

Rediscovering Derek Boshier

BY DOUG HARVEY

*Untitled (5 Pepsi's
and Sun 2 Guns).
Watercolor on
paper, 8½ x 11 in.*

1962



Derek Boshier has never had the best timing. In what was perhaps the archetypal grad-school, cradle-robbing, star-making group exhibition of the contemporary era, the 1961 "Young Contemporaries" at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London's East End, Boshier, alongside Royal College of Art classmates David Hockney and R.B. Kitaj, was anointed one of the seminal generation of British Pop artists.

One of the most startling fallouts of this initial burst of attention was a controversial 44-minute BBC documentary entitled *Pop Goes the Easel* (aired March 25, 1962), featuring Boshier, Peter Blake, Peter Phillips, and the doomed, incandescent Pauline Boty in a dazzling, fragmentary, surrealist—and currently unavailable on DVD—collage by director Ken Russell in his auspicious debut.

Instead of riding the media wave to Swinging Sixties celebrity—as any Pop artist worth his soup would do—Boshier capitalized on his big break by disappearing to India for a year. Was he on some proto-hippie mystical quest or merely looking for more colorful package design to appropriate? "No, I just wanted to travel," he replies in his art world–burnished but still distinctly working-class accent. "I was finished with college and didn't know what to do next, and I saw a poster advertising government scholarships to go overseas, to India or Canada. I've always loved to travel; I'd already been to Spain and Morocco. So I applied and got it."

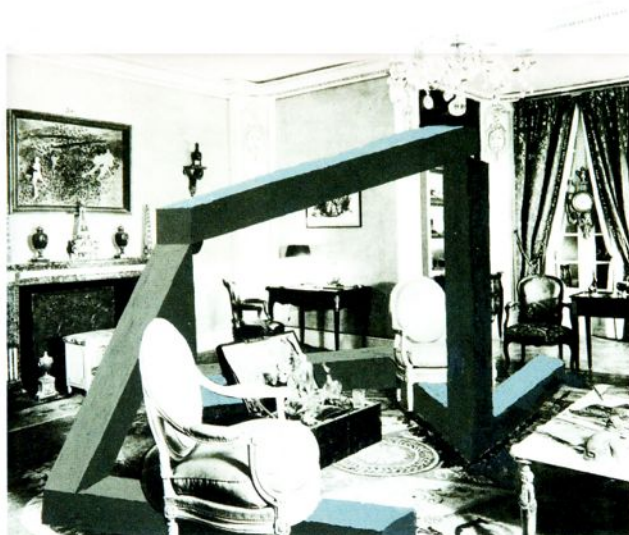
Ensnared on a hillside overlooking the Los Angeles River, the I-5 freeway, and Elysian Park (home to both Dodger Stadium

David Bowie as The
Elephant Man.
Oil on canvas,
30 x 24 in.

1980

French Art
Collectors
Apartment, Paris.
Acrylic on
photograph,
7½ x 8½ in.

1972



The Culture of
Narcissism.
Oil on canvas,
67½ x 50 in.

1979



and the LAPD Police Academy), Boshier has about as quintessential a view as one can get of the postmodern city he has called home for the past dozen years. Having recently celebrated his 76th birthday, Boshier is at the height of his powers, operating globally from a 1920s Cypress Park bungalow and tapping a new generation of admirers in the local scene, including Ry Rocklen, Laura Owens, and the proprietors of the übertrending Night Gallery, where he's just scheduled a show for spring 2014.

L.A. obviously has some kind of deep resonance for Boshier and his peers (both Hockney and Kitaj also adopted it as a base of operations at different phases of their careers), but there's evidence of a special affinity between Boshier's work and the quirky discombobulation of Westside aesthetics. Even before his Indian junket, Boshier's Pop paintings—which remain his best-known work—had a cool ambivalence toward the semiotics of advertising that had more in common with Beat Generation skepticism than the celebratory relish of a Peter Blake or an Andy Warhol. A painting like *Special K*, 1961, looks surprisingly like the iconic logo-koans that Ed Ruscha would make his stock-in-trade over the next few years.

If Boshier had taken the variations-on-a-theme route and done *all* the breakfast-cereal trademarks, he might have become a household name by the end of the decade, but he has always been nothing if not inconsistent. On his return from India, he resumed his participation in the cultural scene of '60s London, but gone were the vertiginous pastiches of celebrity portraits, NASA ephemera, and Blake's *Albion*; gone the washy red, white, and blue iconography of dueling U.S. and U.K. flags, Pepsi logos, air-mail envelopes, and metastasizing extrusions of striped toothpaste.

In their place, Boshier unveiled a now almost-forgotten body of work that was fundamentally incorrect on many levels: an unholy marriage between Pop and hard-edge abstraction, with shaped canvases full of trompe l'oeil geometric solids and candy-colored Op patterns. These also coincided with the hard-edge abstraction and Finish Fetish painting trends that were emerging on the West Coast at the Ferus Gallery and elsewhere, while rather ostentatiously ignoring the politics of mutual exclusivity that ruled the post-painterly abstraction versus Pop art culturescape at the time.

Gaining massive exposure from his contribution to the prestigious "New Generation" exhibition of 1964 (again at the Whitechapel, this time alongside Hockney, Bridget Riley, and Patrick Caulfield), Boshier's "Geo art" paintings served simultaneously as notice of his disinterest in the staking out and defending of art world turf, and his devotion to the ongoing expansion of the contemporary artistic vocabulary—a devotion that would serially alienate the artist's fans but result in an endlessly surprising and variegated oeuvre that is only now beginning to be reassessed.

Born in the southern English coastal city of Portsmouth, Boshier is the son of a career sailor who, not wanting to risk being taken off active duty at sea, never rose above the rank of able-bodied seaman in his 28 years with the Royal Navy. There's something germinal concerning Boshier Jr.'s own priorities as regards worldly ambition in there. He also apparently inherited his legendary social ease patrilineally, growing up in a series of pubs managed by his garrulous father after the latter's retirement. Stumbling into the British art school system like many postwar

The Bride.
Oil on canvas,
40 x 23½ in.

1983



The Equestrian:
From the
Monument Series.
Ink on paper,
19¼ x 15¼ in.

1984



working-class creative types, Boshier arrived on the scene with an uncommon air of confidence and nonchalance.

And Geo art might have caught on big time—if Boshier had stuck with it for more than a year: “I’ve always shifted about. Pop was finished for me in 1962. I use the medium that best suits the idea. It’s as simple as that.” Simple or not, in the puritanical ’60s art world, Boshier’s flexibility and curiosity were perceived as fickleness, or worse: “When I stopped painting, some guy came up to me and just said, ‘You. Fucking. Traitor!’”

In 1966, oblivious to whatever pigeonholes his public wanted to plug him into, Boshier declared, “Painting has become an inadequate vehicle to contain my ideas and experience,” and began exploring a variety of more challenging and up-to-date vehicles, beginning with a series of gigantic minimalist Plexiglas-and-neon sculptures, which literally took the illusionistic geometric forms of his Geo art into a new dimension.

Within a couple of years, Boshier was mocking the mythic universality of such monumental primary structures in a tour-de-force photo-conceptualist series (also presented as an installation and published as a book) entitled *16 Situations*, 1971. In it, a pair of minimalist geometric forms—an empty cube with a solid rectangular cuboid standing upright next to it—are inserted via darkroom magic into a variety of loaded contexts, radically altering the piece’s scale and significance.

The sculptures are variously depicted nestled on a 1950s ladies’ night table, perched on a hillside seen through an industrialist’s office window, dwarfed by a mosquito dining on what appears to be a human arm, and enclosing Gilbert & George in the midst of their famous performance-installation *The Singing Sculpture*,

1969. In spite of its being blatantly ripped off by Hipgnosis for the cover of Led Zeppelin’s *Presence*, it remains unmatched as a simultaneous homage and piss-take on the high seriousness of late modernism.

The same year (1971), Boshier published (under the anagrammatic pseudonym Roderick Beesh) the over-the-top psychedelic children’s book *How Hudson Saved Rock City*, which tells of the epic battle between the peppermint stick-shaped Rockmen and their attempts to defend themselves from the ravenous Tonguemen by deploying vast quantities of mustard, the word *mustard*, and the color yellow. Apart from its Kosuthian overtones, *Hudson’s* spectacular illustrations testify that Boshier’s renunciation of painting had more to do with that medium’s cultural baggage than with any withdrawal from visual indulgence.

Indeed, Boshier’s output of drawings, collages, prints, and other two-dimensional media remained resolutely virtuosic in design throughout the ’70s, though he never neglected the avant-garde. May 1968 found him in the midst of the Prague Spring collaborating with artist Joe Tilson on a relational mail-art happening called *The Smith/Novak Event*, inviting citizens with the most common Czech surname, Novak, to send postcards to their Smith counterparts—randomly selected from the London phone book. Unfortunately, the tanks rolled in before the penpal circuit could be completed.

Boshier’s politics have always been subtle and witty, but distinctly leftist. In addition to participating in antiwar and antinuke demonstrations throughout the era, he designed banners and leaflets and took jibes at Nixon and the military-industrial complex in ragged cut-and-paste collages. Primed to

2011

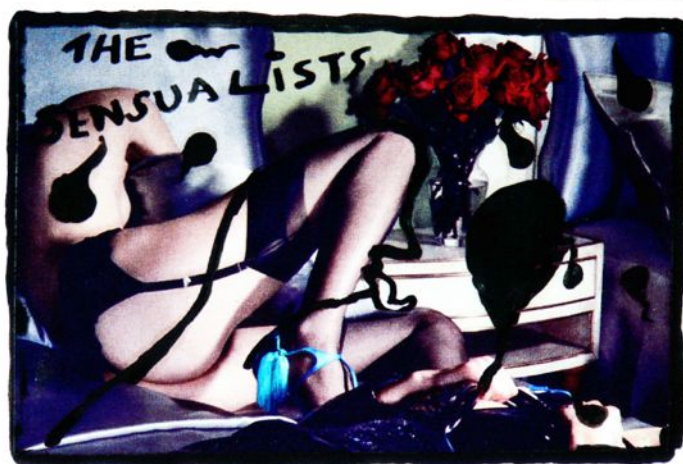
25 Cents (From the
L.A. Series).
Pencil on paper,
13 x 19 in.

1997



The Sensualists.
Mixed media on
paper,
7½ x 9½ in.

2004



connect with the punk generation, he ventured into curatorial practice with the controversial 1978 Arts Council show "Lives: An Exhibition of Artists Whose Work Is Based on Other People's Lives," which included political cartoonists, postage-stamp artists, and punk graphic legend Barney Bubbles, who also designed the catalogue and poster.

Boshier was suddenly surfing the crest of another cultural tsunami, commissioned by former student Joe Strummer to design a songbook for the Clash and recruited by longtime fan David Bowie to orchestrate the cover of his best album ever, *Lodger*. Which is where Boshier's remarkable timing kicks in again. Rather than hanging out and becoming the U.K.'s New Wave graphic laureate, Boshier traveled to Houston, Texas, for a visiting-artist lecture in 1980...and stayed for 13 years, teaching and reversing his position vis-à-vis painting, which he began to pursue with enormous vigor.

At this point, it's best to stop trying to make sense of Boshier's peripatetic trajectory and trust his instincts. It worked for him. His extended Texas sojourn brought him a whole new audience: His large, deceptively rough-hewn cartoon-figurative images of naked cowboys prancing in front of oil rigs segued into ominous, mythologically charged silhouettes that related more to Goya than Schnabel but won over the Neo-Expressionist fanbase nonetheless. Another apparently arbitrary geographical shift landed him in L.A. in the late '90s, just in time to get enraged over the antics of his recent homey George W.

Always political on many levels, Boshier's work became adamantly so in response to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, culminating in the masterful "Pantomime War" paintings of

2005, which introduced an Hergé-esque "clean line" aesthetic, a toned-down color palette, and an almost-outsider horror-vacui accumulation of stealth bombers and helicopters colonizing the picture plane. He followed this up with another spectacular body of work entitled "Chemical Culture," depicting cowboys, models, musicians, and athletes morphing or disintegrating into geometric cascades of crystalline molecular structures.

Most recently, L.A. seems to have provided Boshier with a place whose structure supports his nonlinear mode of being. Earlier this year, he had near-simultaneous shows in L.A., New York, Paris, and London, mostly of recent paintings that seem determined to absorb the contemporary visual culture of iPhone screens into the vocabulary of painting. In October he'll have two shows opening on the same night—the 28th—one at Northwestern University's museum in Boston; the other at London's National Portrait Gallery.

But locally the buzz has been all about his films. In the early '70s, Boshier created a series of four DIY collage films that for some reason have captured the imagination of the Los Angeles art community: "There's all this interest. MOCA's interested and LACMA's interested, but first I'm going to show them with these Ooga Booga books people at Gavin Brown's gallery here, which is Laura Owens's space, on Tuesday." Coincidentally, Boshier has been working on a new movie, shot with an iPad. "I've got to meet with my editing guy. I want to finish the new one this summer, because I have another idea for a film I can shoot in a day." Could be his big break—as long as he doesn't once again hear the call of the wild, and light out for Saskatchewan. **MP**