

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

MICHAEL SMITH AND MIKE KELLEY SCULPTURECENTER

Babies can be adorable, but Michael Smith's Baby IKKI . . . well, his name says it all. Played by the artist in diapers and a scalloped bonnet, the character is an 18-month-old toddler that Smith invented in the feminist early '70s. At the time, he hoped that "pre-genital" might become "somehow genderless," as he tells Mike Kelley, his old friend, in a 2007 interview. Their conversation appeared in the catalogue for that year's Michael Smith retrospective, "Mike's World" (mainly his collaborations with Joshua White, at the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia). In the interview, Smith and Kelley contemplate a future collaboration of their own starring the Baby. "Personally," muses Kelley, "I think it would be very interesting to see the difference between your usage of a baby character, one that is linked to art practice, in contrast with these infantilist groups, where the focus is more on pleasure I suppose. It would be an interesting collision of worlds." Worlds colliding? Baby IKKI, meet BURNING MAN.

In "A Voyage of Growth and Discovery," Smith and Kelley's exhibition on view at SculptureCenter, a multi-channel, 2½-hour-long video playing on six large screens follows Baby IKKI's five-day sojourn at the 2008 Burning Man Festival in Black Rock Desert, Nevada (due to legalities, in the press release the yearly event is simply called "a festival"). The story begins with the Baby's trip to Burning Man in a huge, anonymously piloted RV and ends with a psychedelic postscript in which he meanders through a desert tinted acid green. In between are playtimes (banging doors, sifting multihued sand in an inflated wading pool), naps (in which the Baby dreams of naked breasts streaming with milk), sloppy self-feedings (mainly of bananas and a disturbing array of junk food, including Fireball jawbreakers) and visits to myriad art installations. Baby IKKI's favorite no-no is playing with matches and other fire delivery systems—a key, perhaps, to what motivated him to undertake the trip in the first place. Most lengthily, the Baby attends nighttime raves and parties to a pounding soundtrack



Video still from "A Voyage of Growth and Discovery."

(another Smith & Kelley production) while encountering every degree of stoner and some half-naked, tattooed pole-dancers who (ew?) rub on him.

The video was edited down from many hours of raw footage in which, incredibly (given what must have been physically demanding circumstances), Smith remained in character—a short, hairy, diapered middle-aged man sucking his binky and lurching along (in a convincing toddler's gait) on dingy white Crocs, vision shielded from sun and glowsticks alike by white plastic sunglasses. In blotting out Smith's eyes, which might betray something of his adult consciousness, the sunglasses give the character a particularly cartoonish air, so that when we see on a TV in the RV a famous episode of "Popeye," in which Sweet'Pea is menaced by numerous dangers, we feel they could be cousins (and that, perhaps, Baby IKKI, with no adult supervision, is himself under some threat).

At the darkened SculptureCenter, the screens are set amid a roomful of variously configured jungle gyms embellished with sooty, Mike Kelley-brand stuffed animals and sad-looking flag garlands, in a stripped-down, Goth version of Black Rock City. In the courtyard a crummy van shelters an armchair made of even filthier stuffed animals; the van could almost be the burnt-out remnant of one of the "Mutant Vehicles" (the Burning Man Festival's term for them) stuffed with costumed revelers, which in the video surreally appear and disappear in the blowing sand à la Mad Max. Presiding over this universe of debased metaphor is a 30-foot-high junk-assemblage robot depicting Baby IKKI, echoing the anonymous effigy that is set ablaze at the culmination of the festival. When, at that fiery climax, we see the ecstatic Baby in the rapt crowd, we understand that, although the

celebrants have accepted him as one of their own, he remains apart: through sheer perversity, and a heavy dose of irony, Baby IKKI has outplayed them at their own game.

—Faye Hirsch



View of Mike Kelley and Michael Smith's exhibition, 2009: at SculptureCenter.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"A Voyage of Growth and Discovery," through Nov. 30.

