



Life As Art: Thom Shaw

Remembering the maker of provocative, beautiful art with the power to shift perspectives

MATT MORRIS // AUG 3, 2010

News that a great artist has died always raises the stakes for me; the responsibility of creating moving art and important discussions surrounding it is more immense, because there is one less innovator sharing the weight. Thom Shaw — one of Cincinnati's best known and most admired contemporary artists — passed away on July 6, 2010, due to complications from diabetes.

Shaw attended the Art Academy as an undergraduate, earning his BFA in 1970, and was the commencement speaker at my own graduation from that program in 2007, when he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the school. He was already struggling with illness at the time, and had been since 1997.

Shaw is best known for his relief prints that unflinchingly portray struggles in the lives of the poor and in black families in various states of undoing. His work is confrontational and, in the desperate stories depicted, viewers are made to see a version of urban life that is in utter upheaval. But in proper darkest-before-the-dawn form, Shaw tempered the righteous anger of his protests with glimmers of hope that we might evolve as a civilization and — more specifically — as a city fractured by the conflicts of racial, social and economic inequities.

Shaw's work has been shown locally in nearly every venue I can think of. His first solo show was at Miller Gallery in 1973. In 1995 he had a solo exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center, closely followed by another at the Cincinnati Art Museum in spring of 1996. The CAM show, *The Malcolm X Paradox*, has been considered a breakthrough for the museum's relationship to artists of different races and diverse cultural backgrounds. It also formed a relationship between Shaw and the museum. Since his first show there, he has been included in numerous other exhibitions as an artist, mentor and even guest curator. In 2005, Shaw was the Taft Museum's Duncanson Artist-in-Residence. He has exhibited abroad at The Studio Museum in Harlem and the Jenewein Gallery in the Czech Republic.

Shaw's work entered into my worldview shortly after moving to Cincinnati in 2003. It wasn't until I had already arrived that I learned of the race riots two years earlier. People were still talking about them. Being from the South, I was surprised that racism seemed more apparent here than down in Louisiana where I grew up. Interracial strife laced many of the public conversations I observed in my first months in Cincinnati. In particular, as the Art Academy prepared to move into Over-the-Rhine, the inner-city neighborhood seemed to have an even lower reputation than it had prior to the riots.

Later that fall, the Art Academy presented *Homecoming*, a solo exhibition of Shaw's large-scale relief prints. They were beautiful and disturbing. Never before had a black-and-white image been so suggestive of violence. Never before had I seen an artist so committed to showing us the worst parts of our society. Shaw's scenes were full of torturers and the tortured. Lives were being ruined right before our eyes by poverty,

drug abuse, sickness and gang violence. And the most ruinous of society's vices seemed to be our overwhelming fears.

These were graphically depicted melodramas in black ink on white paper. All of the marks that constructed the images on hand were rough and aggressive, and yet the artist's clear control of the medium was evident. To look at the prints was to imagine the plates that made them, where areas were hacked and gouged away to unsettling effect in the final images.

Shaw's prints told stories from the poorest ghettos, where gangs roamed and veins bulged and brows furrowed and everyone always seemed to be yelling. One instinctively thinks that Shaw must have exaggerated his subjects, portraying them in incredibly extreme duress. Certainly in one work when a seeming rapist had the head of a brutish animal rather than a man, the artist has clearly drifted into nightmarish fantasy. But perhaps more harrowing is the possibility that these scenes approximate reality. They look like what we have seen on the news, or — for those of us who live in Cincinnati's urban core — what we might have observed in our daily life.

In particular, Shaw's work gave me a vocabulary of imagery for race and class struggles in Cincinnati. More generally, this fearless, gut-wrenching work gives form to suffering that might take place behind closed doors, in alleyways, in the dead of night or even in our own inner, psychological breaks.

One of Shaw's iconic prints from the Cincinnati Art Museum's collection is currently on view through Aug. 15 in their *Coast to Coast* print exhibition. Next month, Miller Gallery will host a celebration of Shaw's art and life with a display of his "Webejammin" period of paintings — jazzy abstracts like those that Shaw first showed at Miller. The event takes place Sept. 8 and the works will remain on display and for two weeks following.

Thom Shaw's art is part of the way I see our city, and I'm surely not alone in that. He was a respected member of our local arts, and his work has served to inspire many younger artists, regardless of their skin color or preferred medium.

A celebration of THOM SHAW's life and art takes place Sept. 8 from 6-8 p.m. at Miller Gallery in Hyde Park Square.