

A native of Chicago, Michael Smith emerged in New York in the late '70s, performing in both non-profit art spaces like The Kitchen and Artists Space, and in small nightclubs and cabarets. Smith is one of the first artists not to be afraid to confront the forms of television entertainment. His entire production revolves around Mike, his alter ego, the protagonist of performances, videos and installations that replicate the generic interiors of sitcoms.

Mike is the average American: clumsy, enterprising, motivated by the desire to succeed and excited by the taste for business. Smith shapes an aesthetics of failure, perhaps animated by the feeling of inadequacy towards TV that the artist confesses he felt as a child. Indeed, like all good

MICHAEL SMITH

The inadequate spectator

INTERVIEW BY FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO
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comedians, the ability to make the audience laugh is to stage a farce in which the distinction between the fictional character and the real actor is never clear.

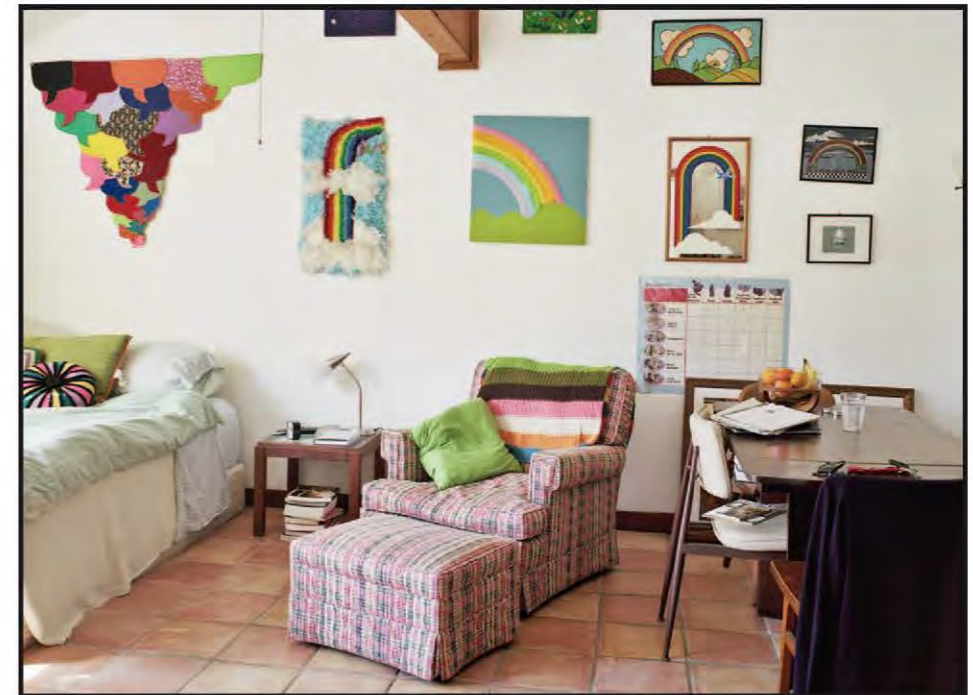
In his career, Smith has collaborated with other artists including Mike Kelley, Joshua White and William Wegman. His work has been presented and exhibited in galleries, theatres, universities, clubs, television and museums such as MoMA, the Metropolitan and the Whitney in New York, Le Consortium, Dijon, and the Kunstverein, Munich. He has taught at Columbia University and Yale and is currently a Professor at the University of Austin, Texas, where he spends most of his time in a small house full of rainbows.



How did you start collecting rainbows and why? I needed a little hope in my life, not to mention a little colour in my home. It started as a kind of a fluke, a kitschy sort of gesture. Then I got into it. Friends started giving me rainbows. Not too long after, I learned that if you bring rainbows into your life, unicorns will follow.

You live between Brooklyn, where you also have a studio, and Austin, where you are a professor at the University of Texas. Which of the two places do you prefer?

Chicago. When I finished my studies in Colorado and earned my undergraduate degree, I knew that I was not ready to go back to NYC and moved back to Chicago to work for my father in his real estate business. That lasted four months and I made a lateral move to delivering pizzas and trying to figure out what to do next in the studio after realising I was no longer a painter. In 1976 I moved to NYC, and eventually to Brooklyn. Oh, and in 1997 I lived in Los Angeles for about six months when I was teaching at various art schools around the city.



To be honest, no matter where I am, it always seems like I am in my underwear in front of the computer. The reason I moved to Austin was because of my job. Much of my time there revolves around teaching and recovering from travelling, since I am on a plane every two weeks. When school is not in session, I go back to NYC, the place where most of my old friends and family live. I've lived there for 35 years, so it feels like my home.

Can you list all the places you've lived in?
I grew up in Chicago and lived there until I was 17. Then I went to college in Colorado and was there until I was 19. For the next five years I was between Colorado, NYC and

What about the homes you've lived in? Any favourite?

I lived in an office building in Chicago after college. Two other friends and I rented the entire second floor for \$100 a month. There were about 10 offices and two bathrooms connected by a 120-foot-long hallway. Lots of windows and each of us paid only \$35 a month. Oh, the good old days.

Do you use to carry objects and furniture with you when you move, or do you find new stuff every time you settle in a new place?

It all depends on how far I'm moving, but for the most part, other than a mattress and some knick-knacks, I eventually get new stuff.



Top to bottom, left to right:

1. *Famous Quotes from Art History*, 2001/2003, video.
2. *Secret Horror*, 1980, video, in collaboration with Mark Fischer.
3. *It Starts at Home*, 1982. Video, in collaboration with Mark Fischer.
- 4 & 5. *Portal Excursion*, 2005-7, video.
- 6 & 7. *Government Approved Home Fallout Shelter/Snackbar*, 1983, installation, in collaboration with Alan Herman. Castelli Graphics, New York, 1983.
8. *It Starts at Home*, 1982, video.



Top to bottom, left to right:

1. *Go for it Mike*, 1984, video, in collaboration with Mark Fischer.
- 2 & 3. *Mike*, 1987, video.
4. *How to Curate Your Own Group Exhibition*, 1996, video.
5. *Mike's House*, 1982, installation with video at the Whitney Museum, New York.
- 6 & 7. *Bill Loman: Master Salesman*, 1983, performance, The Kitchen, New York.
8. *Secret Horror*, 1980, video, in collaboration with Mark Fischer.

Currently, my favourite TV show is Storage Wars, a reality show where a group of people meet in front of storage units whose tenants have stopped paying the rent, and start bidding to win what's inside without even seeing it. Are you familiar with that? Do you agree with me that the storage has become a symbol of American culture?

I like that show a lot too. What fascinates me is how the people immediately calculate the value of their purchases, as if inventorying translates into immediate cash. It is really wishful, deluded thinking. As for becoming a symbol of American culture, I'm not so sure I see that, but I do think it is indicative of a precarious economic situation that the US and much of the world is experiencing these days.

Am I right if I say that the objects that people normally put in storage units play a major role in your artistic production?

Much of my work has been developed from and built out of discarded objects. Many of the props I use were things I collected. I cannot and do not try to assume what these things meant for others and try to figure out what they mean for me. Storage, however, plays a large role in my life; what to do with all the boxes of crap with the details for my immersive installations.

How did performance help you, through stand-up comedy, to question TV in the first place?

TV helped me to question performance art more than performance art helped me to question TV. I do not question TV. I accept that it exists, even though I may not like the majority of the content I see broadcasted or cablecasted. Stand-up comedy provided an interesting and totally different model to work off of, rather than the serious performance art model in vogue around the art world back in the mid-'70s. Also, stand-up allowed me to consider and accept non-sequiturs as a way to connect widely unrelated ideas.

'Mike' is a fake persona you've been using in most of your artworks. Is he your alter ego or, as you said in a conversation with Mike Kelley, a 'vehicle' for you, 'an empty shell'?

Mike is a convenient vehicle that I still use today. It seems like we are getting old together. Much of my work is self-reflexive, like much of the television and art of my generation, and what better way to underline this idea than to use a persona that goes by the same name as yourself?

Please tell me the five adjectives that best describe Mike.

Hopeful, slow, innocent, oblivious and trusting.

You emerged in New York in the late '70s. Other artists started to question mass media and TV in those same years. I am thinking of Richard Prince, Jack Goldstein, Barbara Kruger and especially Dara Birnbaum. How different was your research in comparison with that of the Pictures Generation?

A big difference is that I made original television programs. They borrowed, copied, re-presented and repurposed old TV. I did this too, but primarily by using the formats and structures from old, well-worn and familiar TV genres.

TV was present in your work since the beginning, even when you were performing. In Down in the Rec Room (1979), at Artists Space, you tune in some TV programs within a reconstruction of a generic American domestic setting. How did you select them?

I think it was the embarrassment quotient of those shows that originally drew me to them, but also, their pop look and feel of each.

The documentation of that performance has been mounted as a narrative video. Has video helped you to add something to the performance?

It was the first video of a performance I re-worked and re-purposed and also the video that allowed me to go further and produce *Secret Horror*. Video in general has allowed me to experience the limits of performance.

Secret Horror (1980) is constructed as a sitcom, like many other of your following videos. Mike has a nightmare in which some ghosts force him to take a TV quiz introduced by a voice-over saying 'We moved his entire living room down to the studio'. Is that just a nightmare or is this what happens when we watch TV, that our living room becomes a TV studio?

It is set up as a dream and in relation to the story, it most likely telegraphs the idea that TV is a kind of opiate. But when writing a piece, a dream is a convenient device to move a story forward and to connect unrelated images and ideas.

A major role in *Secret Horror* is played by the grid, which is a planimetric model of how American cities and homes are built, but it is also symbolic of how lives are organised into



preconceived structures. Is my interpretation too conceptual?

No, I thought of this, but it was also a very literal translation of experiencing my local bank renovate and convert a beautiful, old vaulted ceiling bank building into a bland, drop-ceiling office space.

What specific TV interiors mostly influenced the interiors where Mike lives?

'50s and '60s American sitcom sets.

In 1983 you worked around the idea of the shelter, with a video, *Mike Builds a Shelter*, and an installation, *Government Approved Home*

TV have played a role in shaping the American dream. When I made *Go For It, Mike*, President Reagan was about to run his 'Morning in America' campaign ads, political advertisements showing bankrupt Americana images of the western range, the rugged individualist, family religion and the flag, together promoting a message that talked about simpler times in America.

The video *Mike* (1987) begins in black and white with Mike looking at the camera and saying: 'It seemed to be another regular day, but a voice kept telling me: this is going to be the first day of the rest of your life'. Who's voice is that?



Fallout Shelter and Snack Bar. To me, it looks like another experiment on interiors, an exploration of what we need at home to be happy without going outside.

Happy? I think the shelter is more about feeling secure. If security means happiness, I agree with you.

Then you did *Go For it, Mike* (1984), with Mark Fisher, one of your most entertaining videos. It's the story of a 'regular guy' from a small town who becomes first the most popular guy in the school and later a successful entrepreneur, which is also the story of the American dream, from the Far West to the Ford. What role have cinema and TV played in shaping this dream?

It is an understatement to say that cinema and

TV was my voice. I would have preferred to hire a professional voice-over person, but I never got it together. I wanted a voice that gave a feeling of authority and disengagement, kind of an omnipotent voice. I later learned that in voice-over terminology it is called the voice of God.

How much do you think what we see in TV influences the way we build our identity, both in private and in public?

I do not have a clue how much or little it influences our identities. However, as for me, when I was a young child, it succeeded in giving me a feeling of inadequacy. For others I hope it has sent a more positive message.

Mike's clothes reflect the generic taste he has for

furniture and decoration. Can we talk about the interiors in Mike's videos as a living uniform? Generic and bland, mixed with the homey and some splashes of colour, is what I hope to bring to the Mike *mise-en-scène*.

Do you think art should be entertaining?

It depends what you think entertaining means. I think art engages its audience on various levels. If it also means entertaining an audience, then sure: why not entertain? To say that a mandatory goal of art is to entertain... I do not think I agree with that.

In a conversation with Dan Graham for Artforum in 2004, you talk about Eric Bogosian and Laurie Anderson as 'two artists who successfully made the transition' from art to mass media. Have you ever been interested in doing the same?

Yes, I was very interested in trying to cross over at a particular time during my career. I figured if I am doing comedy, why not see how it worked in front of a more general audience. In the mid '80s to the early '90s I co-produced two variety shows, *Mike's Talent Show* and *Mike's Big TV Show*, at very mainstream NY nightclubs. I had a manager, an agent and my own cable special on Cinemax. In 1991-1992, I developed in workshops a children's show called *Mike's Kiddie Show*. It went nowhere. I realised I was not interested in producing TV for children, but was more interested in doing juvenile shows for adults. From 1992 to 1996, I did puppet shows with Doug Skinner called *Doug and Mike's Adult Entertainment*. I thought it was the funniest material I've done over the years and thought for sure we would be able to find a larger audience but potty humour stopped us from moving more into the mainstream. *South Park* and *Beavis and Butthead* came around a little later and successfully explored and developed that niche. By the way, the video Mike was produced for Saturday Night Live.

Among the people you've collaborated with, a special place is occupied by Joshua White, known for his legendary *Joshua Light Show*, an environmental light show that used to accompany live psychedelic concerts in the late '60s and is still touring the world. When did your collaboration begin and how does he contribute to your work?

Our collaboration began in 1992 when he directed the *Doug and Mike* puppet shows. We

first met a few years earlier, when he saw one of my variety shows in a club and offered his services on future projects. Later I got the idea for *Mus-co* (1997), after hearing his stories and experience as a famous light show artist. For many of our collaborations Joshua designed the installations, but he was also very involved with developing the concepts, directing all the videos and capturing a look and feel that was totally convincing, not to mention very successful. Our last project was *Mike's World* in 2007.

A Voyage of Growth and Discovery (2009) is a video/installation/performance project that you and Mike Kelley presented at the Sculpture Center, New York. It features videos of you, dressed as a baby, wandering through the desert at the Burning Man Festival. What did you guys find there?

We were looking for a very colourful and active backdrop for the baby, a character who for the most part does very little. The baby basically wandered through the festival looking for distraction and/or something to put in his mouth.

Did you think about the way you presented that work in sculptural terms?

Mike [Kelley] was responsible for designing the installation. I was more responsible for producing the videotape at the festival. Mike did not go and that was probably a good thing. He was not the best traveller. For the installation, we used video on multiple screens to recreate the atmosphere and intensity of the original festival. We wanted it to be immersive for the viewer.

People use to refer to your work as parody. However, most of it doesn't necessarily look critical. Isn't it more as if you're trying to understand how that mechanism of media entertainment works?

I use parody and also satire. At times I hope to reveal the mechanism of media but it depends on the project. All in all, I hope my work operates on various levels and the viewer is able to engage in one way or another.

I think your work is more relevant than ever today, in the age of digital media and the Internet. Indeed, your research was never just about TV, but about the way we use fictional narratives to create our identity, which is something people are still doing online, now that they have the means to create their own entertainment.

Thank you.

