

MICHAEL SMITH

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Michael Smith



Galleria Emi Fontana, Milan, Italy

In April 2001, a few weeks before Italy's general election, 12 million families found in their mailboxes a 128-page booklet titled *Una storia italiana* (An Italian Story). It was Silvio Berlusconi's hagiography compiled by Sandro Bondi, Italy's current Minister for Culture. In it, the political leader opened the doors of his private world to the masses: from the black and white images of his schooldays, to tales of his first job as a crooner on cruise ships, to his prodigious rise as a media tycoon, every chapter was carefully constructed in the amateurish style of the early Photoshop era, mimicking cheap gossip magazines. One could see Berlusconi posing as a regular guy, hugging his mother, jogging, picking flowers or shaking hands with Bill Clinton. In one telling shot, Berlusconi stood smiling cheerfully between his son, Piersilvio, and Sylvester Stallone, both sporting boxing gloves raised to the sky. Half of the country sneered at the cheesy pictures and the dumb infomercial. The other half didn't, and Berlusconi became Prime Minister – a position he was re-elected to again last year. The lesson was clear: the oversimplified visual codes, maddening jingles and plasticized televisual aesthetics of Berlusconi's campaign were finely tuned to popular tastes.

Michael Smith
Baby Ikki
2009
Documentation of
performance

Seeing Michael Smith's recent exhibition, one couldn't help but think of its resonances with this history. For Smith's 2003 debut at Galleria Emi Fontana – a collaboration with Seth Price titled 'Playground' – the gallery was filled with an installation of wooden toys and video projections. The star was Baby Ikki, Smith's alter ego: a giant infant in a loose-fitting nappy and sunglasses, and the show amounted to a quasi-retrospective covering the time-span of Berlusconi's rise to power. In 1978, Berlusconi launched his first television station, Telelilano, filling up the gaps between ads with trashy American television series and sitcoms from the 1950s, '60s and '70s. In 1979, Smith's alter ego, Mike, made his debut in the video *Down in the Rec Room*, which deals with the very same world of cheesy variety shows.

All the works exhibited – a large selection of video and audio pieces, vintage photographs, ephemera, photo comics, books, drawings and watercolours from the late 1970s to the present – are based on the fictional misadventures of Mike, or 'Blandman', who lives according to the codes laid out in the videos, and whose social life consists entirely of stubborn attempts at fitting in. It's both hilarious and unnerving to watch him play the cowboy riding his horse in the Reaganomics musical *Go for it, Mike!* (1984) bearing in mind that, ten years later, Berlusconi

the 'Cavaliere' (Cavalier), used similar Broadway songs and lyrics for his party's anthem 'Forza Italia' (Forward Italy!). Now that we are entering a new era of economic gloom, it's even clearer that *The MUSCO Story* (1997) – a video made by Smith in collaboration with Joshua White, renowned for his legendary 'Light Show' at the Fillmore East club in San Francisco – was, as Mike Kelley noted in the catalogue for Smith's 2008 show 'Mike's World', a 'comment on the rising effect of market mentality on art production at the time'. Smith further stresses the point by displaying in a glass case Mike's collection of over 200 credit cards and dozens of regimental, custom-made ties. 'We've gotta get out of this place, if it's the last thing we ever do,' was the line from a 1965 song by The Animals blaring from a monitor.

On the opening night, Smith welcomed everybody with a guided tour, then performed *Minimal Message Movement* (2009; it can now be viewed on YouTube), before returning once again to Baby Ikki's routine of squeezing junk-food and bananas in his hands, trying to pass them on to the audience. But Mike isn't necessarily a more sophisticated character; he's a loser. He dresses up for parties he'll never attend, unless he's the only guest and they are in his own house, a place where he finds himself locked up in a claustrophobic, pre-Truman reality show of the cable access TV era – as in the 1980 video *Secret Horror* with Mark Fischer. He gets his diploma in the video *Outstanding Young Men of America* (1996) for his 'professional achievement and community service' but learns that 'only those born between 1956 and 1965 are eligible for acceptance' – Smith was born in 1951. He embarks on the unlikely entrepreneurial task of transforming an art community in the Catskill Mountains into a Wellness Centre (*The Quinquag*, 2002), as the founders of Monte Verità in Ascona, Harald Szeemann's lifelong obsession, in fact did. Smith plays dumb as a consummate comedian with perfect timing, and practises subversive obtuseness much better than the legions of Beavis and Butt-heads he pre-dates. And there's more than a strain of Samuel Beckett's cruelty in his absurdist parables, where all aspects of daily life seem dictated by media slogans. Pier Paolo Pasolini once wrote: 'Sincerely, there is nothing I consider more ferocious than banal television.' Both Smith and Berlusconi prove him right, albeit in very different ways.

Barbara Casavecchia