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Michael Smith resurrects classic characters for new performance video

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Tucked behind the front desk at Lora Reynolds Gallery is a modest space known as the project room — just enough space to exhibit smaller-scaled artistic endeavors.



Michael Smith's 20-minute video "Excuse Me!?!...I'm looking for the 'Fountain of Youth'" is the latest from the Austin-based artist and professor at the University of Texas whose nearly four decade career has resulted in a multitudinous output of live performances, films and videos, sprawling and detailed installations and all the sundry stuff-making (photography, artists' books, assemblages of found object) required to fill up, and fill in, performances spaces and installations.

For "Excuse Me"—something of a comedic ballet about aging and the passage of time—Smith tapped Ballet Austin artistic director Stephen Mills as a collaborator.

The video screens continuously in the gallery and is joined by seven of Smith's preparatory watercolor drawings.

Smith and Mills make for a smart pairing. Mills has perfected using the ballet vocabulary in classic comedic narratives like in his ballet interpretation of "Taming of the Shrew" and "The Comedy of Errors."

And though the art world likes to situate Smith within a kind of edgy performance art trajectory, much of his performance vocabulary is actually quite traditional, grounded in the type of comedic stock characters that have been around since the dawning of theater in Ancient Greece.

In "Excuse Me," Smith brings out his two regular characters: the archetypal everyman Mike (aka Blandman), the hapless nonhero befuddled by life's events, and Baby Ikki, a diapered, pacifier-sucking toddler who nevertheless has a grown man's facial hair and a cognizance that lies somewhat between naivete and Machiavellian.

Set to an original piano score by Mayo Thompson, "Excuse Me" follows Mike as he sets out on the classic and always elusive quest for eternal youth.



We see him first as a befuddled professor leaving his office and left behind by the swarm of energetic, texting, water-bottle-toting youth. (Dancers from Ballet Austin's apprentice company perform; the video was shot at Ballet Austin studios.)

Mike can't quite untangle the earbud chords for his smartphone, though the youth flit around him with theirs. And by the time he saddles up to the water cooler to refill his bottle, it's been drained by the obsessively hydrating youth.

After Mike is handed a giant gold watch—presumably a retirement gift—he begins to daydream.

Next, the scene changes (the video is quaintly subtitled “A Ballet in Three Acts”) and we see Mike as an awkward knight in less-than shining armor. Accompanied by a passel of squires, he continues his quest, ravaging barrels, looking for the elixir of youth. Even divining rods and dancing nymphs don't lead Mike to the magic potion.

Mike morphs into an evil jester before becoming Baby Ikki. Act III finds Mike muddling through a yoga class amid the nimble youth and then befuddled by security procedures at an airport—chiefly that he can't take his much-prized water bottle through the scanner.

Watching life and time pass, being eclipsed by a younger generation—it's no fun. But Smith's charming short video makes sweet fun of that melancholy.