Oliver Maxwell Kupper, "Derek Boshier," *Autre*, Summer 2017

DEREK BOSHIER

At the zenith of pop art, the British Invasion, the punk explosion and the Cold War, artist Derek Boshier held a mirror to the times and defined the English pop aesthetic. He has left an indelible mark - yet, he is hardly as famous as some of his contemporaries. This obscurity has lent a cult appeal to Boshier, whose work takes on an idiosyncratic genre of its own. Having cut his teeth at the Royal College of Art in London with the likes of David Hockney and Allen Jones, he went on to design the iconic cover of David Bowie's 1979 album, *Lodger* and The Clash's *Second Soundbook*, which became a template for punk's cut and paste modus operandi. We drove up the narrow hills of Silver Lake to have a tea with Boshier and discuss everything from his humble working class beginnings, to his most current solo show at Night Gallery in Los Angeles.

text by **OLIVER MAXWELL KUPPER**
portrait by **TONY EVANS**

OLIVER KUPPER: So, what was your motivation to start exploring art?
DEREK BOSHIER: I was sixteen and the only person that ever said anything was the headmaster: "Well Boshier, it's a terrible idea to leave school, but to leave at sixteen, not a very wise decision. What are you going to do?" And I said, "Well, I'm going to become a butcher." He said, "A butcher, why?" I said, "Well my best friend Don," who's still my friend, "he didn't get into grammar school, but his father owns a local, small town butcher shop. So, he said if I was leaving school and wanted a job, I could work for him." So he said, "Great, but what about doing art?" And I said, "What's art?" He said, "What you do on Thursday afternoons." I said, "Oh, I kind of like that."

And at the Royal College of Art, you were in some of the same classes as David Hockney and Allen Jones, right?
And R. B. Kitaj.

Did you all spend time together out of school, or did you talk about your ideas?
Yeah I'll go back. To get into the Royal College of Art, and this is in the early 50s, very early 50s. You had to submit a very specific portfolio, six paintings - you had to ship them up there by train and then they were in storage and you picked them up by taxi, and then there were drawings, a certain amount, and then there was at least one sketchbook. Out of hundreds of people that applied, I got an interview. And to do the interview - if you lived in the provinces, like a lot of us did, David from Bradford, myself from Somerset and Dorset, Peter Phillips from Birmingham - we had to stay over night in London. Interview: part one, first day, you had to enter a life drawing class and we drew all day. Second day was the interview where you were surrounded by the professionals and they asked questions: "Who's your favorite artist?" All those.

Typical questions.
So I did life drawing that day and went back to the hotel and there were two guys in the hotel lobby. One guy came up to me and he said, "Oh I see, Royal College. Are you going for an interview?" and I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Oh me too. I hope we get in." It was David Hockney.

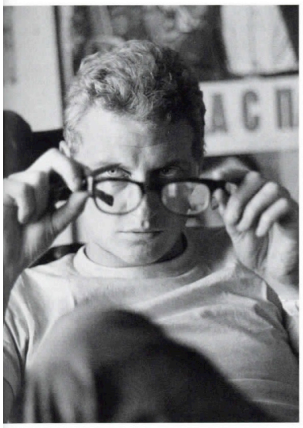
Oh wow, amazing.
Everyone at the time had to do national service, so David worked in the mortuary and in the forest decommission. He tells a good story about his first day of work. He goes there and he sits in this room with all these dead bodies and they hand him a broom and he sweeps, "Coffee's over there. Okay, lunch break!" All the guys go to the side of the room and they bring out their sacks of sandwiches and they put it right on the bodies! The bodies just lie there with the everyday sandwiches!

So, when I got to Royal College I at least knew one person there and as it happened for most of the time we were there, we worked in the same studio. And the last year we worked I agonized him and that's why I made that painting behind you [points to a painting], that's the only painting that I have left from the sixties. It's called Swan and it's based on a popular cigarette brand, at the time, and artists loved it because they all loved Gitane cigarettes.

So growing up, you all sort of had working class backgrounds.
The only person that wasn't really working class was Pauline Boty. You know her work.

Yeah, of course. She was one of the only female artists of that time, there weren't really any others that were a part of that scene.
Yeah, she was great, a good friend. We were dancers on television, *Ready, Steady, Go!*, It was a pop music program. Because I used to go to those and we used to dance in front of Mick Jagger, oh god everyone, The Animals. Although, there were a few female artists, but the reason they didn't get covered was because they weren't doing pop art. It's like today, you know, they're in conceptual art.

But female artists are definitely getting more recognition for their work today, regardless of style.
Oh yeah, yeah, that's how it should be. Now the story of Pauline is slightly more complex than most people want to lay out. Oh, she was a woman - but there were several other things about Pauline. She couldn't decide whether she'd become a painter or an actor. When they interviewed her they also looked at what she was wearing and you know, looking at her tits, and she was an actress and such. The muck journalism would take on the sexuality part rather than talking about art. She was great, she was very far beyond her time from a feminist point of view. She was willing to talk about sexuality and



liking men...she loved 'em. A lot of her paintings were all about the Italian and French movie stars.

You were a big part of the sort of swinging, London scene. I mean you were all part of the music scene.
Yeah, but we were before, in college, it still hadn't happened. Going back to the working class thing, what's never mentioned enough - although it's mentioned in popular culture - is that working class people were the biggest cause for the popular culture and they were the biggest cause for the pop music revolution.

Sure.
But for instance, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, The Animals...they all went to art college. And they all went there because of us. Going to art college as working class kids and doing so well.

I want to talk a little about your work and the critique on American culture, or the exploration of American culture. What's your take on it now?
Worse than ever. For those of us in England they treat us the same, and also Europe - the rise of the right-wing and stuff. I don't know, I don't feel like doing work within the art world about it, but I do like doing work about it on the outside.

Do you think the American influence in popular culture is dimming now? Do you feel like it's less influential than it was?
Yeah, I think for so many years London has been the focal point of new art. And now much of the influence is coming from groups that haven't been represented as much. It's happening everywhere, you know, the diversity issue - the feminist issue was brought in. There are a lot of great artists that you've never heard of, African American, Latino, brilliant and they deserve their time of course. I became very politicized in the 70s and I worked on a lot of conceptual art and I gave up painting for 13 years where I did all sorts of stuff. I traveled a lot and did work about each country I was in.

Yeah, and you went to India.
I went to India, did work about India, Israel, Canada, Japan, Hungary, Czechoslovakia. I did a big show, I was sent in '68 with another British pop artist, Joe Tilson, to be on a coastal exchange. We went to meet other artists, went to their studios in Hungary, Budapest and Prague. God, what a difference between the two countries at that time, well now Hungary's right-wing anyway, so is Poland. But at that time, it was called the Czech Spring and it was a silent revolution. Everyone was trying to break away from the Russians and every bar was a cabaret. It was amazing, their sense of optimism. By September the Russian tanks moved in and it wasn't until a few years later that they became independent.

Are there any American pop artists that you most relate to?
Well, first of all I think that for me, the best and greatest British pop artist is Richard Hamilton, without a doubt. I'm not sure if you asked me what makes classical pop art, I think Rosenquist. I mean he was amazing and the size of that big painting he did, and of course, I like the early stuff too. I got to know Jim Dine quite well and I liked his very early work. I like a lot of British pop artists because they were good, and you know, British pop art came first, basically through Hamilton because we were the second generation or third. It was us that popularized it, basically through Royal College.

And some British artists moved here in the late seventies.
Yeah. In fact, I was one of the last British pop artists to visit America. And like David, I just stayed.

And you started teaching.
The reason I came to LA was to teach at CalArts, but I had to teach at CalArts at the time of those "French philosophers" and I had a hard time because I was teaching painting and drawing. I taught for many years at UCLA as well, probably five years ago I stopped teaching.

Going back a little bit, I want to talk about your collaboration with David

David Bowie as the Elephant Man by Derek Boshier, 1980.

Bowie. How did you come to collaborate with him?
I was asked to curate an exhibition by the Arts Council of Great Britain who is the equivalent to the NEA. And they, every few years, ask an artist to become a curator. I curated a show that went on view at the Hayward Gallery. I tried to combine high arts and low arts. So amongst other people, I put in a show with [Brian] Duffy because I thought he was the most inventive of the 60s photographers. Anyway, he contacted me three weeks after the show, finished and said, "Now Derek I know you quite well now, and I've got this friend that I think you'd want to meet, I think you'll get along." And I said, "Sure." But the way he phrased it I thought it was a blind date. So, I went along to his studio, and of course it was David. Duffy did that image of David up there. [points to *Aladdin Sane* album cover]

Oh yeah, that's a very famous one.
It was Duffy's idea, though. There was a guy putting makeup on David and he did that flash sign, which came from Elvis Presley.

The TCB symbol. Oh yeah, of course.
And Duffy looked at it and said to David, "You don't want it that small, you want it all over your face." So that's how that came about. And then he asked me to do all the album art for his *Lodger* album. We were almost done and I said, "Oh David, we haven't talked at all about the inside," and David said, "Do what you like." The only thing that David asked me was that I would include, on the cover, the word 'Lodger' in five languages.

Were you a fan of David's music before you worked with him?
Oh, yeah.

Have you ever seen him play before?
Yeah I have, but not that many times. In fact, one time I was in Houston, Texas when he did a concert, and he called me up and said, "If you want to come backstage, come see me before I go on." I saw him and he said, "well I got some tickets, how many do you want?" Free tickets. I said, "Oh just one for me and my wife," I was married at the time. So anyway, I see him backstage, David comes on, and he does his set, stops and says, "Ooh it's great to be here in Texas. Do you know my friend Derek Boshier, the artist? You should go to his show." You know in front of thousands of people. But that's the other point about David: he did that all the time, he had great generosity.

And one of your paintings is also in the Let's Dance album cover.
Yeah, if you look, it's on the back of the wall over there.

Beautiful. And, Joe Strummer of The Clash, he was your student.
Yeah, he was in art school his first year and he sat in my class strumming a wooden guitar, he said, "Hey man, call me Woody, man, call me Woody."

He was doing a Woody Guthrie thing.
Woody Guthrie was popular. And fast-forward, I was his personal tutor once. So, I saw a lot of him. I liked him. He was in a band, they were a young group of rebels. They were good. Fast-forward about four years or so, and I'm walking down Oxford Street and who should I see coming towards me but Woody. I went up to him and now he was all in black.

He's a punk.
He was a punk, yeah, and I said, "Woody!" and he said, "I'm not called Woody," and I said, "I know Joe, I'm a great fan of The Clash, that was a joke." And so within a week or so I think, I don't remember, I got a phone call from another ex-student called Caroline Coon - she became well known for starting an organization called Release in the 70s which actually changed drug laws. She said, "I just got done talking to Joe and he wants to know if you wanna design a songbook for The Clash. MTV didn't come into existence until 1981 and this is '79. So, what pop groups and rock groups did was they made songbooks.

Yeah, this is really beautiful. This is sort of early punk graphics too. I mean, for decades this defined how punks represented themselves in flyers and posters.
You know at the time I had a huge collection of fanzines and I included a lot of photographs of punks. I gave them all away to friends, though. I sometimes wish I hadn't.

And you were just granted a Guggenheim Fellowship.
Yeah, I applied for that and in the fact file it said that the average amount of money awarded is forty-six thousand. I didn't want to push my luck, so I asked for forty, and when the official letter came they sent me fifty-eight thousand.

Wow!
That's to cover taxes. And of course, I have to wipe a lot of that off by employing someone.

So what are your plans next?
What's next? Well, I just want to spend six months on drawing, so that's why I got a show in London in October; I heard only yesterday that they're doing a catalog.

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Derek Boshier LP cover 'Lodger; David Bowie (Two copies to show external and internal designs) 1979 Mixed media