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Derek Boshier, "Untitled", 1962

POP PYRAMID

**Alex Kitnick on Derek Boshier at
Thomas Solomon Gallery, Los Angeles**

All eleven pieces in a recent exhibition of Derek Boshier's work were made by the artist in London in 1962, right after taking a degree from the Royal College of Art. That same year, the BBC aired Ken Russell's documentary "Pop Goes the Easel", which profiled Boshier, as well as his peers Peter Blake, Pauline Boty, and Peter Philips, as the hip young protagonists of the new British Pop Art: Down from the artist's garret and looking a bit like teen idols, they go to a carnival, do *The Twist*, and muse about their infatuations (Elvis Presley, Brigitte Bardot). Alone, Boshier talks eloquently about America and advertising, which inspire equal feelings of attraction and

repulsion in him. Mostly, though, he just wants to understand what these things are doing to his person. Tie tucked in, he works on a handful of paintings, one of which depicts astronauts, while another reproduces the logo from a Special K cereal box. Just down the aisle from the Campbell's soup can, this morning icon suggests how quickly advertising colonizes the day.¹ The nod toward outer space, on the other hand, points to the seemingly limitless potential of marketing's reach.

Given such popular, intergalactic iconography, it was something of a surprise to see the ancient motif of the pyramid feature so prominently in the ten untitled line drawings shown in this exhibition. In other ways, however, it jibes with the Pop idea. One of Pop's main tenets, after



all, was that society's conventional hierarchy of cultural forms was flattening out into a horizontal spread of options. "Unique oil paintings and highly personal poems as well as mass-distributed films and group-aimed magazines can be placed within a continuum rather than frozen in layers in a pyramid," the English critic and "Father of Pop" Lawrence Alloway wrote in his 1959 essay "The Long Front of Culture", encouraging this shift.² Boshier's work from this period, as well as that of many of his colleagues, did its best to help establish this continuum by populating "unique oil paintings" with the stuff of "group-aimed magazines". He does this, for example, in the sole painting included in the exhibition, "Swan", which depicts a jumble of men falling down toward an easel in front of a box of Swan matches. Rather than sand down the pyramid in

these drawings, Boshier dressed it up as a tourist destination replete with palm trees. He simultaneously vamped it and camped it. In "Pepsi High", another work on paper from 1962 (not included in this exhibition but viewable on artnet.com), a similar pyramid appears in a red, white, and blue landscape – with a Pepsi logo replacing the sun. In comparison to such pictorial work, however, the drawings at Thomas Solomon Gallery looked more like diagrams. One imagined them as illustrations in a book, figs. 1–10 for Alloway's article. Rather than portray Pop objects, they convey Pop's operation of tumbling the pyramid of cultural hierarchy, its ambition to lay low and network. The different combinations of human figures offered by the drawings, moreover, suggest the many possibilities for linking people together that Pop conceived.

In addition to pyramids, many of the drawings depict factories with smokestacks. One imagines they are English, but they remind me of the old Domino Sugar Refinery on the banks of New York's East River, which is now being transformed into condos (deindustrialization eventually took hold on both sides of the Atlantic). In a lot of ways, factories are the opposite of pyramids; they produce (or, at least, they once did), whereas pyramids preserve. But from today's vantage point, which may have been Boshier's as well, the two couple together as equally outmoded things. They are both big, slumbering monuments; symbols of civilizations past.

The human figures that appear in these drawings materialize somewhere in between the factories and the pyramids. In some of the more cartoonish drawings, men fall from the sky in the style of William Blake's "The Casting of the Rebel Angels into Hell" (1808). In one, they are suspended from the wheels of a machine; in another, men, standing arms akimbo, lay out the beginnings of a (cybernetic?) grid. Either way, they are never centered like the figures of Renaissance drawing, nor are they singled out like pop stars. Rather they are defined by what's around them. They are hollow men – not shaded or shady, but simply cut out, one-dimensional, as Marcuse said. They are puzzle pieces, another Boshier motif, one easily fitting into the next.

In one drawing, the outline of a gun aims its muzzle straight at the eye of a face in profile. While pointing in some respects to Pop's violence against the individual subject, the object here is violated as well. Like the contour chalk drawings policemen make around victims on the sidewalk, it looks as if an object (the gun) had been there, was traced, and was then taken away. One usually

associates Pop with images, but objects offered the starting point, even if they were only to be rendered as lost objects.³ What Pop did was trace the shift from a world of objects to a universe of images, which by necessity gave rise to new forms of subjecthood as well.

Pop has recently become popular again. Hal Foster has suggested that we have entered the second Pop age.⁴ So what do artists do today? They take images and map their movements and flows, their edits, distortions, glitches, and effects. What Alloway optimistically referred to as "the long front of culture" has given way to what the business enthusiast Chris Andersen has dubbed "the long tail". If big business once focused on the head of blockbuster hits, the long tail mines the infinite space of micromarkets and niche interests. And this new cultural form also finds a correlate in artistic practice: If drawing once took a line for a walk, and if, in the 1960s, it consolidated it into icons and diagrams, today the line walks around all by itself, whipping us back and forth. One wonders if the long tail must always wag the dog.

"Derek Boshier: 1962", Thomas Solomon Gallery, Los Angeles, January 26–March 9, 2013.

Notes

- 1 Boshier is perhaps best known for a painting of toothbrush and toothpaste, "The Identi-Kit Man" (1962).
- 2 Alloway is one of many critics who took credit for coining the term "Pop Art". See the BBC documentary "Fathers of Pop" (1974), directed by Julian Myers.
- 3 The first Pop exhibitions – Walter Hopps's "New Paintings of Common Objects" in 1962 and Alloway's "Six Painters and the Object" in 1963 – both contained the word "object" in them. Nearly ten years earlier, in 1954, Alloway curated a proto-Pop exhibition called "Collages and Objects" at the ICA in London.
- 4 See Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Work of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha*, Princeton 2011.