

MIKE SHINE • CURTIS KULIG • VICTOR CASTILLO

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# MIKE SHINE

*Interview by R. PIERCE McELROY // Portrait by JOHN BUTLER*





IT'S 1970 AND A SEVEN-YEAR OLD BOY HAPPENS UPON A WEIRD RUSSIAN CLOWN AT A CARNIVAL. WEIRD CLOWN GRANTS BOY THE LIFE OF HIS DREAMS. BOY SIGNS THE DEAL IN BLOOD. WEIRD CLOWN ERASES THE BARGAIN FROM BOY'S MIND. BUT WEIRD CLOWN MAKES GOOD ON IT; BOY UNWITTINGLY LIVES THE DREAM LIFE, AS AGREED.

FAST FORWARD FORTY YEARS, WE FIND THAT THE BOY IS AN ARTIST WHO HAS BECOME RENOWNED FOR CREATING ELABORATE INSTALLATIONS AND PERFORMANCES ABOUT A MYSTERIOUS RUSSIAN CLOWN. THE SUBCONSCIOUS MIND IS A POWERFUL THING, ISN'T IT? FOR THE BOY HAS SUBLIMINALLY RECALLED THE CARNIVAL MEETING, THE BARGAIN, EVEN THE CLOWN'S CORRECT NAME: DR. PYOTR MASTOLF ILYAS. OR "FLOTSAM," FOR SHORT.

Sounds weird, but hold on, it gets weirder.

After forty years, Flotsam the clown reintroduces himself by appearing in the artist's dreams. After a series of such apparitions, the artist not only regains full recollection of their bargain, he has also been told Dr. Mastolf's life story, and the answer to the "World Riddle" (I'll explain that shortly). The artist is allowed to retell the story, but here's the catch: He can't explain the riddle, nor answer questions about it. Or else...

So this is what we know about artist Mike Shine and his new book and exhibition, *Flotsam's Harvest*. He may publish the story, create artwork, films, operas and plays about it. But he cannot talk about it.

OK, I'll ask the question for you. WTF?

Well, assume Shine isn't bat-shit crazy, or at least let's humor him and start at the beginning, which involves Friedrich Nietzsche and Stanley Kubrick. Ready? Here we go...

Friedrich Nietzsche completed the controversial novel,

*Thus Sprach Zarathustra*, in his final years of sanity, and died before it was published in 1892. Historians believe his insanity and ill health were caused by syphilis—contracted decades earlier in his days as a university student.

It is unfortunate that Nietzsche died before being able to lecture about *Zarathustra*, as it contains many of his most provocative ideas, one of which was the "World Riddle." This concept has intrigued many thinkers and artists, including Richard Strauss, who composed the orchestral poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in response. It also intrigued Stanley Kubrick, who co-wrote and directed his Oscar winning classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which offered a bizarre but fascinating interpretation. The film, in fact, used Strauss's composition as its central theme song. But whatever Kubrick's answers were to the riddle itself, we may never know. He died before disclosing them in 1999.

Mike Shine is convinced there was a connection between the untimely deaths of Nietzsche and Kubrick, that while the diseases that defeated their bodies were different, the victor that claimed their souls was one

#### ONE

*Flotsam ordered a ham and cheese omelette at breakfast. He is not a vegan.*

#### TWO

*Juxtapoz invited Mike Shine to perform at outside Lands Music and Art Festival in both 2011 and '12. Flotsam came instead.*

#### THREE

*Flotsam's Harvest opens at 941 Geary on March 16, 2013.*

#### .....

*Act 9—Valley of Gudvangen*  
Mixed media on shutter door  
38" x 48"  
2012  
Photo by John Butler







and the same.

Shine believes that victor is Dr. Pyotr Mastolf.

"Nietzsche died from VD," Shine states. "A century ago it was commonly said that unprotected intercourse was 'tempting the Devil.' Short term gain for long term pain—the classic Faustian bargain. Kubrick died by heart attack, also a classic Faustian deal; making life choices that lead to immediate gratification often kill you before your time."

Is Shine drawing a Faustian parallel between the philosophical and cinematic geniuses? "Let's just say Dr. Mastolf made me aware of a connection between the deaths of Nietzsche and Kubrick," Shine opined in the same interview. "He said it was a warning. Then he told me a story, an autobiographical tale of his life, specifically his encounters with ten different people. Those encounters revealed the answer of the World Riddle. Once I got it, all of a sudden everything in our world made complete, terrifying sense to me."

But when pressed to elaborate on his enlightenment, Shine went mum. "I can't say any more. Other than this: It flips a lot of what we think we know about the world right on its fucking head." And what about the warning?

"After I understood the World Riddle, Mastolf told me never to talk about it. I could use it in any way I wanted," Shine replied, "any way other than words."

Perhaps. But not according to Justin Giarla, Shine's gallerist, and owner of San Francisco's 941 Geary gallery. "True or not, Shine believes it," says Giarla. "He lives and breathes it. It's like Flotsam gave him the keys to the kingdom, then told him to stash them away. And he stashed them good."

So why make art about it? Why take the chance? "First off, Shine has to," maintains Giarla. "He's like the *Close Encounters* guy making the Devil's Tower out of mashed potatoes. He's completely obsessed. Probably so were Nietzsche and Kubrick. Second, it's OK as long as they don't talk. It's like Flotsam is cool with people trying to interpret the Riddle in an artistic way. As long as the answer isn't just handed to them."

So Shine has created his own tower of mashed potatoes. He has published Mastolf's story, called *Flotsam's Harvest*, and will craft a massive installation around it at 941 Geary, opening on March 16. Giarla discloses, "The book, artwork, and the entire installation are packed with clues to the Riddle."

**Carnies: Shine On, O' Brothers**  
Frank Norris Street,  
San Francisco  
Photo by Colin M Day  
Wall courtesy of Wallspace

**Carny Brother Yvan**  
Frank Norris Street,  
San Francisco  
Photo by Cooper Shine  
Wall courtesy of Wallspace

You can listen to a reading of the book while looking at the art. There are clues in the paintings. He's giving you more clues online. For Shine, it's not about the money. It's all for free. Some artists hope to sell out the work in their show. He just wants you to solve the riddle. Shine doesn't want to be the only guy on earth with the answer, that's pretty clear."

We were able to record a conversation with the infamous, reclusive, Dr. Flotsam. But of course, Mike isn't allowed to talk. —Alex Zohan

*R. Pierce McElroy:* So, I understand we are precluded from conversation with Mike Shine for this interview, so we are going to address you, Flotsam, instead. Why do you speak for Mike? Or, better yet, is there a reason Mike cannot discourse on the matters of Flotsam and the new gallery show, *Flotsam's Harvest*?

*Dr. Flotsam:* Mr. Shine of course, is a free man. It's his choice whether to speak or not. However, our partnership is rather complicated, and I think he has wisely chosen to err on the side of discretion when discussing it. Some people have chosen unwisely in the past and paid dearly. So I'm happy to answer questions for him, at least to the extent that I can.

Does Mike ask you questions?

Quite often. Most of them, I don't answer. I think it's far more interesting for him to find his own answers, as I hope it will be for others who try to solve the riddle as well.

You are a reoccurring figure in Mike Shine's exhibitions. I think we have to ask who you are? When were you born?

To quote another partner of mine, "Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm a man of wealth and taste. I've been around for a long, long year. Stole many a man's soul and faith." My name is Dr. Pyotr Mastolf Ilyas. "Dr. Flotsam" for short. I don't have a birthday. For centuries I've been the subject of operas, poetry, literature, and films. And so finally I'm giving the art world a chance to crack my riddle. Thus, my partnership with Mr. Shine.

What has been your favorite era of existence?

What a pleasant question! I'll have to think for a moment. [Pauses] I would have to say the era you live in today, actually. It is so deeply satisfying to finally see the results of one's toils in the fields. My beautiful plants have grown tall, strong, and heavy with fruit.





**Act 10—Ari of Vestrin**  
Mixed media on shutter door  
36" x 48"  
2012  
Photo by John Butler

MIKE SHINE

## HE'S LIKE THE CLOSE ENCOUNTERS GUY MAKING THE DEVIL'S TOWER OUT OF MASHED POTATOES.

I think most farmers would agree that seeing their crops grow tall is the high point of their season. The harvest itself can be somewhat anticlimactic.

I'm a bit confused by your presence, and let me tell you why. You insinuate through history, a bit mysteriously, hypnotizing people, and influencing them to suit your will. But it's not just some random game? I mean, there is a grand motive here, am I right?

[Clears throat] Correct. I am plowing, sowing, watering, fertilizing, so to speak. My motive is simple but quite grand.

What I perceive is that now you want to be known to a greater audience. Has Flotsam adapted to the social networking world? Why are you allowing Mike Shine to publicize your being now, in 2013, as opposed to hiding within the cracks of our history? Or, is this how you always plot your appearances?

A game of solitaire is never as satisfying as playing against an opponent. I want to give my adversaries an edge. Mr. Shine is a part of my game. He is helping me to create worthy opponents—by offering them a fair chance at deciphering the World Riddle. If someone solves it, I lose. If they don't, I win. But I want it to be a glorious win, not an easy one. Mr. Shine can use any artistic means he likes to prepare my opponents. Just so long as he doesn't speak directly about the World Riddle. That would be unfair.

What is the problem with the world now as you see it?

I'm afraid that's a key part of the World Riddle, and my apologies for being coy. I'll just say this: human arrogance has made my game embarrassingly easy. To solve the riddle, the hubris must first be conquered. Humans need to step back and question how they view progress.

Why riddles? Why not make everything really obvious?

What fun is that? The longer the chess game, the sweeter the victory.

I don't get it. What is victory?

A successful harvest.

*"When Mike was around seven we used to go to this little old amusement park in Syracuse, NY called Suburban Park. Whether he met Flotsam there I don't know. He was always interested in art and the weird. We would always watch "Monster Movie Matinee" at 1:00 pm on Saturday afternoons. He wasn't afraid of the abnormal. He has been drawing since he was very little. When he was three he did a Rubinesque woman complete with nipples and public hair! I have no idea how he knew that much detail. He was always sketching something, also carving his name into any surface, including window sills. If he did meet Flotsam, it sure did make an impression and has brought him fame. So I say, go Mike and Flotsam, conquer the world! He also brought a cat skeleton with him in a shoe box when we moved to New York when he was five. At that time, he was big into bones and, of course, dinosaurs. Mike has always been obsessed with wherever his attention was focused at the time. It continues to this day. Need less to say, he was and is always "interesting!" —Jane Summers, Mike Shine's Mom*

Historically speaking, there have been seminal moments that have been influential to our demise. These moments are noted in the *Harvest* show, but can you illuminate some of these occasions?

The *Flotsam's Harvest* book highlights ten of my historic encounters with various people. The encounters were quite calculated, and I'm proud of the results of each of them. But there are a few that truly stand out, if I must say so myself. The most fruitful was my meeting with young Jesus Christ. The results, just over 2000 years later, have far surpassed my expectations. Perhaps I underestimated humankind's predisposition to follow their leaders without questioning them. Of course, that was where Mr. Nietzsche's first *Metamorphosis* shone so brightly. He understood human predisposition better than I. Friedrich had a wonderful grasp of the World Riddle. It's a shame he went mad before he could explain it. [Chuckles]



*I WANT TO GIVE MY ADVERSARIES AN EDGE.  
MR. SHINE IS A PART OF MY GAME. HE IS HELPING  
ME TO CREATE WORTHY OPPONENTS*

lightly]. The second encounter that stands out for me would have to be the Rosenbergs—Julius and Ethel. That one seemed a bit of a gamble to me at the time. But it played out astoundingly well. Just remarkable. Incredible.

What is the common thread that you see in these moments?

The beautiful irony is that each of the people I encountered thought they had mankind's best interests at heart.

Where did the end begin? And when does the end really end?

Mr. Friedrich Nietzsche came closest to answering that. His theory of "eternal recurrence" was correct, I'm afraid. There is no end, just another beginning. Therefore, there was no beginning. My game doesn't end. It's like farming. The harvest isn't the end, it's merely a respite before the spring planting.

What does the *Harvest* exhibition offer to an audience in terms of saving themselves? Or can we eat, drink, and be merry to the end? How do you want this all to be interpreted?

Mr. Shine has done an intriguing job of supplying clues and tips to the riddle with his artwork and performances. The paintings have coded information within, and he will be posting additional hints in his street murals and online in the weeks leading up to the show. He has pushed the limits of our agreement to the hilt, but I am a gentleman. And I will allow him some artistic license, as long as he doesn't speak,

of course.

*"Mike experienced a seminal event when he was growing up. He won't talk about it but I've heard him mumble in his dreams. He doesn't sleep much as it is. He stays up late most nights painting. When I check in on him, he's in some sort of altered state. Maybe he is propelled by Flotsam, like he's running out of time. I don't know other than what I've overheard him say. He was young, at a county fair or traveling carnival. Whatever it was, it was certainly life changing. He was just a regular kid when he walked in and then a holder of secrets after he walked out. I think his mom and sisters could tell you more. When Mike first started painting, I was concerned about the disturbing images. But then I realized that he needed a way in which to let the ghosts express themselves after all those years of silence. I can piece together what might have happened to Mike and what his connection is to Flotsam, but I don't think it is my place to tell you. In fact, it could be dangerous."*  
—Marianne Shine, Mike's wife

What is our greatest flaw in trying to figure out an answer for everything? You have seen it all through thousands of years? Do we get anything right?

I have seen more than you could ever imagine. And interestingly, there are people who have already figured out the riddle, unwittingly. Aboriginal peoples such as Native Americans, they knew the answer. They possessed a humility that allowed them that wisdom. The civilized populations don't share that modesty. The irony is, for all their education, religions, politics, and technology, they can't see the forest for the trees. That's a hint from me, for what it's worth.

*Act 7—Julius Rosenberg*  
Mixed media on shutter door  
38" x 48"  
2012  
Photo by John Butler





THE BEAUTIFUL IRONY IS THAT EACH OF THE PEOPLE I ENCOUNTERED THOUGHT THEY HAD MANKIND'S BEST INTERESTS AT HEART.

Act 1—Hunta Seeg  
Mixed media on shutter door  
36" x 48"  
2012  
Photo by John Butler

Do you think our flaws can ever be repaired? Or are we too far along?

Myself, and history, would bet heavily against that notion. It's not that humans are too far along, it's that they are wonderfully arrogant and stubborn, and they always have been.

Where do you go from here? Do you have a plan?

I do have a plan. If someone solves the riddle, the plan may change. If not, well... let's see how it goes. I will say that I am quite enjoying my partnership with Mr. Shine, and hope it can continue. As at least as long as he does, anyhow [Laughs a little too loudly].

I guess my final question wonders if people today live closely with your perfect image of survival?

The irony of the answer is—all people. By evolutionary design, humans have been meticulously programmed with one simple goal in mind: survival of their genetic coding. DNA that survives will live on, and that which fails dies out. Evil, compassion, love, lust, hatred, fear, anger, creativity, strength, humor, beauty—are all traits that combine in interesting ways to help strands of gene codes survive through reproduction. But as I've said earlier, arrogance, greed, and stubbornness are often a part of that combination. So they may help an individual's DNA pass onward, but often at the expense of others. Which is why the World Riddle will be beyond the grasp of most. Solving it requires casting off a thousand generations of inherited instincts and traits. Again, consider Mr. Nietzsche's *Thus Sprach Zarathustra*. Zarathustra's third Metamorphosis was "the child." He believed man's highest state is reached

only when he can cast aside all predispositions, beliefs, and perceptions, and see the world anew—like a child. Zarathustra's first Metamorphosis was "the camel," a beast of burden who lives to do the bidding of others, often without questioning or challenging their authority. So here is a final hint: Consider deeply what happens after the third Metamorphosis, and before the first. Before the eternal cycle begins again. Therein lies the answer to World Riddle. Good luck [Smiles].

For more information about Mike Shine, visit [FlotsamsHarvest.com](http://FlotsamsHarvest.com). *Flotsam's Harvest* opens at 941 Geary in San Francisco on March 16, 2013.

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