

MICHAEL SMITH

Curt Riegleng, Review: Michael Smith, Fountain,  
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## Michael Smith: Fountain

Hales Gallery London 11 January to 23 February

In the US, after the classic rhapsodising on Columbus and Cortez, the first few chapters of junior high school American history textbooks afford mention to the cohort of lesser explorers of the New World. Juan Ponce de León is one such figure who, though he discovered the gulf side of Florida and, by happenstance, the Gulf Stream, is perhaps more memorable for what, by some accounts, he was searching for after he landed: the Fountain of Youth. Given that Florida has been more recently nominated as the place where, as Conan O'Brien once put it, 'America goes to die', Ponce de León's quest had a strange prescience. In 'Fountain' at Hales Gallery, Michael Smith takes advantage of the loaded dichotomy, in conjunction with the lineage of his own video-and-performance alter ego 'Mike', to happily excoriate the notion of ageing gracefully.

Smith's exhibition sees his old friend Mike, a far more malleable and less self-aware version of the artist, feeling his own mortality more acutely. The photographs of *Fountain of Youth State Park, Journey No. 1*, 2012, are crisp but unstylised documents of Mike's twilight quest, where they could easily have been fudged and angled bluntly enough to mimic the air of tourist shots taken by Mike or a similarly amateur companion. Unostentatiously scaled and subject-driven, about half of them foreground the character, as he poses schlubbishly and absorbs the scenery, sometimes grasping a prop sailing sheet or conquistador's spear, as if he might draw just a little extra life from the place through the hemp and varnish.

The opposite wall of the gallery's small interior plays the same video on two monitors with a single still photograph in between. The video is an absurdly but not unpleasantly long steady shot of Mike (or is it now Smith himself? – the rift between the two narrows at points) riffling around in his jogging suit's multitude of pockets, removing and replacing the usual late-middle-age paraphernalia of glasses, mobile phone, overstuffed wallet. The amplified sounds of all this overburdened fidgeting pipes wryly through the small gallery space, making a public burlesque out of private fumbling.

When Smith is a bit sad or deluded, he is naturally also at his funniest. In the artist's earlier works, it helps that he exudes the plausible innocence and bears the slightly off-average physique of the natural slapstick comedian. His face would have been the envy of Harpo Marx, with its lithe, robust eyebrows rapidly changing altitude above a wide, prodigiously expressive mouth. And in his shuffling uncertainty and glacial pace, he presages contemporary comedians like Zach Galifianakis and the duo of Tim & Eric. Comically empowered by these, and by his quizzical detachment from direction, Mike makes epic the everyman's persistent bewilderment even as he mocks his archetype's inclination towards premature self-congratulation.

In the video work of the early 1980s, the faux-naïveté and bad taste of both Mike and the productions he starred in tempered the preceding television dabbling of Chris Burden or David Hall with a popular outreach whose genuineness was cloaked in satire. Even the works of that period share a cadence with a diversity of current creative output,



Michael Smith  
*Avuncular Quest* 2012

from the shrill, spliced narratives of Ryan Trecartin to the nightmarish domesticity of Todd Soloncz. Smith's peculiarity these days is rather in the fact that his representation of that same horrifying tedium walks the planet with his face and voice, an indistinguishable alter ego and a sort of reversal of the internet-trolling 'avatar' guise favoured by some younger artists.

As in those past video works and performances, the Mike of the *Fountain* is driven and aimless, entering with purpose then spectrally floating on as any tangible opportunities glide swiftly out of his reach. In the autumn of his life, Mike's myopia and self-regard have given way to an appreciation of time's implacability, but he is still incapable of handling such weighty concepts. The orange water bottle that dangles around his neck in the *Fountain* photographs is a stark totem of the equating of accumulation with salvation – the confusion of stuff with fulfilment to which our man is ever prone. But as absurd as Mike's predicament may appear, it, like all of his past concerns, is easily enough ours to inherit. Like the best in comedy, Smith leads us down the garden path of ridiculing the other, only to reveal to us as the joke tightens that we have been laughing at a distorted image of ourselves. He is Rabbit at Rest or Willy Loman. Stingingly, he is you and me, before too long. ■

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