AGONY AND ECSTASY

Suffering and art collide in the painstaking creations of Jason Shulman. By **Jessamy Calkin**. Photographs by **David Spero**

In Jason Shulman's London studio an occasional, insistent click is emanating from a glass dome near my elbow. Within the dome a rueful saga is being played out. A glass of water (silicone, actually) is standing on a plinth. Around the base of the glass, a Solpadeine pill is enacting a slow staccato dance, struggling to clamber into the water, in order, as its maker says, 'to be a proper pain-relieving product'. It never makes it.

Shulman has spent the afternoon reconfiguring a series of magnets concealed within the plinth (the 'Solpadeine' is another magnet set in white resin) to imbue the dance with the most pathos possible; it symbolises the futility of the human struggle. 'I'm trying to get the saddest and twitchiest movement: that little spidery movement that scares monkeys and elephants,' he says, and laughs. There is a tragicomic element to much of his work, and an emotive core that belies the pristine lines and sterile presentation. 'My work is not conceptual on any level. I feel it fails if you have to know the backchat behind it. The work is all quite visceral and immediate,' he says. Click goes the Solpadeine.

Solpadeine is the focus of much of Shulman's art. For a long time, during a heavy drug period several years ago, it was what he depended on to get up in the morning. 'I would sit in the bath and plop two Solpies

SOLPADEINE BECAME HIS MUSE. 'IT STARTED BY GIVING THANKS TO A CLEVER ANALGESIC AND THEN IT EXPANDED'

into a glass, which would just give me the strength to get dressed, get on the bus and get to work. It's a tiny thing, offering an almost homeopathic level of pain relief, but it was enough to keep me alive in a weird way.'

After 10 years as an art director for glossy magazines ('I wasn't any good at it. I had compositional talent, but I didn't care') Shulman gave up his job and remortgaged the flat he shares with his wife, the writer Susan Irvine, to concentrate on art. Solpadeine became his muse. 'It started by giving thanks to a clever analgesic and then it expanded. Like any decent muse, you can interpret it in loads of different ways.'

His studio is filled with works in progress for his forthcoming show at a modish little gallery in east London. There are holograms and optics, and a lot of strong magnets, including one so fierce it has to be wrapped in a towel and sealed in Tupperware. 'This is a lens I've invented which makes verticals disappear. It's going in a pill of some sort. It bends the light. And this is a nausea print I'm working on. I have to do it late at night because it uses really smelly inks and my neighbours object.' In the back room there is a table covered with glasses; in each, a trail of bubbles leads to the bottom, where a (real) Solpadeine lies paralysed by resin. He has solidified the moment the pill is dropped in the glass and begins to fizz, in a 3-D homage to Harold Edgerton, the high-speed photographer who captured bullets cutting through playing-cards.

'It's what God takes for his hangover,' Shulman says. The original has been bought by the Rachofsky Foundation in Dallas. But they are very difficult to make. There are 10 on the table – everything is done in small editions – and Shulman isn't happy with any of them. When he made the original batch only about six out of 800 worked. In the last batch,

Jason Shulman in his east London studio. The balancing pole, to his right, is made out of tungsten and aluminium, and took many weeks to perfect

not one was successful, and Shulman doesn't know why. Was the temperature different? Have the makers of Solpadeine changed the recipe?

Much of his day is spent watching things fail. The fact that he has no scientific or practical training is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, he says, he is still in awe when things happen that he wasn't prepared for; on the other it is a constant round of trial and effect, which is time-consuming and expensive. There are all the people he has to consult: the glass-blowers, the chemists, the model-makers, the physicists, the stereoscopic experts, the people who cut glasses in half. But what costs the most is the sheer failure rate. His balancing pole, which hangs horizontally even though it is suspended only at one end, took weeks and weeks to get right, using tungsten, which is heavier than lead, and aluminium, which had to be ground down for two days to be thinner than paper. The final impression is perfectly balanced and completely counter-intuitive, like much of Shulman's work.

Brought up in London, Jason is the youngest child of the late theatre critic Milton Shulman and the writer and broadcaster Drusilla Beyfus. His sister Alexandra edits *Vogue* and his other sister Nicola is a writer. He and his wife live in a vast loft in east London full of Shulman-like arrangements. 'If Jason is emotionally upset, he copes with it by tidying furiously and balancing strange objects on top of each other,' a close friend of his says.

Ideas drop into Shulman's head fully formed and he then tries to make them work; his pieces are not just clever, they are beautifully crafted and emotional, too. *A Piece of My Father* is made from the iron elements of his father's ashes suspended in a test tube by a magnet. Shulman had read 'a Ladybird-type book' on the human body, which described what the elements would break down into if you turned them into household products. He collected his father's ashes and rented a big electromagnet, then extracted all the iron, in the form of dust. 'I spent two months sifting the ashes into different oxidised colours.' That must have been a strange task. 'Most of the time I was very detached, but the reality of what I was doing came in powerful flashes.' (The rest of Milton's ashes were strapped to a rocket and sent up over Elizabeth Street in Belgravia, near his bookie's.)

Shulman's Solpadeine pills suspended mid-fizz; when he made the original batch, only six out of 800 worked

There is another, very beautiful tribute to the dead that Shulman has created, a genuine memento mori. It is a small lacquer cabinet in which a little door opens to reveal a mirror. Breathe on the mirror and a photo of Shaun, Shulman's best friend at art school who killed himself, is revealed in the condensation, and then fades as the breath fades. Shulman found the idea in a Victorian book for boys, which suggested a way to amuse your friends by drawing a rabbit on glass with a very powerful acid. It would look like an ordinary piece of glass until you breathed on it, then the rabbit would appear. (It didn't mention that the acid would burn a hole in your skin.) Using this as a basis, Shulman developed a safer process with an industrial chemist, John Davison, and they are planning to develop it and market it commercially, for example, on a powder compact or a vodka bottle.

The writer and artist Harland Miller has commissioned Shulman to do the cover of his book on Edgar Allan Poe. A limited edition, it will comprise 10 of Poe's stories and have original artwork inside by a number of artists, with a foreword by Miller. The cover will be a picture of Poe in the memento mori mirror. Shulman, says Miller, reminds him of Poe: 'He has a gothic aura but he's actually a very modern thinker.'

Miller has invested a lot of money in it and is counting on Shulman being a household name by the time the book is published – Christmas 2007. But it may happen before that. Shulman is a clever little light in the murky, overcrowded art world. His execution is perfect, but his ideas are his strength: even his failures are more interesting than most people's successes – and, he says, he has a lot of mistakes yet to make.

Jason Shulman is at Madder Rose Gallery, Sept 7 to Oct 15. 137/139 Whitecross Street, London EC1 (020-7490 3667; madderrosegallery.com)