



PRINT Summer 1982

## Michael Smith

We are now used to the idea that everyone wants to be a star. It is the dream of fame, and the wealth that is supposed to accompany it, that sees us through disappointments and dreary jobs. Everyone wants to be a winner, and daytime television, with its game shows and talk shows, has long provided a framework to contain that wish for a great many people. It is a cruel fantasy, but a potent one, and one that will inevitably become ever more available with the new surge of activity surrounding cable television.

Such a world of momentary celebrity is the one reluctantly inhabited by Mike, the sad-sack character Michael Smith has been developing over the past several years. Mike is too perplexed by life to get out of the house much—in fact, he rarely manages to get more than his underwear on in the morning. In past tapes and performances we have seen him dreaming of having friends, of throwing a party, of meeting a girl. Now, in *It Starts at Home*, he suddenly finds it all, or nearly all, happening. He has cable TV installed, and as a result of some mystifying technology finds himself on the tube, live in living rooms and bars throughout the city. He becomes a star, and never leaves his own home. Before he knows what is going on his deadbeat friends and neighbors are dropping in to stare, and his home is taken over by Bob, just flown in from the Coast, a deal-making piece of fur (literally) perpetually on the phone.

Smith's presentation places the viewer in a strange space and time warp, an oddly imperfect mirror effect which works as a destabilizing device in tandem with Smith's deadpan clowning. The tape is shown in a set, on the same monitor that plays the part of Mike's treacherous cable TV on screen. But the set is not quite the same comfortable room that Mike is seen to inhabit in the tape, with its melancholy, worn-out furniture and secondhand mementos. It has become the home of The Star, with its bric-a-brac carefully arranged, and a disembodied voice welcoming you and guiding you to your place. And in a far corner—further evidence of Mike's new-found celebrity—is a study area lined with showbiz caricatures.

The tape itself contains similar mismatched mirror play, discomfiting sight gags too corny to be funny and too funny to be anything less than deeply unsettling: Mike's first discovery that he is

on TV, watching himself watching himself on the screen, repeating movements endlessly in the empty electronic space; Mike sitting, dazed, in front of the TV, beside the mailman, another slob, only bigger; Mike dancing, in top hat and tails, with a beanpole partner, each reflecting the other as in some grotesque distorting mirror; even the space of Mike's house, with its suburban garden out back and tenth-floor cityscape out front. What is real in Mike's world is its unreality, the confused doubling that makes everything appear false and hopeless, a world of ersatz duplicity in which the only certainty is Mike's star quality.



Judy Rifka, *The Drummer*, 1982, oil on linen, 102 x 72"



Michael Smith, *It Starts at Home*, 1981, views of set in video piece



these are paintings that are also constructions, built of panels layered out, or projecting from supporting walls. And all have multiple forms, with fields of pink, aqua, and bright orange-red intercut by raw canvas shapes. Confettilike dots punctuate the surfaces, further animated by Rifka's characteristic quirky lines. But most important are her characters—a veritable New York cast. Most step out of the rock clubs; there are dancers, drummers, posers. And many are femmes fatales—racy ladies with high-heeled shoes, who strut their stuff and perform. These figures run and jump, cavorting across the canvas, or swoop in from the wings—from off-stage, “real” terrain. And while some are punk priestesses, still others are graffiti *guerrillères* armed with spray cans. Whoever's on the scene, supposedly, is there.

Through their collisions of figure and form, these paintings seem to extend an aim which Rifka has projected for years in video, installation, and performance. And that is to convey the sense of a world that is not only active—endlessly in motion—but is intercut by diverse and conflicting sensations. Forms here are continually bombarded; they are rained with dots and blasted by shapes. Some figures emerge from the panels while others recede within, so that all is endlessly oscillating. Rifka accentuates this through her crafty contours, suggesting movement through paint and line placed at interstitial odds. The result is constant dynamism—metaphoric flashing lights which illuminate a pointedly unstable stage. And while this may not be, as Rene Ricard writes in the catalogue, the “Greatest Show on

Earth” (to make me believe it, you've got to tell me why . . .), it is a reasonable evocation of the dynamism of daily life. To use abstract, formal devices for such figurative ends is a considerable accomplishment.

—KATE LINKER

**MICHAEL SMITH, “It Starts at Home,” a video installation at the Whitney Museum; BERND KOBERLING, *Annina Nosei*:**

**MICHAEL SMITH**

We are now used to the idea that everyone wants to be a star. It is the dream of fame, and the wealth that is supposed to accompany it, that sees us through disappointments and dreary jobs. Everyone wants to be a winner, and daytime television, with its game shows and talk shows, has long provided a framework to contain that wish for a great many people. It is a cruel fantasy, but a potent one, and one that will inevitably become ever more available with the new surge of activity surrounding cable television.

Such a world of momentary celebrity is the one reluctantly inhabited by Mike, the sad-sack character Michael Smith has been developing over the past several years. Mike is too perplexed by life to get out of the house much—in fact, he rarely manages to get more than his underwear on in the morning. In past tapes and performances we have seen him dreaming of having friends, of throwing a party, of meeting a girl. Now, in *It Starts at Home*, he suddenly finds it all, or nearly all, happening. He has cable TV installed, and as a result of some mystifying technology finds him-

self on the tube, live in living rooms and bars throughout the city. He becomes a star, and never leaves his own home. Before he knows what is going on his deadbeat friends and neighbors are dropping in to stare, and his home is taken over by Bob, just flown in from the Coast, a deal-making piece of fur (literally) perpetually on the phone.

Smith's presentation places the viewer in a strange space and time warp, an oddly imperfect mirror effect which works as a destabilizing device in tandem with Smith's deadpan clowning. The tape is shown in a set, on the same monitor that plays the part of Mike's treacherous cable TV on screen. But the set is not quite the same comfortable room that Mike is seen to inhabit in the tape, with its melancholy, worn-out furniture and secondhand mementos. It has become the home of The Star, with its bric-a-brac carefully arranged, and a disembodied voice welcoming you and guiding you to your place. And in a far corner—further evidence of Mike's new-found celebrity—is a study area lined with showbiz caricatures.

The tape itself contains similar mismatched mirror play, discomfiting sight gags too corny to be funny and too funny to be anything less than deeply unsettling: Mike's first discovery that he is on TV, watching himself watching himself on the screen, repeating movements endlessly in the empty electronic space; Mike sitting, dazed, in front of the TV, beside the mailman, another slob, only bigger; Mike dancing, in top hat and tails, with a beanpole partner, each reflecting the other as in some grotesque distorting mirror; even the space of Mike's house, with its subur-

ban garden out back and tenth-floor cityscape out front. What is real in Mike's world is its unreality, the confused doubling that makes everything appear false and hopeless, a world of ersatz duplicity in which the only certainty is Mike's star quality.

**BERND KOBERLING**

The first wave of “violent painters” from Berlin—Rainer Fetting, Helmut Middendorf, Salomé, and Bernd Zimmer—were of some interest, because they were so sophisticated in their use of style. They seemed to make references to a national culture (German Expressionism in particular), but did so in order to link that culture and its trappings in a provocative way to that of America of the '60s by keying their allusions to color field and stain painting, Pop, performance, and rock 'n' roll. The work came from Berlin, but attested to the Americanization of Europe in as sly a manner as possible by making fake American paintings in Europe (this in odd contrast to the work of some painters in New York, who want to make fake European paintings here).

Unfortunately the success of the younger Germans has encouraged their elders (who are often also their teachers) to present their wares over here as well. As a result we have been recently overwhelmed with second hand, second-rate expressionism of the worst sort—a sincere expressionism, which is unable to recognize its own entrapment within the conventions of a style.

Bernd Koberling is only the latest of these, an art teacher from Berlin and Düsseldorf who has spent a good deal

# Bernd Koberling

## **Annina Nosei**

The first wave of “violent painters” from Berlin—Rainer Fetting, Helmut Middendorf, Salomé, and Bernd Zimmer—were of some interest, because they were so sophisticated in their use of style. They seemed to make references to a national culture (German Expressionism in particular), but did so in order to link that culture and its trappings in a provocative way to that of America of the '60s by keying their allusions to color field and stain painting, Pop, performance, and rock 'n' roll. The work came from Berlin, but attested to the Americanization of Europe in as sly a manner as possible by making fake American paintings in Europe (this in odd contrast to the work of some painters in New York, who want to make fake European paintings here).

Unfortunately the success of the younger Germans has encouraged their elders (who are often also their teachers) to present their wares over here as well. As a result we have been recently overwhelmed with second hand, second-rate expressionism of the worst sort—a sincere expressionism, which is unable to recognize its own entrapment within the conventions of a style.

Bernd Koberling is only the latest of these, an art teacher from Berlin and Düsseldorf who has spent a good deal of time in Lapland seeking inspiration. The pictorial results are predictably dark landscapes and seascapes with threatening rock formations, close-ups of cormorants, and the occasional solitary figure, arms outstretched as if mimicking the sea birds. The paintings are somber in effect, with blacks, browns, and purples predominating, lightened with touches of pink and yellow over the dark ground—emotive highlights of a banal kind. The canvas is coarse, of course, and the paint splashy and mostly thin, with a lot of those feathery drips caused by too much turpentine. The brushstrokes, and the marks that delineate form, are sketchy in an extremely mannered way, making the artist's “visions” appear doubly inauthentic: borrowed ideas dressed up in a borrowed style, but presented as if they were the result of some long and arduous struggle with the self, alone in nature.

—[\*Thomas Lawson\*](#)



Bernd Koberling, *Cormorant II*, 1981, oil and kunsthartz on canvas, 78 x 101 1/2"



Kim MacConnel, *Formidable*, 1981, acrylic on cotton, 97 1/2 x 128"



Jean Michel Basquiat, *untitled*, 1982, acrylic and oilstick on linen, 76 x 94"

of time in Lapland seeking inspiration. The pictorial results are predictably dark landscapes and seascapes with threatening rock formations, close-ups of cormorants, and the occasional solitary figure, arms outstretched as if mimicking the sea birds. The paintings are somber in effect, with blacks, browns, and purples predominating, lightened with touches of pink and yellow over the dark ground—emotive highlights of a banal kind. The canvas is coarse, of course, and the paint splashy and mostly thin, with a lot of those feathery drips caused by too much turpentine. The brushstrokes, and the marks that delineate form, are sketchy in an extremely mannered way, making the artist's "visions" appear doubly inauthentic: borrowed ideas dressed up in a borrowed style, but presented as if they were the result of some long and arduous struggle with the self, alone in nature.

—THOMAS LAWSON

**KIM MacCONNEL, Holly Solomon Gallery; JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT, Annina Nosei Gallery;**

**KIM MacCONNEL**

"If you've seen one, you've seen them all" is a likely initial take on Kim MacConnel's new fabric hangings. At first glance, he seems to be coasting. At second glance, darker thoughts about rank opportunism furrow the brow: what new elements there are here—bombs, missiles, planes—seem to have him jumping rather belatedly on the protest bandwagon. Suspicions, unfortunately, are like warts—uninvited and ugly, but hard to get rid of.

A third, more thorough look should

put moralists at ease, at least on the score of exploitation. If there's anyone MacConnel is pirating, it's himself, and there's a method in his monotony. Yes, splicing symbols of entertainment (top-hatted Fred Astaire clones, televisions, musical notations) and sports onto images of war machinery laments that war has become just another show, another spectator sport—argues that our seemingly most innocent pastimes are part of our least innocent. And, to be sure, arms now are stockpiled or *Collectable*, sold or *Marketable*, certainly *Formidable*, and at the moment insanely considered *Worth While*. But these titles of MacConnel's are so obviously self-parody that it's hard to accept all this at face value. Besides, MacConnel's premeditated facility is too sly to be powerful as direct statement. In his financial and critical éclat, he is deliberately whoring it up. And by debasing his own "art"—which he also does by cranking out these rote "MacConnels"—and then putting bombs into that debased product, he is implicitly criticizing the degree to which current "engaged" art has gotten itself embrangled with the fashionable, often with the best intentions in the world. What more fitting than that a leader of the Decorative should warn how decorative the political can become? When the shapes of missiles are echoed in MacConnel's abstract patterns and, thanks in part to the debunking effect of his slick, ad-world drawing, are demoted to patterning rather than giving the patterning new allusive force, what are we seeing except co-optation—the suborning of even life-and-death messages by the context from which they are broadcast?

This is not to say that MacConnel does not feel as strongly about the possibilities of nuclear destruction as anyone else; what he may be expressing is a black-humored despair over the inefficacy of the medium for communicating those feelings.

Let's assume that meaning is produced by the differences between terms. Yet MacConnel collapses differences even between things that seem opposed, or, put another way, he compares items pointlessly. In *Marketable* he visually rhymes a pointing finger and an inverted Eiffel Tower with the missiles appearing elsewhere, in the same way that Laurie Anderson elides a waving hand (good-bye or hello?) with a metro-nome (an ambiguous marker of time with a precise marker) and that David Salle sometimes equates similar masses—a turned head on an elongated neck, for example, with a hat raised at the end of a hand (empty-headed or not, it's all one?). In Salle we have the exhaustion of signs, in Anderson the unintelligibility of signs, in MacConnel the corruptibility of signs. Entropy is the reality of this mimesis. If, like computer dating services gotten ahead of themselves, these artists seize on the most remote similarities as an excuse for matching incompatibles, this poor hedge against disorder only underscores the degree to which they distrust order altogether. And if such siphoning out of meaning has been an aim of the avant-garde program for some time, is it possible simply to put it back when we need it again? William Blake said, "Without contraries is no progression," but does that mean regression is a viable alternative? These are the deadlocked

questions that MacConnel's paintings, advertently or not, ask.

**JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT**

Surprisingly, though Jean Michel Basquiat comes, infamously by now, from a graffiti tradition (nom de spray: Samo), his colliding opposites are much less anarchistic than MacConnel's. Whereas MacConnel's ironic stance allows him to endorse nothing publicly, Basquiat's reversals are not those of his own irony but of the unintended situational irony of a system he would like, one surmises, to see work, if only it could. His tone, as compared to the Flaubertian one of MacConnel's slice of commercial low life, bears the accent of disillusionment: if MacConnel presents the way it is, Basquiat tends to emphasize the way it should be; if MacConnel describes false premises, Basquiat decries false promises.

So even such a potentially neutral formal decision as the subtly diptychal nature of these works (the ground is often split, though not evenly between two dominating colors) becomes an analogue for double talk, the rhetoric of American democracy whose true import is revealed by a simple process of inversion. The scales of justice? "Peso neto," Basquiat writes on one of the canvases. "Net weight": the scales of commerce. Trial by jury? Trial by combat: painting after painting features boxers, winners and/or losers. The repeated gesture of the dazed champion raising his arm above his head in victory is uncomfortably close to that of the Statue of Liberty bearing her torch aloft, a resemblance brought home when one of the fighters actually does hold a