Michael Bell-Smith
FOXY PRODUCTION

There’s a pretty vacancy at the heart of Michael Bell-Smith’s four new videos that is as nauseous as anything in Sartre. Drawing on the fatally bland aesthetic of the stock shot and the digital template, Bell-Smith’s recent exhibition “mbs_fp_090712”—his third solo appearance at Foxy Production—confronted the viewer with what remains when “content” (in the Web-age sense of the term) is stripped away to leave only palettes and placeholders. It’s not that there are no images in these frictionlessly smooth projections—no moves, no marks, no “creative” decisions—only that they all have a queasy familiarity that suggests Groundhog Day reset in a low-rent graphic-design house. Yet they remain, in spite of this nagging, numbing, self-conscious blankness, weirdly, compulsively watchable. Empty calories, addictive.

Waves Clock (all works 2012) is the most pared down of the four in terms of scenario and narrative, or lack thereof. It depicts, as the title suggests, a generic analog clock face hovering in front of a generic rolling ocean. The two hyperfamiliar images are almost endless in their symbolic associations and formal possibilities; yet arranged in this contrived combination and locked into an endless loop of noninteraction, they feel somehow isolated from all meaning. Just as it is immediately clear from the image’s unreal perfection that the meeting of object and environment never “really” happened, so we find ourselves unable, or unwilling, to dignify its portrayal with even a potential raison d’être.

The White Room is a more visually complex affair, but equally obtrusive. The video’s action consists of an animated sequence in which various objects, including book and CD covers, spin into view; receive a jaunty, somehow slightly 1980s-style digital squiggle as if from an invisible pen; then disappear from the frame again, whirling, bouncing, and zooming off into the virtual void. Each object has been
given a different surface treatment—marble, wood grain, chrome—but is otherwise akin to a newly manufactured showroom dummy in its smoothed-over, rounded-off featurelessness. The sound track is a compilation of short, Muzak-like instrumental themes that, while supposedly describing a spectrum of moods, rapidly collapse into the same homogeneity as the visuals. The work is profoundly wearying, yet hard to turn away from.

*Magic Hands* and *De-Employed* utilize similarly debased lexicons. In the former, a pair of white-gloved conjuror’s hands repeatedly clasp and unclasp, each motion revealing a new object, image, or effect that hovers in space until replaced by the next in a seemingly endless sequence. In the latter, Bell-Smith’s animation technique reaches some sort of technical apex, as an array of off-the-shelf special effects end every bit of programmed or found footage in a fanciful explosion or screen wipe. There are also subtitles of a sort, a sequence of words that gradually form what might be song lyric mash-ups (*EVERYDAY READ THE PAPER CAN RIP IT UP AND START AGAIN*). Again, each frame lasts only a few seconds before it is displaced.

Other artists before Bell-Smith have, of course, explored the landscape of boredom. But even if his work is finally just an update, it remains a useful addition to the canon. Itself resistant to “expression,” it functions as a weirdly compelling survey of defunct motifs that somehow stagger on, zombie-like, despite their thorough absorption into the rootless, soulless culture of commerce. There’s an energy to the videos that is irresistible in its sheer relentlessness, even as they worry at our unfulfilled expectation of a wonderful wizard behind the screen.

*—Michael Wilson*