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WELCOME TO **MIKE'S WORLD**: Conceptual artist invites us into his wacky alternative universe  
By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin, American-Statesman Arts Critic

Everyone, meet Mike.

He's a regular guy - the happy-go-lucky dude who greets every day with enthusiasm, delighting in that first cup of coffee before earnestly setting about accomplishing everything on his to-do list.

See, Mike has great ideas - big ideas. Ideas that might just be revolutionary.

Ideas like the next best-ever cable access show. Or a wellness retreat for dot-com executives. Or building a combination basement snack bar and bomb shelter. Or a disco light-show equipment company.

Mike tries hard to capture the American Dream. But always, in a classically tragic-comic manner, it's just out of reach for him. Mike is part Willy Loman, part naively optimistic Candide, part slapstick Buster Keaton. And through December, you can meet Mike at the **Blanton** Museum of Art. Mike is the creation of Michael Smith, an internationally recognized performance artist and associate professor at the University of Texas. "

**Mike's World**: Michael Smith & Joshua White (and other collaborators)" is a sprawling, immersive, overloaded, stimuli-challenging exhibit that surveys Mike, the character Smith has developed over the past 30 years. As a young artist in New York in the 1970s, Smith, now 56, began featuring Mike in performances, later creating videos, films, puppet shows, skits for cable television and complex gallery installations along with myriad other artistic creations including books and illustrations.

Mike and his everyman foibles might be familiar to all of us. But " **Mike's World**" is possibly unlike any other museum art exhibition you've seen. Just as Mike is an imaginary character, " **Mike's World**" is essentially an imaginary exhibition: Smith and his longtime collaborator, television producer and lighting designer Joshua White, have created a huge, episodic tribute to one person that's structured much like a showy, presidential library. In essence, " **Mike's World**" is a stunningly detailed theatrical set of a theme park-style tribute - right down to the slick introductory film with the booming voice-over - "Welcome to **Mike's World**. Please turn off all cell phones "" - and the shiny-leafed fake ficus trees that perch in the gallery corners.

Annette DiMeo Carlozzi, the **Blanton**'s curator of contemporary art and the curator of the current exhibit, describes " **Mike's World**" as "an artist-created alternate universe." Instead of reading didactic labels or exhibit brochures, "visitors become the live audience," she says. In addition to several large installations, there are more than 20 hours of performance video and film to view. And as in the theater, Carlozzi says, the exhibit audience is asked to "suspend disbelief and inhabit this other place called ' **Mike's World**.'"

Mike the character is certainly not the artist Michael Smith. "There are autobiographical elements in the character, but it's not me," Smith says. "Mike is pretty simple and so is his emotional life. He's patient. I'm not. Ambivalence, conflict are not a part of his emotional landscape as they are for me."

Still, Smith's face is the unmistakable face of Mike: the bushy, expressive black eyebrows; the wide grin; the strong features; the thick, short build. Smith might have aged over 30 years, but the basic image of Mike has not.

Born in Chicago to a real estate agent father and homemaker mother, Smith has the flatly melodious voice of the quintessential American newscaster. As he describes it, his was an average upbringing in a secular middle-class Jewish family. Without a burning focus of his own, Smith happily followed his older brother, Howard, to art school at Colorado College to paint large abstract paintings because that was what lots of nascent artists in the 1970s did. Several stints in New York at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program during his college years exposed him to pioneer performance artists such as Vito Acconci and William Wegman. After a brief period back in Chicago where he participated in open-mike nights at comedy clubs, Smith headed to New York.

"I've always enjoyed clowning around, hamming it up," says Smith, who joined the UT faculty in 2001. (He still maintains an apartment and studio in New York.) "I'm a very social person." In fact, for all the early influence of avant-garde performance pioneers, Smith gives equal credit to self-deprecating comedians such as Bob Newhart and the so-called "King of Deadpan" Jackie Vernon. Absurdist playwright Samuel Beckett is another favorite. And over the years, Smith's inclusive sense of creating has garnered him a long and very eclectic list of collaborators. Among guests on his 1989 "Mike's Talent Show" Cinemax special? Lyle Lovett. Still, Smith resists specific show biz comparisons.

"I just don't know really anything about theater," he says with a shrug. "That's just not where I'm coming from."

Where he is coming from is a place filled with the remnants of Mike's failed dreams. One of those dreams is "Mus-Co," a light-show equipment company (the title, a combination of "music" and "color," is yet another typically less-than-original Mike idea). Just as the age of disco slips away, Mike thinks it's brilliant to sell the technical supplies needed for creating flashy lighting effects at home. Smith says "Mus-Co" was inspired by the image of "a lone, creaking, spinning disco ball in an empty room." And as an exhibit installation, that one image becomes an actual office and showroom that looks as if the Mus-Co owner has just left the place. A counter with sale items, a desk full of papers and catalogs, a cheap electric coffee pot, a wall full of posters and calendars - all the actual ephemera of a real store is there. "Mus-Co" is "Death of a Salesman" as a life-size bankrupt disco electronics showroom poised for liquidation.

"When you realize he's synthesizing all kinds of pop cultural influences and experiences - from self-help books such as 'How to Win Friends and Influence People' to 'Mister Rogers' to presidential libraries - you begin to realize why it's brilliant," Carozzi says. "It's familiar, it's entertaining, but it's also super-refined and condensed so that it reads as extraordinary. He's interested first and foremost in the everyday, the critical edge of the everyday. There are many subtleties at play in the character that reinforce this without giving in to cynicism, sarcasm or condescension."

Reinforcing that subtly is Smith's collaborator White. Although Smith has created much work on his own, in the past 10 years he's collaborated with White on ever-more complex environments and films. White, 64, first made his name in the 1960s as the originator of the Joshua Light Show at a legendary New York live music venue, the Fillmore East, and at Woodstock. White pioneered the psychedelic light show for musicians such as Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. Later, White staked out a reputation as director and producer, directing episodes of shows such as "Seinfeld" and "The Original Max Talking Headroom Show" along with Laurie Anderson's "O Superman" music video.

"I'm a TV director who specializes in styles," says White, adding that he especially likes to imitate the production values of earlier film and video work.

"I think my particular contribution was to take (Smith's) character and put it into stories and environments that were very realistic to the viewer, more than in his solo work and with his other collaborators. Yet, his character remains essentially the same."

White gave a deadly accurate amateurish veneer to "Interstitial," an imitation of a 1980s early cable access television show that skewers the New York art world - and amateur cable access shows. In "QuinQuag Arts and Wellness Centre Touring Exhibition," White and Smith conceived of a New Age wellness retreat for dot-com executives replete with a scale model of the place, a marketing video and a fictional documentary on the history of the fictional artists' colony. But like "Mus-Co," of course the "QuinQuag" project never gets realized, crashing right along with the dot-com bubble. What we see in "Mike's World" are just the remaining artifacts.

"(Smith's) other work is, in my opinion, brilliant, but quite rarefied within the tropes of avant-garde and performance art," White says. "Our work (together) is more grounded in a reality."

Or maybe it's grounded in the brilliant imitation of a very familiar reality - the all-too-human reality of our contemporary landscape.

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'Mike's World: Michael Smith  
and Joshua White And Other  
Collaborators'

When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturday (Thursday until 8 p.m.), 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays through Dec. 30

Where: Blanton Museum of Art, Congress Ave. and Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

Cost: \$3-\$7 (free on Thursdays)

Information: 471-7342, [www.arthousetexas.org](http://www.arthousetexas.org)

Artists' talk: 6 p.m. Oct. 25. Michael Smith and Joshua White discuss their work. Admission is free.