

SATISFY THE NEED IN ME

An absurd but affecting pathos underlies US artist Michael Smith's Reagan-era video alter ego Mike, rediscovered for a new exhibition

By John Beagles

What would happen if you met a man who was a cipher, who was nothing more than the sum of all the media sloganeering, corporate propaganda and nationalist mythology he'd spent a lifetime ingesting? Travel to the Tramway Gallery in April and you'll meet one. Here, you'll find a video installation showcasing Mike, the alternative persona of American artist Michael Smith.

Smith created Mike in the late 70s as "this bland, nerdy character who has a lot of received ideas, mainly from TV and advertising". Mike's essence is (to use a very Mike word) neatly distilled in the lyrics to the Devo-like 1984 pop video 'Go For It, Mike': "Some people are born to win. Some people are born to lose. Then there are people like me and you..." Mike's an all-American everyman, someone who has stayed resolutely in the middle of life, pottering around in his blue shirt, baseball cap and chinos, which are held up with a buckle emblazoned with 'Mike'. This is not to say his life has been empty of desire. Propelled by the galvanising mantras of his age (Smith's creation became prominent during Reaganism), Mike's an itinerant 'dream-catcher', someone who has always striven to be a 'winner'. Unfortunately, as the mini-retrospective at the Tramway – curated by Mark Beasley under the new Glasgow International Festival directorship of Sarah McCrory – will show, whether as a businessman, disco dancer, student, artist or cable show host, Mike's reach has always been frustratingly beyond his grasp.

In Mike's world, then, the mythic narratives of the American dream are played out. In videos such as 'Portal Excursion' (2007) and 'Down in the Rec Room' (1979), it's clear that Mike's a good consumer and a productive citizen, someone who looks upon his self as a dormant piece of real estate that needs to be developed. Yet despite following the script of how to live the good life, Mike's still left with a gnawing sense of emptiness. Throughout Smith's fictional documentation of Mike's world there's a pervasive sense of the melancholic pathos of his middle-class life, created by the shortfalls of the American dream. Many of these frustrations are both existential and specifically related to the conformist, conservative culture Mike exists in. In 'Down in the Rec Room', Mike dances along to a glittery Osmonds disco number on his TV, alone in his sparse apartment because he has thrown a party but nobody has come; the gap between aspiration and reality here is painful in its intensity. The American dream is incapable of satisfying the need in Mike.

The pathos of Mike's life is primarily communicated through Smith's performance. His facial and bodily movements are perfect in their subtle externalisation of Mike's quiet interior despair. As Mike's face flips between a befuddled expression – like a Labrador having Nietzsche explained to him – and a half-hearted



All-American everyman: Mike in 1983's 'Government Approved Fallout Shelter and Snack Bar'

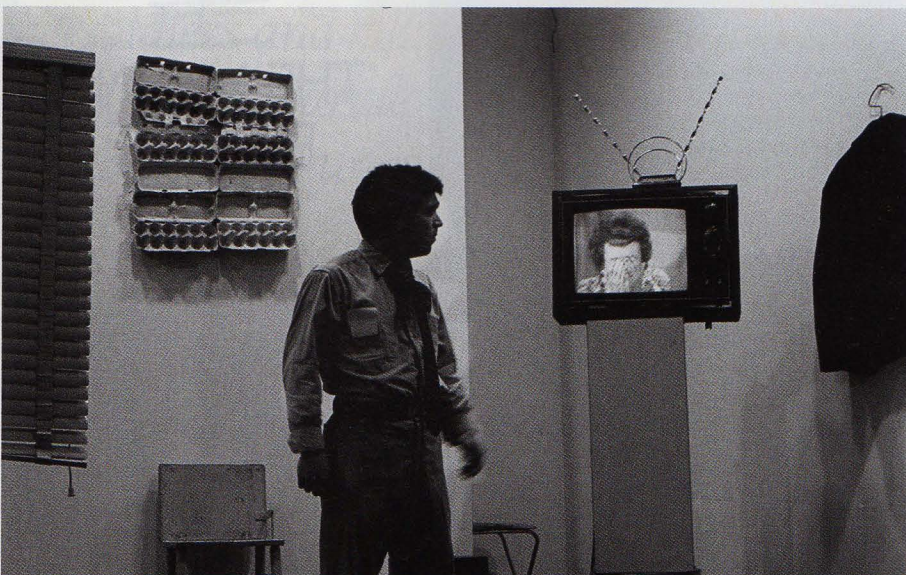
smile, it's difficult not to regard him as a living ventriloquist's dummy, especially as one eyebrow appears permanently higher than the other. The fact that Michael the artist performs Mike the character without any laboured irony or contempt makes the performance all the more memorable. For those not lost in narcissistic fantasies of their own triumph, there is a plaintive, recognisable pleasure to be had in watching and sharing in Mike's failed attempts to be a better person. The tragic comedy of 'Portal Excursion', in which Mike hilariously recounts his attempts to learn two new words every day, is strangely affecting, for example.

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Mike is a device for exposing the fallacy of populist fantasy projections about 'the people' and a critique of the culture that attempts to 'engineer' a society of Mikes. But he is also a spur to agency. If you caught yourself being Mike-like, would you feel comfortable? Smith's videos are political without resorting to simple condemnations or a position of superiority.

Clearly, there is a Mike in all of us. Mike's 'neato' encapsulation of the bland horror of living a wholesome, consensual life and pursuing readymade dreams is timely. Seeing this work in the 80s or 90s might have been exotic in Britain. Now its proximity is all too real and toxic. The highly prescient nature of the work means that this exhibition is, as Mike would say, 'really on the money'. ☺

i Michael Smith's exhibition 'Videos and Miscellaneous Stuff from Storage (pt.2)' is at Tramway 1 from 4 to 21 April as part of Glasgow International



Home alone: 'Down in the Rec Room' (1979)