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ART
MAGAZINE
83

SPRING
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83



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DE/AT EUR 20
CHF 28
GBP 18

Michael Smith, *Government Approved Home Fallout Shelter Snack Bar*, 1983



*Government Approved Home Fallout Shelter
Snack Bar*, 1983. Installation view, "Collection
1970s–Present," MoMA, New York, 2023—

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In maybe the Cold War's most dangerous year, the artist's alias, Everyman Mike, converted a hobby room into a refuge from armageddon, fit out with a radiation shield and a game arcade. If the character's faith in government seems a little cringe to today's preppers, it's also an occasion to ask: **Is survival really worth all those moldy crackers?**

By Travis Diehl



Mike Builds a Shelter, 1983, custom arcade cabinet; game design by Dov Jacobson

Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York



Michael Smith a.k.a. "Mike" in his *Government Approved Home Fallout Shelter Snack Bar*, 1983. Installation view, "The End of the World: Contemporary Visions of the Apocalypse," the New Museum, New York, 1983

Most contemporary preppers haven't had to move beyond the hoarding phase, piling up resources while the Earth stubbornly refuses to undergo a solar superstorm strong enough to kill the internet. Spare a thought for the contingency of actually living off lentils and oat milk for the rest of your surviving life. Hunt online for prepper recipes, you'll find several schools of more or less delusional thought: ads for nutrient-dense gels, creative ways to stretch meat, how to preserve the contents of your freezer once your generator sputters out. The most practical strategy is to get back to basics: learn to cook and eat like our 18th-century ancestors, with fire and salt, and you'll be ok when shit hits the fan – or, as the preppers say, WSHTF.

Michael Smith (*1951) might have had a hard time stomaching the end times. His 1983 installation, *Government Approved Home Fallout Shelter Snack Bar*, on view in one of MoMA's collection galleries, is pretty convincing as a subterranean shelter (once you're past the wall labels). The room feels frozen in time, with its dun linoleum and wood paneling, appointed with binders and trinkets in the wan hues of history. It is a kind of primitive man cave, with leatherette chairs around the color TV set, a steel desk strewn with pamphlets on nuclear war, and a bar made from cinder

blocks. Hinged above the latter is a kind of soffit that, in case of disaster, can be angled over the bar and filled with bricks to make a radiation shield.

Oh, but the menu. The shelter snack bar is stocked with generic-label cans and cartons, the produce of the preserved food revolution – the kind of lab-grown eating developed during World War Two alongside the atomic bomb. There are a few sealed buckets of drinking water, some tins of beans and broccoli, but mostly, there are crackers and syrup by the boxful. With provisions like these, creativity can only do so much. With the likely lack of power for the electric can opener thoughtfully stashed behind the bar, one pictures our intrepid prepper chef bashing the cans open in the unventilated darkness of the shelter, without fresh water for coffee and the J&B whisky long gone. The survivalists would envy the non-survived.

The readiness described by this artwork echoes a deeper truth, though – that the post-apocalypse feast is a fantasy that was never meant to come true. Millions of survival crackers mold in the sublevels of America, baked for an afterworld deferred. Instead, the bug-out basement provided (provides) a home-improvement project to soothe the anxious homeowner during peacetime. Once such a lounge



Government Approved Home Fallout Shelter Snack Bar, 1983. Installation view, "The End of the World: Contemporary Visions of the Apocalypse," New Museum, New York, 1983

was complete, it could be used for entertaining the neighbors, relaxing sessions listening to LPs of Kennedy's speeches, or weekly board game nights with the guys. As an airless parody of the good life of the 60s and 70s, it works. As self-preservation, it's comically inadequate. Like the ruthlessly accurate nuclear disaster depicted for Smith's generation in the film *Threads* (1984), escaping the blast likely means succumbing to radiation soon afterwards, writhing in your basement's rubble.

The only substance we see consumed in the installation is coffee by the pot. A video playing on the TV shows Smith (as his middlebrow, bushy-eyebrowed alter-ego "Mike") describing his morning caffeine routine in his aw-shucks Midwestern accent. He drains the brown brew from a countertop coffeemaker, narrating each cup ("then I drink a second of coffee"), burlesquing the inane Americana of his setting. Mike is the quintessential cog. His trust in government is almost charming. One wall is a framed, typewritten letter to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) requesting information on surviving Armageddon. In fact, the design for this very snack bar fallout shelter – one of several similar schematics published by FEMA in the 50s

The combination of fallout shelter and snack bar embodies a previous era of mass doomthink: the 80s.

– hangs on the wall in Smith's piece. You could imagine the work as a sort of research-based practice, but Smith doesn't just mine the archive for an ironic tidbit to skewer and display – he carries out the recipe. Apparently, Mike approaches the task of doomsday prepping with the same droning pragmatism he brings to his thankless white-collar existence. He probably drank a lot of coffee while building it.

The combination of fallout shelter and snack bar embodies a previous era of mass doomthink: the 80s. The parody itself feels dated, not just in the spirit of the delusional duck-and-cover public service announcements of the 50s that advised school children to huddle under their desks, but also in terms of the contemporaneous punk screeds against that party line (the music of the Minutemen comes to mind: "I try

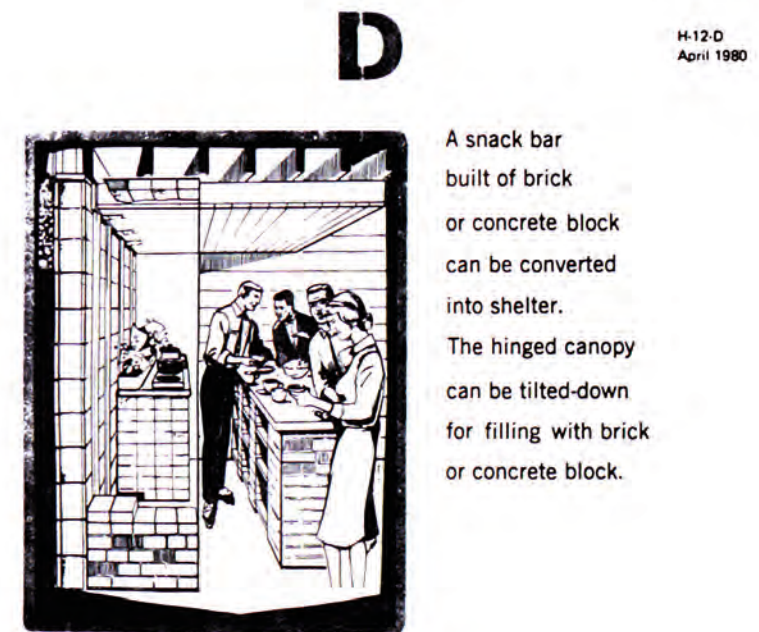
to work and I keep thinkin' of World War III. / I try to talk to girls and I keep thinkin' of World War III ...") as the Reagan administration seemed to revel both in nuclear gamesmanship and black-and-white nostalgia porn. Rejecting government-issue docility is a staple of today's discourse, but asking the government for existential reassurance wasn't exactly cool back then, either. The installation has the flavor of the home economics classes in baking and budgeting that Nancy Reagan probably took, but that have since been cut from the curriculum. Rationing butter and eggs doesn't fit with the image of American prosperity any more than needing to use your home fallout shelter.

But Smith's instinctual twist here is naivety, as well as comedy based on misplaced trust, and on dutifully blinding yourself with the bright side. In one of a series of pencil drawings that read like a comic strip, Smith's character remarks that, heck, he'd been thinking of remodeling his basement anyhow – a fallout shelter is just the excuse he needs. The Damocles' sword of World War Three shouldn't keep you from the pastoral good life promised by the post-World War Two suburbs. In fact, they're compatible, especially if you phrase the defense of life and limb as a DIY home renovation.

And now, MoMA has pulled this arcana from storage. The installation was acquired in 2021, put on view in 2023, and is on hand for the apparent revival of 80s-style good greed and apocalyptic threat. Its note of satire, though, feels quaint – cracking Rust Belt jokes about the food in hell, while the US government under Trump II cannibalizes itself. Not even FEMA is safe. As much as we're living through an irradiated, mutant 80s, none of the dread Smith musters in this artwork can prepare us for the present. —

Courtesy: the artist and the New Museum, New York. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson

© 2025 Michael Smith. Courtesy: the artist



HOME FALLOUT SHELTER snack bar- basement location plan d



FEDERAL EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Fallout Shelter, 1983, pen on paper
collab. Howard Mandel

MICHAEL SMITH (*1951 in Chicago)
is a performance and video artist who lives
in Brooklyn, New York, and Austin.

TRAVIS DIEHL is a writer, editor, and critic based in
New York. His column "Libra Season" runs the last
Wednesday of every month on spikeartmagazine.com.