

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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ART REVIEW | MICHAEL SMITH AND MIKE KELLEY

# Those Are Grown-Up Laughs for a Big Baby



Jason Mandella/SculptureCenter

"A Voyage of Growth and Discovery," an installation by Michael Smith and Mike Kelley, at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens.

By [KEN JOHNSON](#)

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Michael Smith is a big baby. Well, not all the time. But when he gets into his droopy diapers and lacy bonnet, adds sunglasses and a pacifier, and totters around on his stumpy legs as Baby Ikki, he's as riveting to watch as any real toddler, albeit larger, hairier and a bit scary. Mr. Smith, the multitalented performer, video maker and multimedia artist, has been doing this character for about 30 years, and it never gets old.

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For his latest escapade Baby Ikki went to [Burning Man](#), the weeklong celebration of all things psychedelic that takes place every summer in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. A film crew followed him as he wandered around the festival in white Crocs, and the resulting footage is the heartbeat of "A Voyage of Growth and Discovery," a wonderfully entertaining and slyly thought-provoking collaboration between Mr. Smith and Mike Kelley, the Los Angeles artist known for, among other things, sculptures made of old, grubby stuffed animals and children's blankets.

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Occupying the SculptureCenter's main space, the installation features a half-dozen large flat screens showing various phases of Baby Ikki's day and night peregrinations, which cumulatively add up to an odyssey. In the gallery is a set of tubular metal structures resembling children's playground climbing equipment, which includes one shaped like a rocket and a geodesic dome skeleton whose floor is covered with stuffed animals. This emphasizes a view of Burning Man as an essentially juvenile gathering. The boyish optimism of Modernist futurism — as in the inventions of Buckminster Fuller — is evoked by these jungle gymlike sculptures.

Looming over all is a colossal sculpture of Baby Ikki made of welded-together junk metal, which parodies the towering wooden sculpture with the emblematic figure that is climactically set on fire every year at Burning Man.

The videos start with Baby Ikki playing in the motor home that brought him to the event. Evidently preoccupied by fire, he clicks on a cigarette lighter, turns on the gas-fired stove top and consumes candy fireballs while horror-movie scenes of a woman threatened by flames plays on a television.

Outside he ambulates among campers dressed in all kinds of fanciful costumes, gesturing with clumsily splayed fingers at people and objects of interest. Occasionally he belts vehicles — done up like animals for a parade — with the stuffed green creature he carries around in one arm. All the while he maintains an expression of melancholic, slightly quizzical impassivity.

When night comes, he visits some of the elaborate, walk-in environments created by various campers and observes people dancing, twirling flaming batons and otherwise expressing themselves. At one point three minimally dressed women pull him onstage and writhe around him like lap dancers. Finally, all tuckered out, he finds a cushion-covered floor and falls asleep.

Baby Ikki seems to fit right in amid all the zanily attired burners, but he's not one of them. He's a kind of mole, a secret agent with his own agenda. Clearly Mr. Smith and Mr. Kelley designed their project not to celebrate but to mock the Burning Man circus. To substitute a giant baby for its wooden avatar is to suggest that the festival is driven by infantilism.

Contrary to the old hippie fantasy that expanding consciousness through unbridled fun, creativity and hedonism — and of course psychotropic drugs — will transform the world for the better, they imply that Burning Man is naïve and disingenuously complicit with capitalist consumerism. It becomes a symbol of

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what Herbert Marcuse called “repressive desublimation,” which reroutes unruly and rebellious instinctual energies into politically harmless sybaritic indulgence, escapist entertainment and spiritual delusion.

There have been times when anarchic revelry seemed like a good way to resist and overturn socially limiting mores. The antics of the Dadaists in the 1920s and the high jinks of the Merry Pranksters in the '60s were, perhaps, genuinely liberating. But now that Dionysian catharsis has become the promise of beer commercials and spring-break debauchery, behaving “wildly” is no longer so threatening to the status quo.

This does not make the Smith-Kelley project antipsychedelic. A politics of paranoia that finds everywhere the surreptitious, systematic curbing of individual freedoms and democratic initiative has always been part of the counterculture psyche. Yet this sort of suspicious mind-set can be diverted into less troublesome endeavors like “institutional critique,” the academically certified type of conceptualism that views art museums as agents of consciousness control and puts its faith in the analytic powers of the properly trained intellect.

The Smith-Kelley project is an unusually imaginative and funny instance of “institutional critique,” assuming it is fair to call Burning Man an institution. Admittedly, satirizing the festival and its associated New Age culture is like shooting fish in a barrel. (Borat could have a field day there.) But there are moments in the videos of considerable metaphorical and emotional urgency, as when we see Baby Ikki alone in the distance, almost lost in a dust storm, or when he falls asleep and dreams of women’s breasts.

In the Fellini-like scene with the three dancers, he’s like Odysseus enduring the call of the sirens. It’s less the tendentious didacticism than the comic, mythological vision that makes it compelling.

But the tension between ideological critique and carnivalesque rebellion — a schism that has been running through American radicalism for over a century — is something to think about too. A choice between purity of spirit and exuberance of soul.

*“A Voyage of Growth and Discovery” is on view through Nov. 30 at the SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 361-1750, [sculpture-center.org](http://sculpture-center.org).*