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## Jim Shaw - Swiss Institute

Since first exhibiting his *Thrift Store Paintings* more than a decade ago, Jim Shaw has routinely tapped the abundant resources of Sunday painters in order to undermine the prerogatives of taste and connoisseurship. Continuing his investigation into forgotten or overlooked American culture, Shaw has now invented his own religion, O-ism, and dated its origin to the mid-nineteenth, around the time of the Mormon westward migration. In *The Goodman Image File and Study, 2002*, Shaw locates the birth of this denomination in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, keeping it within striking distance of key northeastern legacies, from the Hudson River School to the New York School.

The work's components were arranged in the gallery to resemble a study room, with a group of seven paintings lining the walls near a seven-sided wheel-shaped configuration of file cabinets and a circular worktable. Although Shaw doesn't provide a specific time frame for the activities of Adam O. Goodman (the exhibition's painter protagonist), the style of the images suggests a temporal setting of circa 1960.

They recall Kenneth Noland's circles most forcefully, with hints of Mark Rothko's blurry edges; the target works of Jasper Johns might be distant cousins. In fact, it's the Johnsian tightrope walk between the handmade and the mass-produced object that Shaw references most explicitly.

Those two poles of postwar American art, frequently cast as the distinction between high and low, commingled here with intimations of religious revelation.

The roomful of mandala-esque color-field paintings possessed the air of a sacred space like the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

However, such sanctity was disrupted if one undertook the less transcendent activity of thumbing through the picture files in the cabinets. Shaw relies on the press release - an increasingly common and somewhat tiresome feature of such fictional installations - to describe Goodman as a failed painter forced to earn a living in the commercial arts under the pseudonym Archie Gunn (the names evoke biblical and comic-book or television cultures, respectively); the folders are full of clippings from popular print sources organized by general subjects such as "group portraits of men". As Goodman was uncomfortable sharing the details of his day job, so all the dirty evidence of representation was banished to the drawers. Other sect members apparently didn't subscribe to Abstract Expressionism as the appropriately wholesome style: A concurrent show at Metro Pictures displayed a new slew of faux found works conveniently labeled "O-ist Thrift Store Paintings".

The details of the religion itself were left to the viewer's imagination; Shaw's vague references to an unnameable "female deity" (O as in ovum?) and "time going backwards" didn't vividly conjure a spiritual doctrine. His project rests on its pronounced dualities, which merge strands of mainstream and esoteric American culture while focusing on the clash between the apologists of abstraction and pop culture and the perennial success-versus-failure fixation. If the moral of the story is that the taint of idolatry can never be fully eliminated, Shaw rightfully points out that Noland's circles, John target's, and other recognizable artistic emblems of all types acquire iconic status through the culture's Puritan-derived obsession with the power of images. The viewer may still question how a debate that seems part of a dead chapter in American modernism is newly pronounced alive and well. For Shaw, the purported demise of one phase of art production and reception doesn't have simply negate the terms of a dispute that has been intact, reappearing under numerous guises, since the nation's founding.



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