

A Pop Artist Who's Never Conformed

BY ROBERT MOELLER OCTOBER 21, 2013



Derek Boshier, "I only like Dogs and Abstract Art" (2011), acrylic on canvas (image courtesy William Kaizen)

The famous *Young Contemporaries* exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961 featured early work by artists R.B. Kitaj and David Hockney, as well as Derek Boshier. They were all classmates at the Royal College of Art. The largely student-run exhibition was traditionally an ad-hoc affair, underfunded and disorganized; it did, however, manage to capture a good deal of attention (that may be an understatement). What followed for Hockney and Kitaj is fairly well documented. What happened to Derek Boshier is less understood and perhaps more interesting.

Postwar life in England was gritty. Food was still rationed, the economy was in shambles, and a once-glorious (depending on your perspective) empire was greatly diminished. And while people celebrated the Allied victory, the end of the war was greeted more with a sigh of relief than anything history might want to bestow upon the moment. The bells were rung, yes, but a proudly worn grimness prevailed, firmly grounding a remarkable cultural transition that looked not backward in time (the prototypical Churchillian impulse) but rather into the future. Why not?

In the wake of two world wars, optimism's stock was at an all-time low. Add into the mix the hyperbolic (yet very real) threat posed by the face-off between the United States and the Soviet Union (at that point largely a European affair), and one begins to understand the biting sarcasm and humor present in Kingsley Amis's early work or the grey tones shaped into poetry by Philip Larkin. Indeed, that ambience was captured perfectly by John le Carré in *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*, in which the abject dankness of the period is raised to such a high pitch that it almost becomes a character in the book.

Generationally speaking, the next up to bat had had enough — or perhaps, and more correctly, they hadn't had nearly enough. Keith Moon, for example, immediately comes to mind as someone with an insatiable appetite for more. The brief life of the shamanistic clown and cyclonic drummer for The Who was a gluttonous celebration of everything except privation. The immensely talented Moon smashed his way into the scene (sometimes dressed in a Hitler costume), fraught with a furiously complex series of ambitions that he would die trying to fulfill. What's notable about the period — and Moon a signifier of — is the rise of the working-class artist. Musically speaking, the list is long and varied and utterly familiar to anyone with even a passing interest in rock music. Yet beneath the blare of the power chords swirled a smaller but no less vital reawakening of the British art world.

Not wholly content to look to the past but spurred on by it nonetheless, a new cohort announced themselves. Like the musicians they often intersected with, they were mostly male, mostly unpolished, and mostly extremely talented. Like their young friends with guitars strapped over their shoulders, these artists would grow up in a moment of unwavering cultural change. Derek Boshier would perhaps prove to be the most unwavering of all.

A new exhibition of Boshier's work, curated by William Kaizen, has opened at Northeastern University's Gallery 360, in Boston. The show spans the long decades of Boshier's career and includes examples of his recent work. Boshier, who conflates the "pop" in Pop art with "pop" as in "pop in and out," never has conformed to art world expectations. With moves that would dumbfound today's career-driven art world professionals (I mean, artists), Boshier managed to slip the grasp and monotony of practicality and do exactly what he wanted. This pattern was established early, when the attention garnered by the *Young Contemporaries* show might have prompted a strategic turn; instead, he picked up and went off to India.

Later, he ended up working with David Bowie on the cover art for *Lodger* and the second songbook by The Clash (Joe Strummer was a former student), which may have unintentionally widened his brand. Always on to the next thing, though, he left to teach in America (Houston) and ended up staying for 13 years. A confirmed skeptic, Boshier is seemingly never content to really settle anywhere.

His art is as difficult to pin down as he is. It includes graphic work, filmmaking, printmaking, book writing, photography, and, of course, painting. There's sculpture and installation, too. This seminal figure in the British Pop art movement is decidedly unpredictable, which has nothing to do with being erratic. The basic armature on which he constructs his work — a pop sensibility limned with varying levels of sarcasm and humor — stays solid regardless of the medium he's working in.

In this survey, Kaizen, who is an art historian, manages to capture (no easy trick) Boshier's various twists and turns. Recent paintings mingle with older collages and the cover art for Bowie's album. There are art world digs and cartoon-like observations about Boshier's most recent perch, Los Angeles.

Interestingly, the work is more intellectual than visual. Not brainy in the sense that it's academically composed, but rather conversational and cutting; Boshier might have more in common with Jon Stewart than Andy Warhol. Yet thinking he's just a comedian would be missing the point. What Boshier offers is a serious critique — visual reminders, if you will — of the absurdities of modern life.

The hefty lines in recent paintings almost remedially etch themselves into the surface of the work. "I only like Dogs and Abstract Art," a painting from 2011, is as caustic as it is glib. In a familiar sight, hands hold a phone with an image of a dog and a painting on it. Superficially, nothing is wrong here, and yet . . . In a similar vein, Boshier riffs on the neurosis of Californians in "In California Everyone Goes to a Therapist." The mixed-media piece focuses on the front of a Mercedes with a skull looming just above it. The skull, part architectural and perhaps referencing Damien Hirst, is an ominous hint of Boshier's intent. A message, too, is scrawled across the work — a joke really, about therapy. The takeaway is less obvious than it may seem, as Boshier inflates the simplicity of the scene with a variety of ideas.

Funny to think that even as we pause to consider a small swath of Boshier's work, he's now moved along and is making iPhone films. By the time anyone catches up with the 76-year-old, no doubt he'll be on to something else.