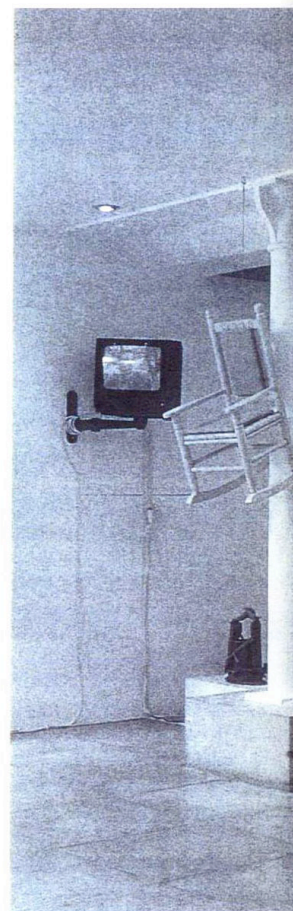


**Michael Smith &
Joshua White**
*QuinQuag Arts and
Wellness Centre 2002*



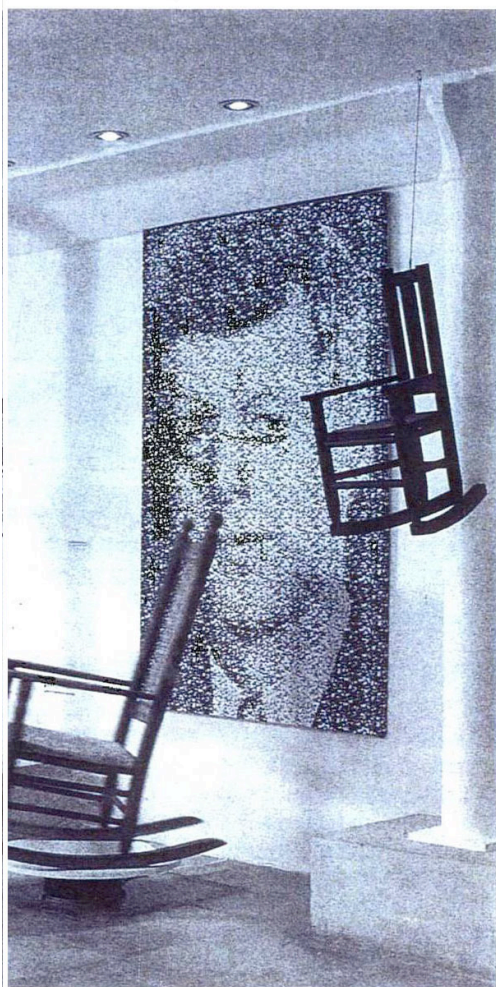
■ Michael Smith & Joshua White

Hales Gallery London March 9 to May 25

This Spring, Hales Gallery seemed to have turned over its space to some dowdy American local history society with an unexpected toe hold on the so-called new economy. An architectural model, flow charts and prominent logos shared company with a display of hundreds of brightly painted decorative tiles, three rocking chairs, an over-sized and extremely grainy image of JF Kennedy, souvenir wishing wells and old photographs from around the 50s of apparently content people indulging in a range of outdoor creative pursuits in a bucolic setting. It took a while to discern what was going on. The video presentation, on two ceiling-high monitors, seemed a hybrid of historical documentary (faded photos, interviews with OAPs and hillbilly soundtrack) and a corporate promo (visionary zeal, corny salesmanship, a seemingly amiable Chief Executive Officer). Slowly, amid the chaos of these

scattered signs, the story of an eccentric arts colony, that once existed on the site of the planned QuinQuag Arts and Wellness Centre, began to unfold in the mellow narration of the video and the numerous captions on the rustic exhibition boards.

The video seemed to belong to a series about entrepreneurs made for French television entitled 'Millennium Visions'. Wellness Solutions Group CEO Mike Smith (a thinly veiled alter-ego of the artist) and his colleagues introduce their plans for an ambitious retreat / convention centre for over-stretched executives in upstate New York where a holistic programme of arts, health and healing awaits them. Smith strikes gold when his 'fiancée', a touchy-feely new-ager in flowing skirts and with a background in 'art therapy and body movement workshops', uncovers the existence of a dwindling arts colony that once thrived on the Wellness Solutions Group's Catskill Mountain plot, founded in 1950 by Isabelle Nash, the daughter of a dental magnate from Buffalo. Isabelle invited artists who either 'amused or interested her' to live on the estate at a cost of just a dollar a year. The



ghpoints of the colony's history are duly narrated: JFK's, Albert Motherwell's and Louise Nevelson's names are popped; the fame of its painted tiles and rocking chairs is nostalgised. We begin to envisage a kind of Black Mountain College and someone resembling Peggy Guggenheim, though on second viewing the colony's importance begins to fade, and its ex-colonists sound a little disgruntled about their benefactor, who turns out to have imposed various officious and questionable regulations on the colonists, and who, in the veiled words of one interviewee, is 'sometimes too impressed by certain people'. The connections to great men and women in the arts and politics turn out to be tenuous at best: Motherwell, one of whose legacies to the Spanish Republic' is shown as a still, was apparently persuaded to paint a silly Quinquag tile there once, and Louise Nevelson once took advantage of the woodwork facilities (cue a shot of a large Nevelson wood relief). As for JFK, the connection turns on the vague suggestion that his rocking chair in the Oval Office may have been made at Quinquag, on the back of which the colonists developed a profitable line in 'Kennedy Rockers'.

Similarly seismic cracks lurk beneath Smith's blandly reassuring smile. A News Release is portentously dated January 1, 2000 – prior to the tech-stock crash. It describes its new strategic partner, Dot.Uncommon ('founded in 1998 and headquartered in the heart of New York's Silicon Alley'), as an 'award-winning Image Management' firm; the authors of 'HYPERSPACE™ ... a proprietary program designed to help burgeoning digital age businesses maximise mindshare', and other such paradigm-shifting blather. The names of dot.com sponsors credited on the exhibition's banner are actual companies that went belly up (shootinggallery.com and pseudo.com, for example). We begin to realise that it's not just the old colony that is history.

The banner's design is inept to say the least: a weird assortment of old-fashioned typefaces badly spaced against a lurid fluorescent yellow background. The model of the Quinquag Arts and Wellness Centre is just as ham-fisted: a Buckminster Fuller-esque dome in wire wool is surrounded by buildings represented by children's building blocks (including the 'Pepsi Holistic Healing Centre' and the 'Site of the Original Kiln'), and model trees of the kind that accessorise train sets. Green and blue craft paper represent the sky and land. A 'Donor Tree' is similarly shoddy: it sits on an art school easel, most of its 'gold' plaques as yet unengraved (though 'Beacon Arts & Yoga Center', 'Catskill Region Travel Board', 'Your Name Printed Here', and a few other inscriptions do feature); white gaffer tape protects the 'Donor Tree' by marking a line one must not step beyond. The cardboard crate in which one supposes the exhibition materials arrived sits in the corner, as if the gallery had no storage space. A Quinquag tile and a little model of a rustic armchair lie smashed at the box's bottom, an apt image of the venture's failure – its inability to reconcile a hi-tech business convention centre with a folksy arts colony, and CEO Mike's inability to reconcile his business ambitions with his wife's mysticism.

'Quinquag', amongst other things, is a poignant and finely-wrought satire of the market absorption of idealism, creativity and dissent once the Baby Boomers got their hands on the reins of the economy. The gap between the new and old Quinquag colony, apparently linked by some sort of monorail, is that increasingly hazy area between the mendacity of marketing and our nostalgia for a time when it seemed possible to exist completely outside its influence. ■

Alex Farquharson is a curator and a critic.