

An Artist's Lifetime of Asking the Hard Questions

Derek Boshier's commitment to being a witness to the catastrophes and jarring discrepancies of daily living has contributed to his near-invisibility in New York.

BY JOHN YAU APRIL 9, 2021



"Some Landscapes" (2020), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches

Derek Boshier has followed an unconventional career path ever since he received his MFA from the Royal College of Art in 1962, where his classmates included Allen Jones (until he was expelled), Pauline Boty, R. B. Kitaj, Peter Phillips, and David Hockney, with whom he has maintained a long and continuous friendship.

Like many of his classmates, Boshier is widely considered a central member of the first generation of English Pop artists. He was one of four artists featured in the film *Pop Goes the Easel* (1962), directed by Ken Russell and broadcast on the BBC (March 25, 1962). (The others were Peter Blake, Boty, and Phillips.) But while his peers in this group followed a trajectory that seemed laid out for them, he went to India for a year.

After returning to England, he painted Pop abstractions that shared some qualities with the American artist Nicholas Krushenick, also an outlier. Starting in 1967, feeling that painting was not equipped to deal with everyday life — which, at that time, was characterized by convulsive change and unrelenting upheaval — Boshier concentrated on photography, film, video, assemblage, and installations. He did not paint again until 1980, when he moved Houston, Texas, and began teaching at the University of Houston. Two of the first paintings he did in 1980 were portraits of Malcolm Morley and of David Bowie in the play *The Elephant Man*.

In 1992 Boshier left Houston and lived in England until 1997, when he joined the faculty of the California Institute of Arts, near Los Angeles; he has lived in LA ever since. Changing as he has, even as he has returned to a number of past motifs, such as a falling man and a silhouette of a man's face, he has flown under the art world's radar, particularly in New York, despite living in the United States and showing regularly in Los Angeles.

Boshier's willingness to evolve and work across a wide variety of mediums have contributed to his near-invisibility in New York, but I think it also has to do with his commitment to being a witness, however personally removed, to the catastrophes and jarring discrepancies of daily living brought to us by the mass media.

I first heard about Boshier in the 1980s from a friend living in Houston — when the New York art world was enthralled with a number of artists who now seem passé at best — so I was curious to see the exhibition *Derek Boshier: Alchemy Alchemy*, at Garth Greenan Gallery (March 25–May 22, 2021). It is his debut with this gallery and the first time a large selection of his paintings have been seen in New York in nearly a decade.

The exhibition consists of nine acrylic paintings on canvas and four intricate pencil drawings on paper. All of the work is dated 2020, suggesting that Boshier — who was born in 1937 — is focused and prolific.

Even before stepping in to see the show, it's clear that he covers a lot of ground, given that his titles include "The Studio (Francis Bacon)," "Afghanistan (Christmas Day)," "Winchester 73," and "Alfred Jarry." I was taken by the first painting I saw, "Afghanistan (Christmas Day)," and knew immediately that there would be a lot to think about.

The painting, which is vertically oriented and framed by dark gray border, contains 10 flat white snowmen against a gray ground punctuated by large and small white snowflakes. The large snowflakes resemble ship wheels or dog bones arranged into radiating spokes.

The snowmen's arms and hands are black branches. Almost all of them are wearing red scarves. Within this seemingly cheerful, conventional scene, the ground is uniformly gray and two of the snowmen are sporting black headphones. What are they listening to? Can snowmen hear?

In the lower right corner of this curious scene, Boshier has inserted an irregularly shaped image of a snow-covered battlefield. What are presumably Allied soldiers fire machine guns; Taliban soldiers are lying in the snow. A diminutive Taliban figure lies near a larger one, suggesting the smaller one is a child. In the distance is the silhouette of two men carrying a third on a stretcher and a helicopter in the upper right-hand corner. Is this a picture torn from a newspaper?

What are we to make of the juxtaposition of the snow? The dark gray border suggests the image might be a card. What Christmas card has a gray border and gray snow, however? Other than snow, what do the two images in the painting have in common? Is Boshier referring to an attack that took place on Christmas Day? Or to the fact that a war is going on during the holiday season and people are being killed? How much can we know about what is happening at any moment in this world before it becomes too much? What happens to us?

In the drawing "Winchester 73," which is on an adjacent wall, Boshier has drawn an arm and hand holding a large coin extending from the lower left corner, while a male figure wearing a brimmed hat is seen from behind on the drawing's right side. His head is turned and he is looking at the coin, the barrel of the rifle protruding diagonally from his shoulder. Beneath the incomplete triangle implied by the hand and rifle barrel, we see a rectangular sign bearing the word HOTEL atop the diagonally oriented roof of a building. Over this scene, Boshier has drawn the faces of oversized watches (a recurring motif).

During the period when he was not painting, Boshier made collages. In layered compositions such as this one, he mimics the collage effect.

The Winchester Model 1873 rifle was marketed as "The Gun That Won The West." It is a repeating rifle — a precursor to the rapid-fire automatic rifles of today. We are surrounded by violent assaults and killings in America; they are deeply embedded in the nation's history. Improving the rifle's efficiency at killing made Oliver Winchester a wealthy man.

How are watches, money, a hotel, a rifle, and two men connected? I do not think Boshier is trying to be obtuse in his work. Rather, it seems that he wants to reflect upon where we are at this moment in time, and what we might do with the time we have left.

"Alchemy Alchemy" is a slightly elevated view of a Renaissance laboratory, with large watch faces superimposed upon it. The drawing, which is full of repeated lines indicating wood grain, printed pages, woven baskets, bricks, hair, and other details, is captivating. The attention is focused but it never becomes fussy. A bearded man in the lower left-hand corner squeezes a small bellows to heat up a fire. A covered metal container sits on the flames. I think of him as Boshier's surrogate.

By transforming the stuff of daily life into art, isn't the artist similar to an alchemist who dreams of turning lead into gold, matter into spirit? Although we know such an enterprise is doomed, we may choose to go on. How else might we shape our way in time?

The superimposed watches implicate both the artist and the viewer. Looking at art doesn't stop time or offer anyone sanctuary from its passing. Why do we need it in our lives? What does art give us that other things do not? These are questions Boshier has never stopped asking both himself and his viewers. By asking them, he challenges those who believe in stylistic consistency and dependable production, which is to say those who see art as capitalist trophies.