

# THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR  
VIDEO, MUSIC  
AND DANCE

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By J. Hoberman

THREE TAPE COMEDIANS. Videotapes by Louis Grenier, Michael Smith, and T. M. Sullivan. At the Kitchen, through November.

There's nothing so ethereal about the work of the three video comedians currently showing at the Kitchen. The most substantial of their tapes is Michael Smith's 15-minute *Secret Horror*, based on a performance he staged at various downtown venues last spring. Not a straight recording, it's directed by Mark Fischler and, replete with dissolves, angles, et cetera, is more compactly dreamlike—if less laugh-out-loud funny—than the live version.

Smith himself plays "Mike," a character who, in a previous outing, learned to dance by mimicking Donnie and Marie on TV. Heavy-browed, vaguely simian, dressed mainly in his boxer shorts, he shuffles around a bilious, *Honeymooners*-minimal set with the slow-motion stride of a winded jogger. When he talks, it's straight at the camera, brandishing a bag of "bridge mix" and asking, "Who ate all the chocolate off these nuts?" in a dumbfounded, smirky whine. The tape's eponymous horror has to do with the condition of being alone and out of it, a stranger in one's own apartment. Robotic voices waft over the phone, summoning Mike to a come-as-you-are party; with a burst of '40s thriller music, the ceiling threatens to smother him; an ensemble of sheet-wearing ghosts turns his living room into a discotheque.

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Without too many specific references, Smith is able to suggest a world totally fashioned from the effluvia of TV and pop music. Dozens of hard-to-place sitcom-Vegas-cartoon routines, broken down and recombined, rattle around the piece at the edge of one's consciousness. (When he drags in something as left-field as the Kingston Trio's version of "Wimoweh"—arguably the most ofay recording ever waxed—this maracalike clatter gets an almost Jungian resonance.) For the most part, *Secret Horror* is seamless, passing from one crisis to the next without ever resolving anything. By the time the credits roll, Mike's ordeal has come to seem a rite of passage: Wearing a ludicrous brushed denim and patched leather leisure-suit (his arm inexplicably in a sling), he struts triumphantly around the set while Neil Diamond serenades us with "Forever in Blue Jeans."

The other two comics are involved with less concentrated, slighter stuff. Louis Grenier mines the droll anecdote/visual pun territory pioneered by William Wegman: In *Oral Exam* he spoons instant coffee and sugar into his mouth, then glugs down a glass of water. His patter is more transparent than Wegman's but he does get off some good one-liners: "I was afraid people were plotting to help me," is the capper of a bit on a paranoid masochist. Funniest are Grenier's parodies of "serious" art. The animated *Feasting* enlivens a succession of magazine cut-outs with some simple-minded strobes, and is scored to a nitwit song about "cotton candy, carousels, and crazy clowns" that's warbled with remarkable seriousness by a Joan Baez-type contralto.

T. M. Sullivan—another one-man band with his right foot in the art world and his left poised for *Saturday Night Live*—has the cadences and phrasing of a TV huckster refined to a science but suffers from a desperate tendency to run his routines right into the ground. Sullivan's main shtick is acting out skits with a cast of dime store toys. The best of these is a "Dominican nun discipline diving contest" judged by a Tweetie Bird doll. Black cloth triangles with sewn-on cat's eyes, the nuns are pushed around Sullivan's table-top stage by what the announcer—in a tone of hushed, golf-coverage reverence—keeps referring to as "the ever-present hand of God." Robert Wilson couldn't have said it better. ■