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Art

Mike’s World and Trenton Doyle Hancock.

by Roberta Fallon



Down with OCD: Trenton Doyle Hancock’s *Cunnilingus* (left) and *The Quinquag Arts and Wellness Centre* Touring Exhibition by Michael Smith and Joshua White are at the ICA.

ICA continues its walk on art’s wild side with two new shows: “Mike’s World,” an immersion into the theatrical sets, props, videos and other works of performance artist Michael Smith; and “Wow That’s Mean and Other Vegan Cuisine,” a 3-D black-light wallpaper-and-drawings extravaganza by Trenton Doyle Hancock.

Some 30 years ago Michael Smith—who attended art school to become a painter—stopped painting and instead started thinking, writing and performing material about a sad-sack character named Mike (no surname). Since then, everyman Mike’s exploits have been performed, videotaped, filmed and lauded just about everywhere in the Western art world, including the 2008 Whitney Biennial. This exhibit includes many of the videos and huge chunks of the stage sets created for Mike by Michael, with his main collaborator Joshua White and others.

Walking through the show (organized originally by the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas in Austin) is like a stroll through an indoor theme park or museum dedicated to a godlike-but-clay-footed human. Everything from Mike’s drawings, Mike’s “Mike” belt buckle, Mike’s ties and other stuff is shown as if in beloved tribute to Mike. But Mike happens to be the ultimate loser.

Good-natured Mike looks earnestly at the camera, explains his projects, and performs, dances and talks like he’s your favorite uncle. But all of Mike’s projects fail. Underlying everything is a critique of life in an America where dreamy Willy Loman and Walter Mitty are doomed to be forever second- (or third- or fourth-) best.

The two most elaborate sets in the show (samples from Smith’s 30-year performance history) are *Musco* (a disco and backstage from the story of a disco lighting company that fails after it falls out of touch with the post-disco world) and *Quinquag Arts and Wellness Centre*, a failed artists’ retirement community.



The disco piece is outstanding in its recreation of a bygone era. In fact, the attention to detail and level of craftsmanship throughout the show is right on, from the slick video introduction that greets you at the show’s entrance—perfectly mimicking a smarmy TV infomercial—to drawings that parody art-fair caricatures and comic books that portray Mike’s tragi-comic adventures à la Nancy and Sluggo.

The deadpan affect of Mike and his ephemera are among the show’s greatest charms. With the slightest hint of flamboyance or wink-wink, this show would land right in kitsch’s front yard. But the work aspires to far greater heights than kitsch, and succeeds the way Mister Rogers succeeded—by being just plain serious.

Trenton Doyle Hancock’s trippy 3-D wallpaper and Project Space installation spins a mock-heroic yarn the artist has been evolving since his grad school days at Tyler, when he lived in disharmony with a vegan couple who introduced him to tofu and their meat-hating ways. Doyle Hancock’s obsessive works depict fantasy battles between the hateful vegans and the sweet, gentle mounds (human-plant hybrids). This work will surely hold its place in art history’s panoply of artists obsessively working a single narrative. Here, in early pencil drawings, you can see the artist’s roots in the apocalyptic works of Hieronymous Bosch.

ICA’s continued programming in zones traditionally neglected by museums—art with humor and playfulness whose motivation lies beyond the commercial realm—is commendable. Shows like these, and the recent Puppet Show, Ensemble and Locally Localized Gravity shows, give art’s outer limits much-needed credibility and respect.


For more on the Philadelphia art scene go to [fallonandrosos.blogspot.com](#) “Mike’s World” and Trenton Doyle Hancock Through August 3. \$3-\$6. Institute of Contemporary Art, 118 S. 36th St. 215.898.7108. [www.icaphila.org](#)

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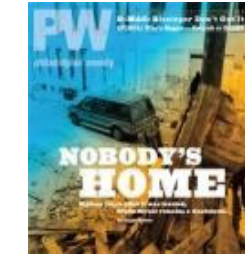
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