

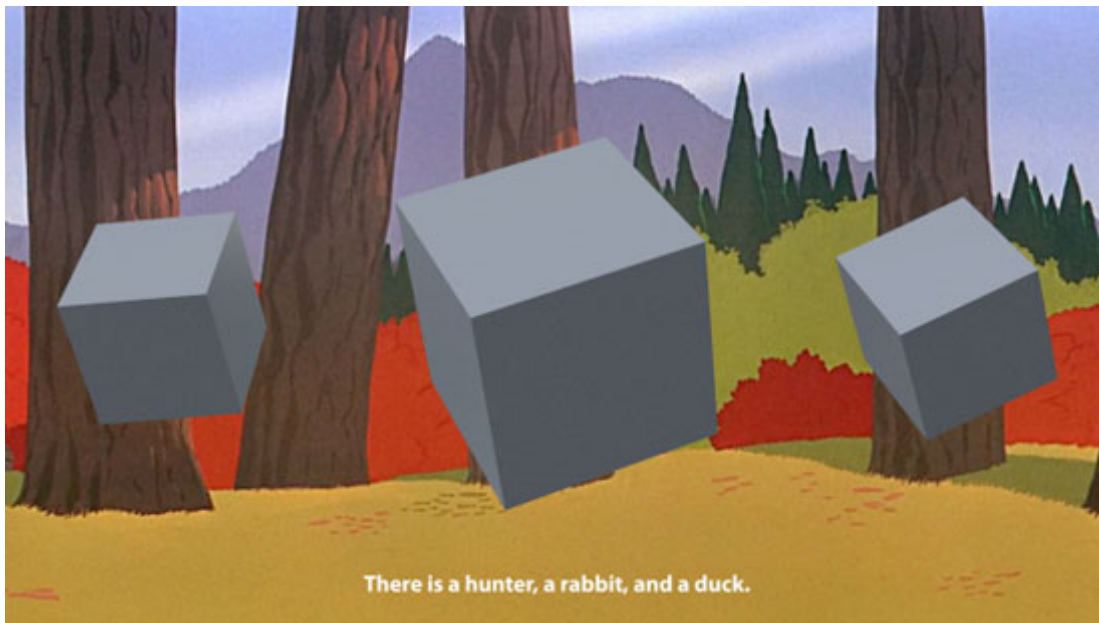
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Happy Hunting: Michael Bell-Smith at Foxy Production

by Kurt Ralske

Michael Bell-Smith: Rabbit Season, Duck Season at Foxy Production October 10 through November 26, 2014 623 W 27 St. (between 11th and 12th avenues) New York, 212 239 2758



Michael Bell-Smith; Still from *Rabbit Season, Duck Season*; 2014. HD video with sound, dimensions variable, 5 min. 18 sec. Edition of 3 with 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production.

"Rabbit season! No — duck season! No — rabbit season!" Michael Bell-Smith's solo exhibition at Foxy Production, borrows its title from a scene in a 1951 Looney Tunes cartoon, in which Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck try to evade hunter Elmer Fudd's murderous intent by changing a placard to indicate that it's the other critter that should be hunted. Modifying the existing sign is a surprisingly fast and easy game-changer, but also a necessary one: for Bugs and Daffy, their life depends upon it.



Michael Bell-Smith, I Refuse (Steve Jobs), 2014. Vinyl film on polyester painted aluminum composite panel, 31 3/8 x 23 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production.

Bell-Smith is interested in the malleability and instability of images. Like other Post-Internet artists, he delights in the tsunami of stock digital imagery that engulfs us, presenting itself so promiscuously, as if dying to be interfered with and repurposed. Computer desktop wallpaper, libraries of textures, browser views, 3D software demo scenes are the readymade raw materials that Bell-Smith melds into questions about the nature of our universe of images.

Six vinyl on aluminum prints, each 31 x 23 inches, riff on the familiar statement “I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member,” setting that text in what appears to be an uncompleted layout for a magazine ad. The quote (actually uttered by Groucho Marx) is misattributed to various celebrities and historical figures. It’s amusing to observe the quote’s meaning slide politically left or right as it is passed from mouth to mouth: when Ayn Rand says it, it’s a conservative’s kiss to the unregulated market; from Thomas Jefferson, a vision of liberty; from the different-thinking Steve Jobs, a call to individuation via shopping.



Installation view of Michael Bell-Smith’s Standard and Life series, in “Rabbit Season, Duck Season,” 2014, at Foxy Production. Courtesy of Foxy Production.

The series “Standard and Life” (2014), comprised of three 47-by-35-inch vinyl-on-aluminum prints, appears as tasteful AbEx allovers. But they’re clever simulations: each mark is a vector-graphics representation of a hand-made gesture, like Roy Lichtenstein’s Benday dot images of brushstrokes. There’s a digital prank here. The same marks re-appear identically in each image, that is, every image is only a rearrangement of one set of messy components. Bell-Smith mocks the modernist sincerity of a gesture, like Jackson Pollock’s shamanesque paint-flinging, by re-imagining it as an algorithm running an equation with arbitrary variables. It’s a re-evaluation of expressive art-making as little more than what Vilem Flusser termed a “combination game.”

The exhibition’s richest work is the five-minute video *Rabbit Season, Duck Season* (2014). Like Oliver Laric’s *Versions* (2012), it’s a theoretical inquiry in Internet-friendly form. The rigor of an essay film is mated with the easy WTF-ness of an animated GIF. Bell-Smith montages hyperreal but unnatural 3D renders, Shutterstock images, and close-ups of fabrics, while subtitles ruminate on questions like, “This / that? Norm / alt? Cool / uncool? Visible / invisible?”



Michael Bell-Smith; Still from *Rabbit Season, Duck Season*; 2014. HD video with sound, dimensions variable, 5 min. 18 sec. Edition of 3 with 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production.

The question “rabbit season or duck season?” might be best interpreted as, Do you side with Adorno or Benjamin? Do we swing high or low? Do we locate ourselves outside, in reasoned critical distance, or inside the contradictions of lived experience?

In his video, Bell-Smith stakes out a uncommitted, centrist position: “The conversation is cyclical. It could last forever, ping-ponging back and forth across time. ...I’m tired. I don’t want to make any more decisions today.” If all is arbitrary, then little is demanded of us. While it’s true that there is energy in the pendulum swing to the opposite pole, and that to be human is to move between contradictory positions, the easy relativist stance misses out on what any fully-inhabited position provides access to: a type of ethics and/or belief. Disappointingly, Bell-Smith refuses to join any club that would have him as a member.

Has any Post-Internet artist made his or her work with Bugs and Daffy’s attitude of absolute conviction, not merely playing a low-stakes game, but struggling desperately for survival? The genre has not yet identified its Elmer Fudd.