

# BLACK SMOKE RISING

TIM SHAW RA 12 April – 8 June 2014

mac birmingham

Cannon Hill Park, Birmingham, B12 9QH

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# BLACK SMOKE RISING

Marking the 10th anniversary of when, in April 2004, the image of a hooded man being tortured in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was first revealed to the world, Tim Shaw shows his installation *Casting a Dark Democracy* for the first time in a public gallery. We hope this exhibition will linger for many years in the memories of all who view it, provoking thought and discussion on the political and spiritual. The title of the exhibition suggests a signal, an attempt to communicate directly. Shaw describes an event from a few years ago:

*'I remember driving into Belfast, seeing columns of black smoke rising over the city, thinking I knew that kind of smoke ... I went down a road and the air was boiling with anger. The tarmac had melted, cars were burnt out. In front of me were about a hundred men. I thought, what am I doing driving into this?'*

Born in Belfast in 1964, Shaw graduated from Falmouth Art School in 1989. Though he has spent most of his working career in rural Cornwall, residencies in Greece, Spain and the Republic of Ireland show an influence on his work. Themes of ecstasy, the cycle of nature, communal ritual and mythology are prominent in his work, but presented here are three works concerned with the nature of human violence. All have been re-worked and developed especially for us.

Like an abrupt edit in a feature film, *Soul Snatcher Possession* thrusts us unexpectedly into uncomfortable proximity with the over-sized inhabitants of a hellish room carrying out their dreadful business. It is not exactly clear what is about to happen, or even to confidently categorise each figure as either victim or perpetrator. Shaw has said *'The figures are inter-related; the strong do not exist without the weak'*, and also that *'it relates to the corridors of power equally as it does to the street.'*

In *Man on Fire* Shaw attempts an act of emotional empathy, partly prompted by a photograph of British soldiers fleeing a burning tank in Iraq, a visit to Pompeii, the terrorist attack on Glasgow Airport. Originally conceived as an idea for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, a public space filled with monuments to the victorious, he evokes the terror of a person caught between life and death.

The monumental installation *Casting a Dark Democracy* has as its central figure an incarnation of an ancient form. This shape is detectable, for example, in archaic Mediterranean statuettes, the paintings of Goya, and the costumes of the Ku Klux Klan. Shaw's faceless giant intimidates, but closer inspection reveals it to be literally a hollow threat. It is a raggedy nameless man, constructed of the same cables that torment him, scourged with barbed wire.

Shaw considers immersive installations of sound and light more compelling in a culture that is overtly familiar with the moving image. The smell of oil, sand underfoot, a giant's heartbeat, or our own hammering in our ears, oil glugging from a barrel, or drums approaching.

Ten years on, the original photograph remains potent, stirring our inherent primitive fears, fear of being the victim, or fear of being the abuser.

Reflecting on his work, Shaw says: *'There is an attempt to understand the nature of who we are through a process of reduction, a stripping down of the human condition to its primordial bare bones. I am interested in aspects of humanity that do not change. The need to shape and form material into something that expresses meaning and emotion is an instinctive one that fundamentally underpins my art practice. It is an activity that connects contemporary life with prehistoric existence. It mirrors the ideas and beliefs of humanity over thousands of years. This is something that I find profoundly moving and important.'*

Indra Khanna, 2014



Indra Khanna is an independent curator based in London. She started curating contemporary visual arts projects in 2003, working either independently or in partnership with institutions. Her projects have included solo shows with artists Donald Locke at New Art Exchange, Nottingham in 2010 and Doug Jones at **mac birmingham** in 2011. She was guest co-curator for Deptford X Festival in London in 2011 and 2012.

For further information visit: [www.indrakhanna.com](http://www.indrakhanna.com)

Tim Shaw was elected Royal Academician in September 2013. Since graduating from Falmouth Art School in 1989, Shaw has undertaken major public commissions including *The Drummer* in Truro city centre and *Rites of Dionysus* at Eden Project. His practice has been supported by significant residencies and fellowships including The British School of Athens, The Kenneth Armitage Foundation, and The Delfina Studio Trust. In 2008 he won the Federation of British Artists Selectors' Choice at The Threadneedle Prize.

For full biography visit the artist's website: [www.timshawsculptor.com](http://www.timshawsculptor.com).

## LIST OF WORKS

### ***CASTING A DARK DEMOCRACY***

2007/08 (reworked 2014)

Height 5.5m, width 3m, length 8m

Steel, plastic, barbed wire, wood, resin, oil, sand, haze, sound installation

### ***MAN ON FIRE***

2008

Height 3.5m, width 2m, length 3.5m

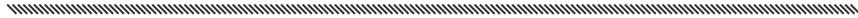
Foam, paint, polythene, steel

### ***SOUL SNATCHER POSSESSION***

2012 (reworked 2014)

Eight figures of approximate height 2m, steel and fabric

Approximate room dimensions height 3m, width 5.4, length 4.5m



## ASSOCIATED EVENTS

### **Artist Talk**

Tuesday 13 May, 7pm

Hexagon Theatre

£3, booking essential

Artist Tim Shaw RA gives an illustrated talk about his work, including the monumental sculpture *CASTING DARK DEMOCRACY* and the media image that initiated it.

### **Exhibition Tour**

Sunday 1 June, 3pm

First Floor Gallery

Free, booking essential

Join exhibition curator Indra Khanna for this tour of Tim Shaw's *Black Smoke Rising* and an insight into the artist's practice.

For tickets visit Sales & Information, call 0121 446 3232 or book online at [www.macbirmingham.co.uk](http://www.macbirmingham.co.uk)

Join in:

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#TimShawRA

*Black Smoke Rising* is curated by Indra Khanna and co-produced by mac birmingham and Aberystwyth Arts Centre with support from Arts Council England. The artist acknowledges the generous support of The Kenneth Armitage Foundation and all those who have contributed to making this exhibition happen.



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