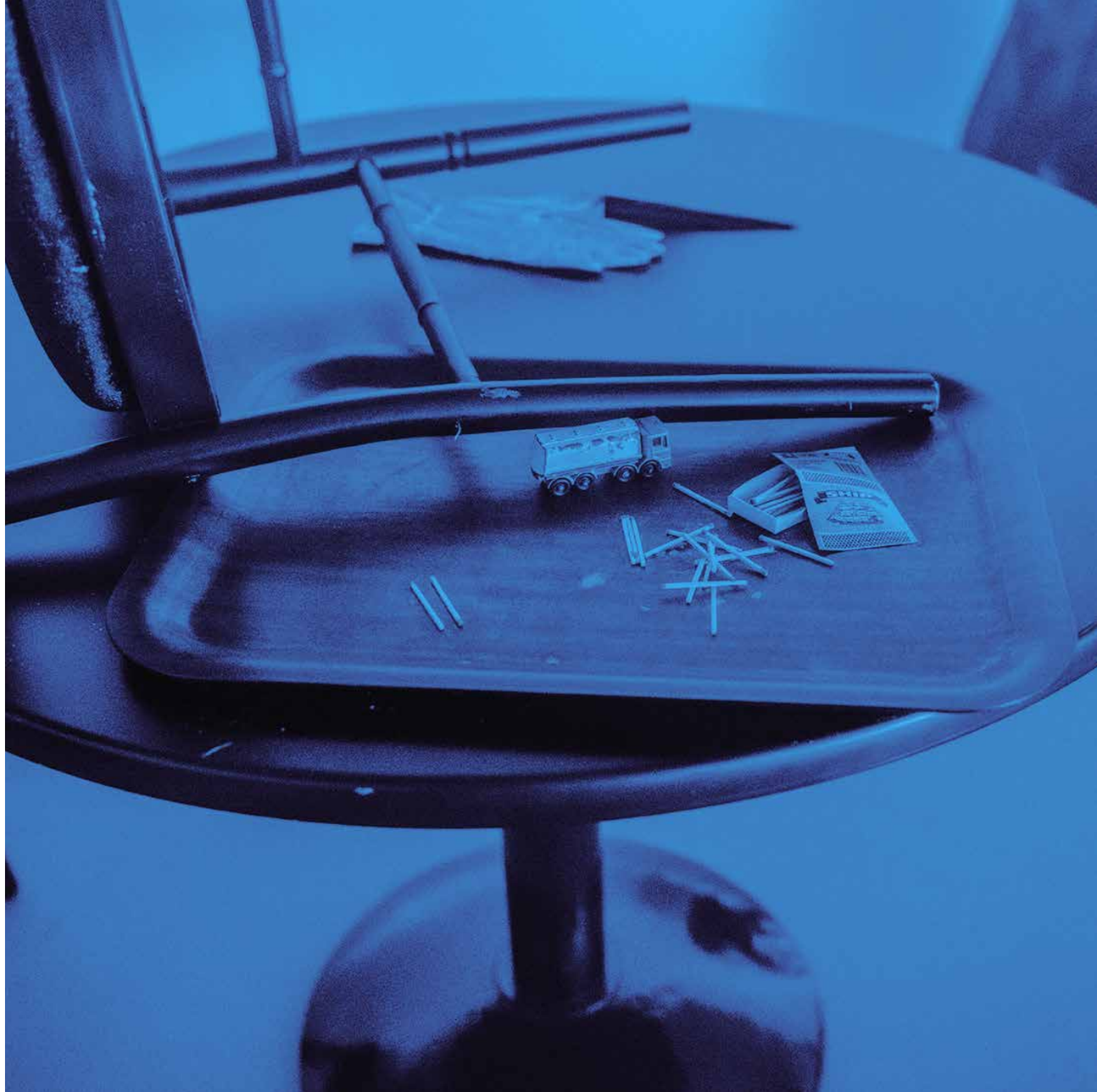
AF: Killed by the IRA[2]?

TS: Possibly sectarian, we don't know. He died violently, but there was nothing much made of it, and it was very quickly forgotten about. The next door neighbors—it was a Protestant area, and a young, nice Catholic couple moved in. No sooner had they moved in, than there was a bullet that had gone through the window and shattered. And looking back, my brother said, "Oh well, it could have been a stray bullet, or maybe it was for them." And I've counted at least eight bombs that had gone off very close by.

It was a strange sort of normality that when you went into town, before you went into the main shopping street, there were these gates, and you went through a turnstile, and each person was body-searched.

And then, every shop that you went into, you were searched again and nobody questioned it, because it was just what you did and it was for everybody's safety. But when you cast your mind back to what everybody endured every day, you realize, it was just so abnormal, really.

And when you saw a car parked with nobody in it, it made you feel really uneasy, because bombs were planted in cars; the IRA had got their new weapon of choice, which was the car bomb. And very rarely were cars ever left unattended, but when they were, if it was in the city center, it wouldn't be long before the emergency services were there to check it out and then, if they saw a bag, or whatever, in it, then it became a "suspect



Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous
(cat. 8, detail)

device." And then it could have the door blown open and a robot would go in and get the bag and blow it up.

AF: Your work *Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous*, is about that experience that you had as a child.

TS: I've always believed that this event happened on a day called Bloody Friday, in which twenty-six bombs were planted, at least nineteen of which went off within eighty minutes, within a few square miles of the city center. So you can imagine what chaos ensued from that.

You've got to realize that I was a kid of seven—so it could have been that the restaurant experience happened on a day close to Bloody Friday and the experience of two events were compressed into one. I shall never know this. My sister, Judith, remembers us running through the streets with our mother on Bloody Friday, running like everybody else in the crowds, not knowing whether we were running away, or running into the next bomb.

Now if that was the case, I can't remember my sister being in the restaurant. I remember my mother and I remember my friend called Sam and his mother. It could be that Judith joined us later, who knows? We just don't know.

So we were in the restaurant when two bombs exploded close by. That day—I have this memory of playing near the door of our house and my mother saying, "We're going to town, Tim, get ready." And I remember saying, "I don't want to go," and I had a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that something bad was going to happen that day. We talked about this once when I was older, and she said, "Well, you know, it was like that then, it wasn't a premonition, it was just, everybody felt full of fear."

And I remember feeling stuck rigid to the restaurant seat, then there was this almighty bang and then the silence. The atmosphere appeared blue and seemed to expand and tighten like a balloon ready to burst, then things went flying through the air. I remember the clatter of trays most of all, and people were running and nobody knew quite where to run. You didn't think about it, you just got out. We had to walk home, because all the buses and everything had come to a standstill.

I decided that I was going to make this piece around 2014. I was back in Belfast, and I wanted to talk to my friend, Sam (Robert McIlroy, his name is really, and we called him Sammy, because of the famous footballer Sammy McElroy). Anyway, we were out late one night, and I turned around and I said, "Do you remember when we were kids and a bomb went off in a restaurant?" And he just stared at me blank and a little confused.

AF: He didn't remember?

TS: He didn't remember.

TS: Well, I was a little annoyed, because you think, well, how come I remember and you don't? So it left me pretty uneasy, because at this stage my mother was elderly and much of her memory had gone.

AF: So there was no one to share the memory with.

TS: Exactly, and so I went off to produce this piece, and I decided that I needed to write Sam out—cut him out of the story—which I wasn't comfortable about, but felt that it was the only way to proceed with clarity. So when I was to show *Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous* in Northern Ireland and Sam was going to turn up, I felt even more uncomfortable. Uncomfortable about showing the work in a place where people's lives had been afflicted by over three decades of the Troubles. The show was never going to sit comfortably in such a situation.

So Sam came to the show, and a lot of people came, and I didn't get much chance to speak to him, and I felt very uneasy about writing my friend, that I had known all of my life, out of it. So I phoned a few days later to thank him for coming, and his words were, "Jesus, Tim, I walked into that room and it was like walking into hell, and I remembered when I was a kid, and I was with my mother in a restaurant, having lunch, and a bomb goes off and we get out."

And this had a really weird effect; I really got angry with him on the phone.

AF: So he did remember.

TS: This event of walking into the space brought this memory back to him. And I didn't believe him at first, I had thought that he somehow was having a joke. So I got him to draw out exactly the shape of the place, and go into minute detail, go through every single freeze-frame, if you like, of this event, and he more or less described the restaurant and everything the way that I had remembered it. And then I said, "Sam, we were both there together with our mothers. We were seven-year-old boys."

It's a story of how an artwork can uncover a hidden memory, because he had no knowledge of it before then. So I think that art, as often is the case, works on many different levels, and it's about giving shape and form to an early childhood memory. It's about commemorating a specific event that, as time moves forward, fades from the collective memory. And because of the magnitude of the event, I felt it was important to commemorate, because if you consider say, Bloody Friday—Bloody Sunday happened just six months before, when British paratroopers opened fire on civilians— then we have this other event that very few people outside Northern Ireland know about.

AF: That's a very specific event and a specific place, but the work itself has universal implications. And in 2014, when you created the piece were you thinking about what was going on globally?

TS: More importantly what happened then still happens today, it still carries on across the world, and in many ways, probably in far greater magnitude and far more tragic consequences, when you think of Syria. And I think that what happened then happened as a result of the secret talks between the IRA and the British government breaking down when an agreement could not be reached. It's a reminder that people must never walk away from the table.

AF: It also makes us think about what people are capable of.

TS: Once conflict begins, it knows no depths. It carries on and it can get more extreme, it has no boundaries. Once it starts, it can go anywhere.

With *Casting a Dark Democracy*, today people will look at that large-scale sculpture in my studio of the Abu Ghraib prisoner—cloaked and hooded. And some of the young people, don't know its significance. They are not familiar with this image.

AF: Remarkable, isn't it, that it's becoming forgotten already, so quickly, when it was such a harrowing image.

TS: I'm just so surprised, you know, old enough now to see that, as time proceeds, these things do get forgotten. But of course, the consequences of going to war in Iraq, I believe, is that we are still paying for today, of what goes on in the Middle East. And it's important not to forget what went on. Why did America and Britain go to war in Iraq? What were the reasons? They still seem pretty empty today. An awful lot of people were killed and a lot of damage done.

AF: In terms of the process of your working—you made *Casting a Dark Democracy* on the basis of newspaper clippings, and the same is true of *Man on Fire*?

TS: *Man on Fire* originally was shaped by a particular event that happened in 2005 in Basra. The British forces came into the town in a in a Warrior armored personnel carrier to try to free two of their colleagues who had been captured and put into a compound. A riot ensued, and petrol bombing, and one of the petrol bombs went down the hatch of the Warrior car and all the soldiers clambered out on fire.

The press images are extremely shocking which is why I felt compelled to make an artwork about the event. Seeing the pictures of those soldiers engulfed by flames made me think about that place between life and death and the desperate fight for survival. It also made me think about a couple of other events that had happened not long before. One being, the terrorist attack on Glasgow Airport [in 2007], when two individuals drove into the front of the airport in a jeep filled with petrol bombs and a gas canister, potentially creating a massive fireball. The irony is that one of the attackers was a professional doctor.

Also, a lot of the work that I create refers to the ancient—it doesn't belong to any specific time, and I started to think about my visit to Pompeii, and these extraordinary life casts, when ash fell on people in their last moments, it molded them; they really are incredible and look so full of life. And I began to think about that with *Man on Fire*, and also about a personal experience of driving into a street riot in Belfast, and everything around was on fire.

AF: When was that?

TS: Late summer 2005. What's interesting is, I can't find it on the internet, but it was a time when there were riots across the whole of Belfast.

AF: And then there's *Alternative Authority*, with the woman who has been tarred and feathered, and that also relates back to Belfast.

TS: Yes, and Northern Ireland in general.

AF: And that state of being in between? I think a lot of people find that piece, in particular, quite disturbing.

TS: It is a disturbing piece. As I've mentioned, everyone was aware of the bombings, the shootings and kneecapping. However, this other form of punishment—the tarring and feathering of a victim—is something that possibly occupies a far more deeply disturbing place in the collective psyche. What is it that distinguishes this from those other forms of violence?

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Casting a Dark Democracy, 2008–14
Immersive gallery installation; steel, barbed wire, black polyethylene, three-phase electrical wire, sand, oil, sound, haze, low lighting
Figure (including wooden platform): 216 x 168 x 48 in. (548.6 x 426.7 x 121.9 cm)
Oil pool: 420 x 168 in. (1066.8 x 426.7 cm)

ABOVE:

Abu Ghraib tortured prisoner, *Daily Mail*, April 30, 2004

AF: It's so dehumanizing.

TS: Yes.

AF: And is the tarring and feathering a practice that was only used against women?

TS: Tarring and feathering was something that had been used more so in nationalist areas than Protestant areas, and it went on, particularly in the early seventies, when it was felt that for any young girl or woman who had fraternized with the British forces or the RUC[4], this was a form of community justice. That's why it's called *Alternative Authority*. The victim was often beaten before being tied against a lamppost, sometimes their hair was cut and then they had tar poured over their head and body followed by feathers thrown over them.

AF: And the tar is hot, it's burning their skin?

TS: Yeah, but tar melts at a lower temperature than what we think, so it wouldn't have killed anybody, but it certainly would have scarred them, and certainly psychologically.

AF: And women were involved in doing this to other women?

TS: In some of the accounts that I've read, that is the case. And again, it's odd that we never talked about it. It's only recently, in making this work, that people go, oh yeah, this happened. People don't like to talk about it.

AF: So people are basically moving on in history and trying to forget this part of their past. Maybe that's also true in the United States, in particular with tarring and feathering, which happened with the Ku Klux Klan.

TS: Yes, there are also earlier accounts of it happening in America.

AF: It seems really shocking that things like that can still be going on, that this is recent history, not ancient history. It does make you question things about humanity, lessons of history: why are we still acting like this to each other?

TS: When I created *Soul Snatcher Possession*, there was a program on Radio 4, Claude Lanzmann, filmmaker, was giving an interview. And he was referring back to the Holocaust, and he talked about a dimension of barbarity that does not disappear from humanity. And I thought, that's it, this is what *Soul Snatcher Possession* is about.

AF: And how fragile civilization really is.

TS: And it doesn't take to walk too far beyond the law, where you encounter something other, and where the laws of nature start to kick into action, or something that reduces us beyond civility. When war breaks out, it knows no boundaries. Conflict makes people behave differently

AF: Maybe that's part of the reason that piece is so frightening to walk through, because it does provoke those thoughts, and also make you question your own capability of being inhuman.

TS: Yeah, it's within us all.

AF: That's the most disturbing thought of all, that we could actually find that in ourselves.

TS: And it's about survival as well, for sure.

AF: That kind of questioning of humanity is implicit also in *The Birth of Breakdown Clown* and the use of technology. Where are we going with artificial intelligence, and what makes us human?

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Man on Fire, 2009–15
Black painted foam and polyethylene on steel armature
162 x 176½ x 78 in. (411.5 x 448.3 x 198.1 cm)

ABOVE:

Teenage girl tarred and feathered, Londonderry, November 11, 1971
Keystone Pictures USA / Alamy Stock Photo

TS: When you walk through the streets of London, you encounter people just looking into a screen, not really looking where they're going, and not very interested in what's around them in their encounter from A to B. And there's something a bit dehumanizing about that, that the focus becomes more internalized. Social media can be interesting, because, let's say with the tarred and feathered piece, there was quite a foray on social media about the piece. And not one person came up to me during the show and said, well, what does this piece really mean? And I find that people can be prepared to vent their spleens, and feel comfortable to do that, but in actual reality, face-to-face, not so.

AF: People are much more likely to say what they think, even if it's a criticism or a misunderstanding, if they're on an email or in social media. But face-to-face with someone is a confrontation.

TS: Yeah, I think we have to be careful of that. I think the social media and the digital age has its importance and its place, but there's also something that becomes a little dangerously undemocratic about it, when a leader of a country can tweet something, or put something out there in that very powerful medium, and it gets taken up as truth.

AF: It's a bit perverse—it's democratic and undemocratic at the same time, because you have this forum, where everyone can join in, but at the same time, there's so much false information out there. That also relates to this sense of inevitability that technology is taking us beyond our own control; we don't have a sense of control over our destinies.

TS: What effect does the digital age have upon humanity? Obviously it's got a very beneficial side to it—it's progress—but at the same time, it's important to know what detrimental effects that it can have. Something that I find really sinister is that it could be a man or a woman in some room, thousands of miles away, working on a computer, on the coordinates of where this devastating bomb can go. And it's like there's a block between the actual effect and the action, and I find that's something chilling.

AF: And that difficulty with conversation, if you will, also relates to another piece, *Defending Integrity from the Powers that Be*, with the two figures that are facing each other, who are gagged.

TS: That's about a very universal thing, about the power of money and how money can silence people. Dealing with a local university issue, I've seen a university that's in an area where it could be the top employer, and so it holds a powerful position because of this. And I can say with confidence, that in some cases, it had certainly silenced those that had left and were contractually prevented from speaking out about their former employers.

The threat of being kicked out and losing one's income is also another issue to think about. And also I'm aware of some young people that didn't want to put their head above the parapet, for fear of losing potential employment. And then local people that just really didn't want to get involved and you ask why and they say, "Well, I'm scared to." Money can silence people, or the loss of it.

And so with the two figures exclaim the words 'we are excellent, we are the envy of our competitors, we tell no truth, we tell no lies.' And at the beginning and end of every sentence they're saying, yes, no, and they're rocking back and forth, not sitting on the

ABOVE:

Tim Shaw with metal armature for *Casting a Dark Democracy,* The Kenneth Armitage Studio, London, 2008

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Tim Shaw outside his cottage, Cornwall, 2016

fence, but just a complete inability to say anything with effect, or any real truth, because they're gagged, and they're gagged by money.

AF: Circling back to *Breakdown Clown*, it has a really interesting script. Could you say something about where that comes from?

TS: I worked as a fellow at the Käte Hamburger Centre for Advanced Study in Bonn. It was basically a think tank with up to nine academics from across the world examining the crossover between law and arts and how these two entities define each other. I had some of the most stimulating and thought provoking conversations of my life there, quite heavy-going at times, and these ideas sprung from that. So the piece, the script itself is split up into thoughts on existence, ideas of what spirit or soul might be there's a bit about the law in there.

AF: And law in the sense of not just legislative laws, but also laws of nature?

TS: Yes, it was interesting, thinking that whole script through, that actually there is very little that escapes the law and as *Breakdown Clown* exclaims 'this ground, these walls, the building, the banana on the floor, all subject to law, and when you eat the banana, the law lives inside you,' in a way, because that banana complies to European Union regulations. Everything you eat, everything you drink, everything you touch, the clothes you wear, what escapes the law? The human spirit?

AF: So what are you working on now? Do you have any ideas for future projects?

TS: Well, I see the continuation of *Breakdown Clown*, which is in its infancy. I see *Breakdown Clown* as a vehicle for thought processes and the discovery of new ideas and truths. I'm particularly interested in tapping into ideas that define our notion of 'spirit' and 'soul,' and even thoughts before time existed and thinking more about endlessness.

Anyway, it's playing, isn't it? It's playing with ideas and giving birth to new ideas, and hopefully that takes us on a journey about the understanding of existence. And of course there are no answers to these huge questions, which have always been there. But why not have dialogue, discourse? It's what makes life interesting.

[1] Also known as the Northern Ireland Conflict (1969–1998)
[2] Irish Republican Army
[3] Royal Ulster Constabulary, the police force in Northern Ireland, 1922–2001.

Tim Shaw

Tim Shaw was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1964. He completed a degree in fine art in 1989 from Falmouth School of Art in Cornwall, England. In his work as a sculptor, he has undertaken numerous commissions and exhibited widely throughout the United Kingdom and Europe. He was elected to the Royal Academy of Arts in 2013.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2018 *Beyond Reason*, The San Diego Museum of Art, California, US
What Remains, Newlyn Art Gallery and The Exchange, Penzance, UK
2017 *Something Is Not Quite Right*, Anima Mundi, St. Ives, UK
2016 *The Birth of Breakdown Clown*, Käte Hamburger Kolleg for Advanced Study in the Humanities of Law as Culture, Bonn, Germany
2015 *Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous*, FE McWilliam Gallery, Northern Ireland
Time Got Kicked Around, Kappatos Gallery, Athens, Greece
2014 *Black Smoke Rising*, touring exhibition, Mac Birmingham and Aberystwyth Arts Centre, UK
2013 *Awaken from the Dream of Reality*, Millennium Gallery, St. Ives, UK
2012 *Soul Snatcher Possession*, Riflemaker, London, UK
2011 *Origins of The Drummer*, Millennium Gallery, St. Ives, UK
2009 *Riflemaker at The Kenneth Armitage Foundation*, London, UK
2008 *Casting a Dark Democracy*, Kenneth Armitage Foundation, London, UK
Future History, Goldfish Fine Art, Cornwall, UK
2006 *No Title*, Goldfish Fine Art, Cornwall, UK
2005 *Fragments from the Middle World*, Truro Cathedral, Truro, UK
1999 *La Corrida~Dreams In Red*, Falmouth, Art Gallery, Falmouth, UK
1997 *La Corrida~Dreams In Red*, Duncan Campbell Gallery, London, UK
1995 *Fragments from Middle World*, Duncan Campbell Gallery, London, UK
1992 *Fragments from Middle World*, Albemarle Gallery, London, UK

PUBLIC SCULPTURE COMMISSIONS

2017 *Mother, The Air Is Blue, The Air Is Dangerous Drawing*, St. Cross College, Oxford
2012 *The Green Man*, Antony House, Cornwall
2009–11 *The Drummer*, Lemon Quay, Truro, Cornwall
2008 *The Minotaur*, The Royal Opera House, London
2000–04 *Rites of Dionysus*, The Eden Project, Cornwall

AWARDS AND PRIZES

2015–16 Elected Honorary member of the Royal West of England Academy
Resident Artist Fellowship: Käte Hamburger Center for Advanced Study
'Law as Culture' Bonn, Germany
Jack Goldhill Award for Sculpture, Royal Academy Summer Exhibition
2014 Resident Artist, Kappatos Gallery Athens
2013 Elected Member to the Royal Academy
Elected Fellow of the Royal Society of British Sculptors
Elected Honorary Fellow, Falmouth University
2008 The Federation of British Artists Selectors Prize, Threadneedle Prize
2006 Kenneth Armitage Sculpture Fellowship, London
2005 The Mullan Prize, Royal Ulster Academy Annual Exhibition
Prince of Wales Bursary Award, The British School at Athens
2003 First Prize, Millfield Open
1997 Prize Winner, *Discerning Eye*, Mall Galleries, London
1996 Delfina Studio Trust Award

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