

Michael Bell-Smith: *Rabbit Season, Duck Season*
Foxy Production
623 West 27th Street
October 10, 2014 - November 26, 2014



Michael Bell-Smith, *I Refuse (Morrissey)*, 2014, vinyl film on polyester painted aluminum composite panel, 31 3/8" x 23 1/2"

The words "I CAN EXPLAIN" slam into view from above with accompanying thuds and in reverse order. The 3-D text recalls a latter-day Cartoon Network logo, jutting out gawkishly at not-quite-possible angles. Lush forest footage is intercut with fast-motion cumulonimbus weather patterns. A familiar Warner Brothers sylvan scene appears. The stock images from before acquire some context: they are background animation cels made from life, complete with lens flare.

A re-telling of Bugs' and Daffy's titular *Rabbit Season, Duck Season* disagreement is performed in subtitles, using rotating grey cubes as stand-ins for the absent characters. Hunting signs are torn from the trunk by an invisible hand with satisfying rips. Intensity mounts until a shot is fired, blowing a hole through the tree and any remaining signage. "But no one has to get shot," the subtitles explain, (or threaten, as would the masked man in the bank lobby,) "the conversation is cyclical." Other signs begin to appear on the tree trunk: paint cans, blank tic-tac-toe boards, the first step of a cat's cradle instructional—promising starts which may never see conclusions.

In its affinity for signage and repetition, Bell-Smith's latest video recalls an earlier piece, *Subterranean House (Oonce-Oonce)* (2007), a looping, purposefully dopey reduction of the music video for Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" in which all signs read "OONCE" and a simple house beat replaces the original tune. Whereas his previous work has been blunt, humble, and charmingly tenuous, this exhibition evidences a new confidence in construction alongside a clear anxiety about what is expected from those who seem to know what they are doing.

Those pendulous desktop distraction balls feature prominently as a device in which energy is depleted more gradually than might be expected thanks to a trick of physics and the precision of mass production. In one sequence, every date of a calendar month is consecutively circled in a cascading series of watermarked stock images before the resulting stack is circled itself. A procrastination method

gone haywire is one more useful illustration of time passing, joining the elevator arms, bomb fuses, and bursting thermometers of the cartoon lexicon.

In the front room are some real objects, if you're still feeling up for the peril of point-of-sale. Bell-Smith has printed vinyl film onto aluminum panels in successive layers, a process common to storefront sign manufacturing. In one series, Groucho Marx's famous "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member" is attributed variously to Thomas Jefferson, Morrissey, Oprah Winfrey, Steve Jobs, and Ayn Rand, all pop theorists of one kind or another whose brands have appreciated in value thanks to an impression of radicality or resistance. The compositions take the form of textbook template layouts, including "X-marks-the-spot" content filler boxes, reserved spaces which await the arrival of their images. Those color fields are surrounded by columns of scratchmarks and waveforms typically created in mimicry of dutiful note-taking. Each also contains a single mark of slapdash painterly whim, although these kinds of strokes have begun to look like energy drink logos.

The short video betrays the market-ready quasi-formalism of its accompanying objects. It is a work which, in manners both coy and conspicuous, deals with sign switching and modes of diversion that we feel ourselves savvy enough to "get," yet still willful enough to "buy." It identifies decision-making as a harried task conducted amidst intoxicating influences and external pressures. Elmer Fudd, or "The Hunter," is cast as the hapless consumer, with lethal power at his trembling fingertips. There is an evident unease with the notion that decisions must be made at all.

— *Maxwell Paparella*