



MICHAEL SMITH AND JOSHUA WHITE

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Michael Smith's most recent collaboration with Joshua White is almost profoundly representative of the America of the current moment. *The Quinquag Arts and Wellness Centre: Touring Exhibition* at Hales Gallery is a project about the American response to the failure of the American dream – about the near manic perpetuation of ambition and hope in the face of imminent failure. The installation itself is, appropriately, sweepingly ambitious, not simply in its technical aspects, but also in the completeness of its narrative.

America is obsessed with stories, and *The Quinquag Arts and Wellness Centre* is the most elaborate of fictions; it is the story of an artist colony turned entrepreneurial wellness centre. It seamlessly combines the American obsession with entrepreneurial success, spiritual well-being, and artistic self-expression. Represented here, too, is the naivety behind the American presumption to happiness and 'wellness', the absurdity of a national belief in happiness as a sort of constitutional right. And implicit to this is the failure to perceive a notional conflict between the holistic and the

technological, the capitalistic and the artistic. One of the many delights of the project is the endless proliferation of narratives, from the mock documentary/promotional video on the Centre and the story boards explicating the history of the Quinquag colony, to the mock press release announcing the union between the Centre and Dot.Uncommon, a PR firm. The various plot-lines snake through the space of the installation, and the task of tying them together is one of the multiple pleasures of the show.

Within this installation, Smith communicates the way in which the entrepreneurial spirit has become the defining narrative of contemporary American life; indeed, as William Dean Howells observed at the turn of the century, the story of the 'suddenly rich' is 'the romance, the poetry of our age ... the thing that chiefly strikes the imagination'. Entrepreneurship (and by association business) are the utopias of our time – they are the territory where American dreams find themselves. In this sense, the initially incongruous pairing of a holistic health centre with a dotcom entrepreneurial sensibility makes peculiar sense.

But Smith is clearly working within the narrative of failure. The exhibition sponsoring companies are all 'real' failed dotcom companies (pseudo.com, webvan.com, Shooting Gallery); the donor tree for the Centre bears only a handful of names. The Quinquag Arts and Wellness Centre reeks of future failure, and Smith's entrepreneurial impresario figure exudes the desperate optimism born out of a history of repeated failure. Smith brilliantly captures this desperation: the panicked will to continue, and to rebound yet again with a (surely this time) winner. Within this spiralling narrative, failures can only be countered by large-scale triumphs, and it is the relentless pursuit of the redeeming success that leads to an endless string of nothing-nobody-nowhere endeavours. Smith's deprecating, knowing sense of satire may keep things light, but in a strange way only emphasises the underlying seriousness of the work; laughing inures one against failure, but it is also a symptom of this same disappointment.

Smith manages, rather against the odds, to knit together a narrative that is at once intensely personal (as embodied through Smith's constant, charismatic presence in the installation) and loosely global. The work finds itself in the delicate, charged position of being at once confessional and commentary. In this way, it is far more sophisticated and subtle than much of the work we are currently accustomed to; here, the laughter is double-edged and the answers don't come easily, if they do at all.

MICHAEL SMITH AND JOSHUA WHITE'S *THE QUINQUAG ARTS AND WELLNESS CENTRE* is at Hales Gallery, London, 9 March – 25 May 2002.
www.halesgallery.com



MICHAEL SMITH AND JOSHUA WHITE, *The Quinquag Model*, 2001. Courtesy: Hales Gallery, London