

MICHAEL SMITH by Kathryn Hixson

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"Mike's World" is a sprawling collection of installations, videos, drawings, documentary photographs and various ephemera, representing thirty years of work by performance artist Michael Smith. "Mike" is Smith's main character, a bland Everyman, developed in the late 1970s and early '80s. With the "Pictures" generation, Smith reacted to the Carter and Reagan years by constructing personae who were subjected to—or subjects of—the vicissitudes of a quickly changing pop-media world. Smith has noted that he belongs to the TV generation, with its ever-shortening attention span along the digital frontier. Unlike Cindy Sherman's women portrayed in her untitled film stills, who shift dramatically from photograph to photograph, "Mike" is a constant. As played by the artist, "Mike" has dark good looks and a frank stare that often seeks the viewer's gaze. His active eyebrows communicate concern, concentration, and at times an adolescent wickedness. Appearing in performances in art spaces and nightclubs, and hosting talent and talk shows, "Mike" became a well-known figure in New York's SoHo art scene.

With collaborator Joshua White (as well as others), Smith introduces "Mike's World" with an orientation video screened constantly in the show's first dark anteroom. We are introduced to the title world in a smoothly edited synopsis of this character's life, from youthful foibles to a series of midlife crises. The style is precisely like a mid-1980s industrial or educational video introducing a new laborsaving device or self-help service.

The model for the show is a presidential library in which an abundance of materials are arranged to commemorate a public persona, with endearing bits of juvenilia, stolid avadavats, detailed re-creations of iconic domestic spaces, and overbearing, forcibly relevant exegetical timelines. Unlike the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library across campus, "Mike's World" does not grind off the rough edges of historical realities. The exhibition cheerily embraces embarrassing "mistakes," foolish mishaps, and downright failures in the life of "Mike."

Throughout, Smith uses "Mike" as a sort of unwitting foil to the great social and technological promises of the 1980s, as a way to offer up the myriad means by which identity is constructed, validated, and valued. Harkening back to an earlier celebrity world, Smith has an ongoing collaborative project wherein he asks friends and acquaintances to draw

caricatures of "Mike." Because of the latter's distinctive demeanor, this project results in a delightful wall of small hand-drawn portraits of this "celebrity," just like in Sardi's or any big-city old-world Italian restaurant.

Near this wall lies a bomb shelter built by a more anxious version of Smith's character, sticking closely to the official government-issue instructions on display. The actual shelter, originally built by Smith as art in 1983, is also a re-creation, comprising, since intended for party boy "Mike," a cinderblock and two-by-four design for a "Home Fallout Shelter snack bar—basement location," with liquor and refreshments included among the emergency rations.

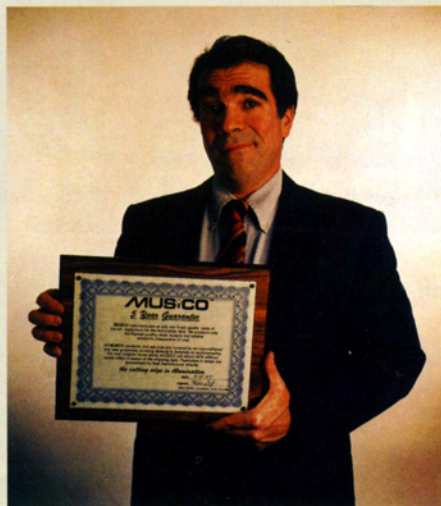
"Mike" often tries to be popular, but is always having parties to which no one comes. Perhaps taking this fact to heart, "Mike" even travels to someone else's festivities, entering the USA Freestyle Disco Championship at Copacabana in 1979. Smith re-creates this competition as a series of slide dissolves. "Mike" is seen earnestly, and hilariously, pumping and grinding, though eventually ranked last by the judges.

Not to be discouraged, Smith goes on to make a romping-stomping video portrait of "Mike" in the style of early MTV, if one can remember back that far. Seated on a horse, "Mike" is dressed in full cowboy gear, flaunting his ubiquitous metal belt buckle that spells out "MIKE." Smith lifts his character to new heights of promised success, as a chorus of all-

American boys and girls chant "Go for it, go for it, go for it, Mikel!" to a throbbing beat.

Promise is the operative word for the character development of "Mike." Within this persona's endearing attempts to please his audience lies the deep anxiety of the art world. On one hand, cable TV had promised a democratic world of entertainment. Smith developed (with Doug Skinner) a live talent show hosted by "Mike" and an "adult" puppet show, which actually could fit well with the *Saturday Night Live* comedy style of the mid-1980s. (Smith claims he once was under the wing of an agent who also represented Liberace.) But pure popular fame for a fine artist is almost as dangerous as failure. Smith addresses this anxiety in *Interstitial* (1999), a cable talk show in which host "Mike" interviews artists and dealers about the pitfalls of celebrity and capitalism. The irony of this position in the art world was presumably not lost on Smith, who soon went on to make *Open House* (1999), a show/documentary video in which the "artist" "Mike" presents as his "installation" the loft he bought downtown, now fixed up with the "sweat equity" of his artist friends. For the "piece," "Mike" tries to sell the property aloft the notoriously gentrifying SoHo real estate market.

So "Mike" goes into business for "real." Along with Joshua White—who developed psychedelic lighting for rock 'n' roll shows in real life—Smith produced *Musco*





(1969-97). Procuring the inventory of a defunct lighting store in 1997, they created what looks like a going-out-of-business sale. Reconstructed at the Blanton in excruciating detail, the “store” looks like the guys just stepped out to get some Chinese food, leaving the viewer to poke around the odd bulbs, gels, electronics, and disco balls scattered about in the dim space.

There is a profound, exemplary moment in Smith’s 1996 video *Outstanding Men of America*. “Mike” receives a letter identifying him as just such a noteworthy youth. Considering this news as an occasion to celebrate, and in anticipation of the party to come, “Mike” hangs variously sized mirrored disco balls around his place and gets out his classic party digs. He dons his dated denim-and-leather jeans and vest, but they’ve gotten a little tight. With his signature eyebrow expressionism, Smith returns the disco outfit to its storage box, and steps decidedly into a new, cool pastel-blue leisure suit. Then, in a characteristic “Mike” moment, he peers into the surface of a mirror ball with a miner’s light strapped to his head. He announces the central defining ambiguity of his generation’s engagement with art making: “Huh!?” This conflation of skeptical knowledge with epistemological wonder sits at the core of Michael Smith’s oeuvre.

But “Mike” reads the rest of the letter—*Outstanding Men* awards are only given to those born between cer-

tain years. Alas, “Mike” is just a few years too old! Still tricked out in his leisure suit, Mike retreats to timeless mother nature, and is seen gazing noncommittally at the sunset. As Smith puts “Mike” through his paces, this mix of knowledge and wonder is quickly put to use for the art world, as a concocted artist retirement community complete with history, legend, and character. “The Quinquag Arts and Wellness Center” lies in the mountains somewhere, and many talented artists retire there to make ceramic tiles. In a convincing low-tech presentation, Smith tells the story of the crazy rich lady who started it, a grid of sample celebrity tiles, and many moving video testimonials from members.

Smith took his character’s mock innocence to even more exhilarating extremes in a performance one evening in the museum’s vast atrium. Smith first appears as “Mike” in his boxers, enjoying his cup of Mr. Coffee. After begging off “work” on his cell phone, “Mike” decides to get ready for his party later that night. He dons a dapper get-up and brutally proceeds to belt out the bawdiest ditties. Frantically swinging his arms and dancing in place, Smith transforms “Mike” into a gnarly old misogynist down at the pub, singing, “If I had the wings of an eagle and the balls of a hairy baboon/ I’d fly to the top of a mountain and I’d piss on the man in the moon!”

After abruptly ceasing to sing, Smith metamorphoses a third time into a certain “Baby Ikki.” In giant diapers, too-small sunglasses, and a silly bonnet, “Baby Ikki” is given plenty of room, and the character finally toddles up the stairs to make its escape. Because Smith interweaves the old, middle-aged, and adolescent psyches of “Mike” with the toddler antics of “Baby Ikki,” the artist brings the viewer abruptly face-to-face with the terror that always belies laughter’s belly cheer.