Here Comes Laughing Boy: Jim Shaw and his Comic Books
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Two years before he died, Wayne Boring—a recently retired bank security guard who was also known as the definitive Superman artist of the twentieth century—completed a remarkable drawing and painting. The painting, *Clark Kent and Friends* (1985), shows Kent in the foreground surrounded by notable pals: Mort Weisinger, the Freudian-minded editor of *Superman* for two decades; Jerry Siegel, *Superman*'s cocreator, in a wide-lapel yellow shirt; Siegel's wife, Joanne, sporting the latest in '80s mall-wear; Perry White, Kent's boss at the *Daily Planet*; and Kent's beloved Lois Lane. Jumping up in the background is a young Boring himself, holding aloft, as if vying for attention, an ink drawing of Superman proudly posing. Meanwhile, Kent is dreaming of Superman frolicking in the water with his mermaid lover, Lori Lemaris. The drawing for this work is considerably different: Lemaris is topless, and the fish that surround her in the painting here pass through her torso. In their depictions of odd relations and their Freudian undertones, both the painting and the drawing look remarkably like art Jim Shaw might have made (shades of his "Thrift Store Paintings" series for example), and yet they were created by a nearly eighty-year-old retiree, inadvertently exposing a truth behind the great mid-century comic books as highly eroticized and ripe for psychoanalysis. Hetero, homo, whatever—it's all buried in these comics, something Shaw knows quite a bit about.

They are just one tool for him, but Shaw uses comics in many different ways. For the moment, let's consider just a few of these uses: Shaw's 2000-2010s "Not Since Superman Died" and "Blake/Boring" series use a mid-twentieth-century comic-book drawing style (as found in Wayne Boring's *Superman* work) to root the imagery in a particular historical and psychological context. Shaw's "Oist" comics are actual comic-book pages telling stories rooted in Oist mythology; his "Dream Drawings" allude to and subvert comic-book sequentiality and use graphite, a material not typically used in comic books, to render forms in a comic-book ink style; and finally, he uses an encyclopedic selection of comics and graphics from the 1950s to the '80s throughout his "My Mirage" series 1980s-90s to show the popular graphics and culture in which his protagonist, Billy, was absorbed (the series is truly a catalogue of Shaw's influences, comic book and otherwise; each piece could and should have an essay unto itself). "My Mirage" could be read as a picture story, and it was presented as such in its 2011 publication in book form, accompanied by an essay that nicely dissects its many references.

Superman provides one way into Shaw's engagement with comics, and to understand why this is the case, it's necessary to grasp the work that went into the comic book and the property as a whole. Created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster and first published in 1938, the comic was a phenomenon by the following year. A decade later, Siegel and Shuster attempted to challenge the legal claims and payments conferred by *Superman*'s publisher, National Allied Publications, now known as DC Comics; following the suit, the duo was fired and denied any future earnings. From the mid-1940s,

prior to Siegel and Shuster's legal woes, until 1970, Weisinger was the editor and guiding force for the comic and its characters. He had worked at National Allied Publications since 1941, after he had copublished the first science-fiction fanzine and later acted as an agent for science-fiction writers. Weisinger is truly a founder of the contemporary fantasy zeitgeist.

In 1958, just when a young Shaw would have begun reading the comic, Weisinger decided[1] to move away from the mundane crime-fighting aspects of the Man of Steel and instead delve into creating the mythology of the character, exploring his home planet, Krypton; the isolated city-in-a-bottle, Kandor (home to a whole populace of tiny Kryptonians, trapped for eternity); the myriad kinds of Kryptonite; the Fortress of Solitude; and all aspects of Superman as an alien orphan on a planet that will never truly know him, with all the anguish that might entail. Weisinger was notoriously sadistic toward his freelancers, which, beginning in 1959, included Siegel, by then a struggling writer, long-since forgotten as Superman's creator and (by that time) with no claim on the copyright. Weisinger delighted in telling his writers that their work was shit (he took one of Siegel's scripts to the men's room to prove the point) and taking credit for their work. Weisinger's shrewd directives, along with Siegel's and alternate writer Otto Binder's expansive imaginations—as well as their duress—produced a golden period of Super-angst. Again and again, Superman and/or Superboy is forced to lose his parents and his girlfriend, to watch his planet explode, to undergo inexplicable physical changes, and so on.

Drawing it all with uncanny certitude was usually Boring. He was born in Minnesota and studied art at the Minnesota School of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago. In the 1930s he was living in Norfolk, Virginia, working as an artist and advertising salesman for the *Virginia Pilot*. Around that time, he replied to an ad placed by *Superman*-writer Siegel in *Writer's Digest* seeking an assistant for Shuster on other comic book features. In 1940, Boring moved to Cleveland, where Shuster and Siegel were based, and began work on *Superman*, publishing his first identifiable work (the comics weren't signed) in the summer of 1940. When the duo was forced out in 1948, Boring became the lead artist on the feature until 1966, when he was fired by Weisinger without any explanation or comment other than "Do you need a kick in the stomach to know you're not wanted?"[2]

For three decades, Boring defined the look of the Superman character, giving him a long torso, an immensely broad chest, and a narrow, finely featured face. In his drawings, Superman ran through the air, landing and taking off at steep diagonals. Boring's style was not dynamic or terribly versatile, but it was solid, and its solidity made the

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[1] Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

[2] Mort Weisinger interview with Richard Pachter, *Amazing Heroes* 41, Feb. 1984.

outrageousness of what it depicted absolutely believable. Better still, Boring was incapable of expressing much more than love, shock or grief in his drawings, and he used the fattest brushstroke possible to depict Superman's body and the thinnest of his face.

Boring's style developed for the sake of expediency. Whether the goal was to become a magazine illustrator or to have syndicated strip, the key was developing a fast and semi-realistic style rooted in that of the three titans of newspaper adventure comics: Alex Raymond, the *Flash Gordon* cocreator who made comics that were highly eroticized blizzards of fine brushwork; Hal Foster, whose *Prince Valiant* was rendered in a finely detailed and refined storybook realism; and Milton Caniff, the *Terry and the Pirates* artist who first popularized an approach that combined a modernist sense of flat space and abstraction that stood in for objects, rendering them in chiaroscuro and using heavy areas of blacks and thick lines.

Because Boring's income depended on how many pages he could churn out in a day, he needed to find the fastest technique that still offered a decent end product. Comic books were produced in assembly-line fashion—Boring would do the drawings in pencil, which would then be inked-in by another artist, usually Stan Kaye, who used a brush, rather than a pen, as a brush doesn't create resistance on illustration board. Artists can consequently make big gestural lines and can show form more easily, since one can ink from a very thin line to a huge, fat line. So, in the end, the drawing looked good, the comic reproduced well on cheap newsprint, and most importantly, the process is fast if you work the way they worked. To go even faster, some artists would thin their inks so that there would be even less resistance. Brush lines also dry faster than pen lines. *Dick Tracy* creator Chester Gould used a pen for his famous comic, and there are burns marks on the backs of some of his original art from where a lighter was used to cook those pen lines dry.[3]

When Shaw uses this kind of drawing, he is not just referencing a style but a mode of production, a compromised creation, a thematic anxiety, Shaw's own childhood memories of this work, and the lives of the once-anonymous stimulators of his imagination. But on a practical level, Shaw's "Blake/Boring" series is his attempt to essentially learn how to draw like Wayne Boring. That is, to teach himself a style arrived at solely for the purpose of quick reproduction in order to make work that is intended to be viewed on a wall. To do so, Jim came up with the rather ingenious device of redrawing Blake's biblical images using Superman and his cast, which also afforded him the chance to compare Blake's "real" mythology (or at least a mythos rooted in over a century of doctrine) and Boring's *Superman* mythos, rooted in just twenty-odd years of comic books, editorial control, and the reception of an audience composed largely of children.

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[3] This explanation has been greatly helped by my correspondence with Charles Burns.

The "Blake/Boring" series itself was meant to warm up Shaw for the "Oist" comic book stories—such as "Inky Depths" —as well as the larger "Not Since Superman Died" series. A meditation in paintings, sculptures, drawings, and videos on mortality and aging, this series was conceived as Shaw's father was dying (oddly, his father, a graphic designer, was at some point an aspiring commercial illustrator in much the same 1950s style as Boring). Shaw notes,

> I saw Superman as a father figure and perhaps identified with the child Clark Kent, if anything, in the comics. The "Not Since Superman Died" series is by no means finished, nor is it exactly a meditation on death in its present form. But in my head, it is, when I think about all the odd aspects of the mythos that accrued to Superman by the twenty-five-year mark (I'm sure much more has accrued since). I have files of subsets from the comics, like halls of memory he keeps in his fortress, giant statues to him, or created by a grateful populace, etc. I guess it could be seen as the product of stunted emotional growth typical of us fan types, of which Siegel and Shuster were a part, or else something aimed at the ten-year-olds, designed to please them based on either sales records of what worked in the past, or just a supposition of what they wanted. So it could be seen as a meditation on the avoidance of direct reaction to death and emotion typical of a fan/creator who is somewhere on the Asperger spectrum and/or a schizoid.

The series was also begun about a year before his old friend Mike Kelley began his "Kandor" sculptures in 1999. "He claimed the 'Kandors' were all about the way different artists drew the same modernist city differently," Jim explained, "but in retrospect, it's hard not to see them in conjunction with the *Mobile Homestead* as a symbol of his homesickness and separation from his past. I do think he identified with Superman, the lonely alien with his moment of Krypton in a bottle."

In these pictures Shaw frequently adds cartoon-drawing elements to larger compositions. There is *Heaven's Gate* (2012), which presented a comic-style beard rendered with the same verve that cartoonist Bill Everett put into his ink-soaked drawings of bodies of water populated by superheroes like The Sub-Mariner. There is also *The Golden Age* (2013), which features an aged Superman modeled after William Blake's Nebuchadnezzar (ca. 1975–1805) and is seemingly drawn by someone not unlike Ramona Fradon, a flashier and more humorous cartoonist best known for drawing the *Metamorpho* and *Aquaman* comics, as well an untitled work that depicts a flock of tiny Supermen flying out of a small crystal mountain into a large keyhole. In this work, Superman is drawn as he would appear in a comic by Boring, in formation and soaring into a question.

That sense of mystery, or the unknown—the keyhole as passage to consciousness—runs throughout Shaw's "Dream Drawings." Begun in the early 1990s, they comprise his longest project to date, and while they are all narrative (and in some sense all picture stories) they are not always comics. When they were narrative but not in fact meant to be

read as "comics", Jim signals this by removing the spaces between the panels, creating a unified image that marks off time by abutting panels. When they are indeed "dream comics," (i.e. comics Jim dreamt about) they use comic devices, like panel gutters. All of this becomes somewhat confused when comic book or cartoon characters appear in the dreams. Regardless, everything is rendered in neutrals and grays and in Shaw's default drawing style, employing graphite to build up the lines and shadows usually rendered in ink. This drawing style—as much Boring as Fradon, or Wally Wood, perhaps the greatest of the mid-century comic book artists, best known for his science-fiction comics—works perfectly because it signals realism without pushing into photorealism or over-rendering. In much the same way as Boring renders Superman, say, suddenly elderly and sitting on a park bench, Shaw renders himself hypnotizing Wonder Woman into an erotic frenzy. It is believable and solid, so the dream logic prevails.

That solidity of comic book drawing is what is so crucial to Shaw—it is mired in commercial, personal, and popular history, but because of this it has extra power: the weight of a lived-in idea populated by an extraordinary cast. Like Boring's painting, it's a representation of an idea for being.