

James Nisbet, "Derek Boshier", *Artforum*, May 2013

# ARTFORUM

## Derek Boshier

Derek Boshier, *Swan*, 1962,  
diptych, oil on canvas, wood  
frame, overall 72 x 24".



More than a decade before he was designing album art for David Bowie and the Clash, Derek Boshier was among a vital group of painters reshaping British Pop art during the early 1960s. Coming through the Royal College of Art with an influential cohort that included David Hockney, Pauline Boty, and R. B. Kitaj, Boshier cultivated a sharper political edge in his work than these contemporaries. He was less invested in the "ironism of affirmation" (Hal Foster) or "fascinated ambivalence" (Christopher Finch) that critics associate with Brit Pop of this period, and instead incorporated into his art popular imagery—his sources include the Royal Mail, space rockets, and everyday goods—to underscore the alienation of postwar consumerism. More important, Boshier's true achievement during this period, as highlighted by the ten drawings and the painting *Swan* (all works 1962) displayed at Thomas Solomon Gallery, was to have realized a groundbreaking approach to picture-making itself.

In *Swan*, we encounter a vertical composition, defined as such not simply by the orientation of the painting's stacked twin canvases but also by Boshier's use of at least two spatial registers. The first of these—articulated by the illusion of gravitational force—features the apparent free fall of generically male figures cascading from top to bottom, an occasional smear of paint on the work's chalky surface indicating a seemingly endless plummet. A second spatial device is visible along the left edge of the work as a thin band comprising an arbitrary sequence of units that repeat colors found elsewhere in the painting: deep greenish-blue, red, copper, and sky blue. While one spatial system pulls interminably downward, the other vibrates continuously up and down, reading like an encrypted message for which we have no code. What complicates *Swan*, however, is not the concurrence of these two schemata, but rather the ambiguities that result from pictorial elements that do not conform to one schema or the other. For example, a frontal view of *Swan Vestas*, the popular British brand of matches, appears at a diagonal across the upper region of the work yet is apparently unaffected by the same laws of gravity as those bearing on the bodies that flail around it. Instead, Boshier renders the label with the flat veneer of the Three Stars matchbox in Gerald Murphy's *Razor*, 1924, but provides even less of a suggestion as to whether we are looking at a box of matches or at a logo—that is, whether Boshier's depiction of *Swan Vestas* exists in a continuous space with the surrounding figures or only in contiguity with them. In similar fashion, the cluster of rectangles and L shapes in the lower half of the painting also hovers indeterminately. These shapes neither enact the serial logic of the vertical panel to their left nor are they as clearly bounded as are the identical forms that populate the easel painting-within-the-painting at the bottom of the composition. Rather, they seem to belong to a sullied Suprematism, one that renders this configuration too jumbled for properly non-objectivist taste, its abstraction impinged upon, if not utterly foreclosed, by the bombarding figures above and the metafiguration below.

*Swan*, it must be said, is about the art of painting. Its pictorial ambition, however, is not modernist self-reflexivity but more directly political. Likewise, the drawings displayed throughout the space play out the implications of the painting in different iterations, situating various of its elements—such as unmoored figures and morphing shapes—within the cogs and sprockets of industrial machinery or alongside Egyptian pyramids employed as a countergeometry of social stability. Lawrence Alloway once commented that Boshier's generation of Pop artists employed "signs at different levels of signification," which is suggestive but ultimately not quite apposite with respect to *Swan*. It is an artwork that operates through incompatible systems of pictorial signification, each independent of and irreconcilable with the others. Their apparent unity within a single painting belies the possibility of a similarly unified experience within the consumer cultures of late modernity. As such, *Swan* is uncommon for Pop—its possibilities would remain largely dormant in Boshier's work until his turn to photo-based media in the 1970s.

—James Nisbet