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Michael Smith at the Blanton Museum of Art

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AUSTIN, Texas—“You’ve come a long way, baby!” On September 11, 1971, the launch date for the Ford Pinto, this disingenuous feminist slogan could no longer be aired on the radio; the FCC had banned cigarette advertising in radio and television on the second day of that year. But listeners could tune their FM dials to NPR’s then-new program *All Things Considered* to hear reporting in the aftermath of Charlie Manson’s death sentence and a gradual fade to the European export of Donna Summer and her imminent dawn as the queen of disco.

At the same time, in a white-flight neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, not far from where he grew up and close to his father’s shuttered business, **Michael Smith** was driving a cab and contemplating his next move following his rejected application for conscientious objector status during the second round of the Vietnam draft. It was just his luck to have a low draft number—79-- guaranteeing a position on the front line. But this was nothing a note from his doctor wouldn’t remedy, giving him the desired status of 4-F. Meanwhile, Smith’s future collaborator **Joshua White** was producing mind-blowing psychedelic experiences for the soon-to-be-closed Fillmore East. And 1,741 miles away, on a 30-acre parcel of land, a sober, unornamented modernist presidential library would open on the campus of the University of Texas, Austin, designed by **Gordon Bunshaft** for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

In LBJ’s words: “It is all here: the story of our time with the bark off. This Library will show the facts, not just the joy and triumphs, but the sorrow and failures, too.” This dedication could have been the 32-second opening segment in the newly commissioned *Mike’s World*, the “orientation movie” to an exhibition featuring more than 30 years of performance, sculptures, paintings, drawings, and video works by Michael Smith and Joshua White (and other collaborators). The show was a conglomeration of music, dance, high art, haute cuisine, television, business, technology, and politics, all of which centered on the Everyman entrepreneurial character Mike Smith.

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It took another eight years before the artist Michael Smith would expose his prescient skill set, post the infantilization of the baby boomers by the Vietnam era, to create the eponymous character for one of his earliest video works, *Baby Ikki* (1979). This preverbal, postapocalyptic toddler is seen crawling into a busy intersection only to be dragged onto the sidewalk, kicking and bawling, by a New York City cop for obstructing traffic. His diapers are encrusted with everything from avant-garde theater director **Richard Foreman**’s strategy of the remix; to **Norman Lear**’s *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and adaptations of British sitcoms remade as *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, and the autobiographical *Maude*; to the **Borscht Belt** comics, notably **Jackie Vernon**, whose omniscient voice narrated a slide show of vacation pictures, sans the actual pictures, and whose voice-overs for Frosty the Snowman inspired the effective dubbing technique that Smith uses for the majority of his monologues for his character Mike. Smith shares Lear’s abilities to objectify his personal experience and adapt another’s material, and positions both in the realm of the universal. In so doing, he relegates the currency of the social and political to mere propping devices, as in the video *Mike Builds a Shelter* (1983/85), where a bomb shelter is architecturally reprogrammed into a subterranean bar that reduces survival efforts to a last call.

When installing the show, Smith consciously used LBJ’s library as a model, replete with vitrines full of personal papers and time lines showing the chronology of his career. Watching the videos within this context of a counterfeit presidential environment, one realized the self-consciousness and parity of each item in the exhibition to the extent that a transformation occurred: suddenly set design became sculpture. (Indeed, the **Blanton**’s institutional role as “collaborator” exposed the intricacies of bringing Smith to market.) Take, for example, the offices that make up *Mus-Co.: (1969–1997)* (1997), the name of a lighting-effects company that set up shop with the idea that disco was here to stay. The piece reads as an oblique memorial not only to ill-

considered corporations but also to individuals who were victims of AIDS.

The showroom contains deeply discounted items for light shows, such as amplifiers, strobes, gels, silver-foiled room dividers, and disco balls with accompanying sound tracks that are all well past their cultural expiration date. Only the carnivalesque video kiosk (2005) that looks like a life-size game of *Chutes and Ladders*—where gleeful children bear placards imploring the viewer to take off your pants!—can hope to abrogate the sense of loss. It is adult humor delivered by children. The overall experience of the exhibition was not dissimilar to an outing at Universal Studios, where one might visit the set of *Adam-12* and actually sit in the squad car. The hopeful but luckless Mike Smith is just this sort of vehicle—a modern-day, middle-class Candide, who impersonates the condition of our being only all too human.

The success of Smith's work, like that of a television rerun, lies in repetition, and, as with all compelling comedy, timing is key. In his philosophical investigation of humor, **Henri Bergson** writes that "there is something esthetic about it, since the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art." As the audience to Mike Smith, we realize that we must also regard ourselves as product placements, particularly when the voice in the orientation movie booms, "We all live in Mike's world." *"Michael Smith at the Blanton Museum of Art" originally appeared in the February 2008 issue of Modern Painters. For a complete list of articles from Modern Painters available on ARTINFO, click [here](#).*

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