

DON'T DO IT

HARNESSING ABUNDANCE

Michael Pybus has been based in Hackney Wick for nearly a decade. A part of his studio also doubles as a gallery, Welcome Screen. Pybus' work – painting, collage, sculpture – is packed with references to pop culture and global brands. Ikea, the Pokémon character Pikachu and glossy 90s magazines get a slightly skewed, peculiar treatment in his work. We met up with him to chat about painting, curating, and Teleshopping.

Your living space next to your studio is full of art: Keith Allyn Spencer, Brad Troemel, Terence Koh. Talk to me more about collecting. You're getting closer to

Herb and Dorothy, the obsessive American collectors.

Their documentary was what gave me the idea for it. Their place was full of stuff but they couldn't afford very much of it so they worked out a way to do it. And I thought, 'I've got these contacts – why don't I swap art with them?' And also, Brad Troemel was selling for £20. I could tell it was good work and I knew I wouldn't have been able to get that for £20 in a couple of years' time, so I thought why not. Although, at the time I was really broke, so £20 was a lot of money, actually. I remember spending two days thinking am I going to buy this thing. Looking back it's ridiculous. Then the next one, a phone with rice, that was about the same price. I kept going back for weeks and in my head, I went, 'If somebody gets that and I don't get it, I'm going to be pissed off, and once it's gone, I'm going to want it even more.' Now I wish I'd bought a few more. There's some I haven't got room for so it's in storage.

Has your taste changed over time?

It's expanded. I don't think it's changed.

But pivoting on post-internet artists.

The post-internet people are sampling the world we live in. They're not using it as a hierarchy to look like they're better or more intelligent but instead they're referencing experience. Douglas Coupland said in an interview that the most important people in the future won't be the people that create content but the people who provide context. It's not content makers, it's the people who can take the information and make the context for it that are the important people.

How do you divide your time?

I don't do anything else. I live in the space which is where my studio and my gallery are and I don't go outside. I don't go on holidays, I don't buy clothes, I don't go out. I don't do anything else.

Do you find it easy talking about your work?

The worst thing is to be at a private viewing and somebody asks you about your work. I

hate that. A studio visit is different. But when you're standing next to the work, in the installation, in a social setting, it's really not the conversation you want to be having. Also, I don't do things that could just be rounded up in a couple of sentences and it's not the right context. But sitting and chatting in the studio for a couple of hours is fine, because you can see all the crap around. 'Why do you use Pikachu?' I've got answers for that, but it's not a neat little answer and I don't want to stand next to Pikachu explaining why I'm using Pikachu.



'In 3D the basil never wilts' (2014)

A long answer, then. Why do you use Pikachu?

I'm interested in how people have a relationship to images and art using iconography and branding that everybody already has a relationship to. There's been billions spent on building a relationship with Pikachu, whether you like it or hate it. He's designed for you to have an emotional attachment to him, so that emotional attachment leads to more sales, so you want to buy more products. You want to buy his image on things; you

want to interact with a game; you want to buy the new games. You have a cartoon which creates a narrative even further around the characters. Whether you like it or not, you will have some relationship with Pikachu. So, I can take Pikachu, and the second you see it in my work, you have a relationship to my work. It's a shorthand, in the way a lot of artists reference art that has come before them.

Even now I'm looking at a piece on your wall which is not too far off from doing exactly that. Garfield on top of Michelangelo's 'The creation of Adam'.

That's Jack Lavender. You get it. You could say it's a bit of a cop-out because everyone already has a relationship to these things, but I think the trick is that because people have such a specific relationship to them, because it's been engineered by these companies, I've then got to take it and make it my own. I've got to have it as my signature. So now, when people look at Pikachu, I want them to think of me and how I use Pikachu. It's the same with Ikea. I do get that response now and I think I've got somewhere with that. Now, when people see things online, they send me links to things about Ikea and things about Pikachu.

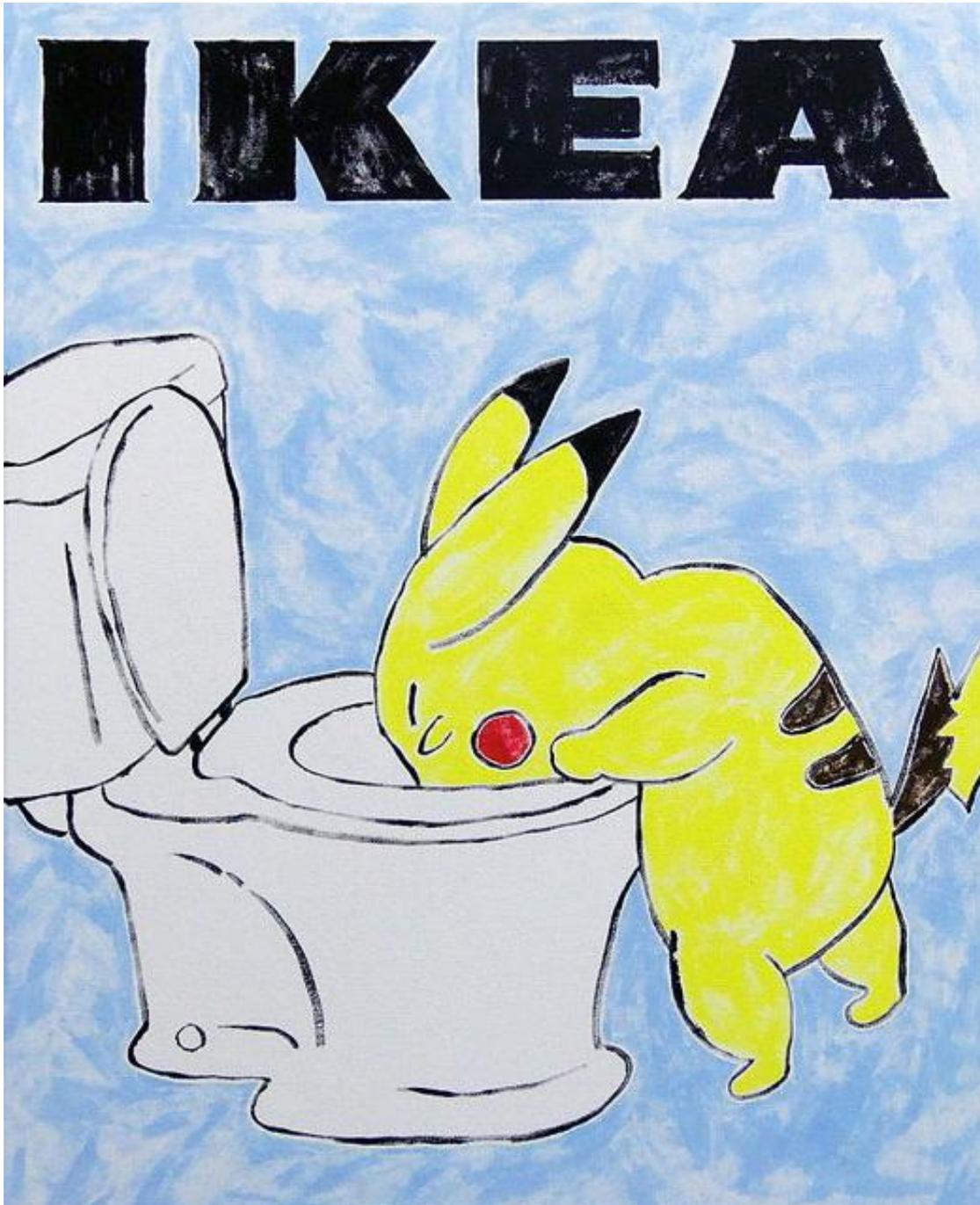
It sounds like an obsession, mixed with being part of the brand's food chain.

Yeah. If I work with brands, I should operate as a brand, in a way that builds a relationship so that you see something and associate it with that brand. I use these brands and you might see them and associate them with me, but those brands are also everywhere, they're viral. I like that. I like the way Pikachu is everywhere. Ikea is really good at being viral. Everybody has it in their homes. And it just replicates. And Ikea's got this utopian, happy feel.

Like a warm Swedish home where there's no death. Pikachu is more sinister, maybe?

I feel it is. But Pokémon is darker; it's Japanese pop culture so it's got a darker edge to it. For instance, the character Cubone is a little creature who's got a skull on his head, but the skulls that it wears is of its dead mother. Or Lampent, a Pokémon who's trying to catch children's souls from hospitals. But then, there's a bit of a dark underside to

Ikea too: the founder Ingvar Kamprad was part of the Hitler Youth movement. And they got some of their stuff made by political prisoners in the 80s. They knew about it and pretended they didn't. The thing is that I'm using Ikea, but I'm not criticising Ikea, I love Ikea. I absolutely love Ikea; I think it's brilliant.



Pika (IKEA toilet barf blue) (2014)

What you said earlier was really interesting about people sending you links. It seems there's a dialogue between your art and audience.

I think so. I use social media really heavily.

**And social media has been crucial in finding your exhibitions for your gallery,
Welcome Screen.**

It has. They pop up on Facebook, but the big thing for me is Instagram. I used to take images, but I never knew how to deal with them, use them on a blog or a website – I didn't know what context to put them in. My sister Joanna kept nagging me to go on Instagram. She's fashion designer and fashion's all on it but I thought it was something only 16-year-old kids do. I joined it last August and started posting. Instantly, I got attention from it – I got shows and sales from it. The art world's on it. I've got a really good dialogue with people through it now.

“Facebook's too curated”

And fine art is a visual medium, so it might make sense cutting the text.

We started visually before we had text. Cave paintings. Text takes longer to consume and people are more time-conscious now. We're going back to hieroglyphics, to emojis: you look at the image and it's shorthand for something else. I read that the most used word last year was the heart symbol – it wasn't even a word anymore, just the heart emoji. And I thought, 'God, I do use it a lot, actually.' You're not going to write 'Love it', you just put a heart and people know. I don't know if 'likes' are enough now. Facebook's too curated. Instagram's a lot less about saying 'I've got an amazing, interesting life' and more about showing how you look at the world, the visual language. It's a diary. When you look through people's Instagrams, they're all pretty coherent – you can get a sense of the person and what they look at. It's less about status.

With filters, though.

I don't know. I don't use filters, a lot of the people I look at don't use filters. I don't know whether filters are going to stay but I don't have time to fuck about with an image working out what filter looks best.

Talk to me more about Welcome Screen. How did that start?

I started to become interested in curating and started to do digital, online projects. I'd done that for a couple of years and then I started collaborating as a curator with Hannah Lees. We did a website called Busy Sleep for a year and that got me more interested. She brought other artists I liked into the mix. It just dawned on me that I've got quite a big studio and I could chop it in half and have a gallery. I'd seen a lot of artists whom I really liked, who were not going to get a show in London anytime soon – young artists, starting up. And I could offer people an opportunity to do a show.

And you were booked full right away.

About a year in advance. Now it's more flexible. At the moment I'm doing a show a month. That's a high turnover for any gallery and there's a staff of one – that's me – and I'm doing all my own practice at the same time. As things are getting a bit busier, I might have to be a bit more sporadic. But I'll do shows off site at other places.

And despite you not really having advertised or promoted the space, it's taken off.

Yes. I'm not a screaming person when it comes to promotion. It's not my style and I don't do openings – if you want to come down, you can see the show, and you can see the images are online, which is the way most people consume art now anyway. The way I deal with it is organic.

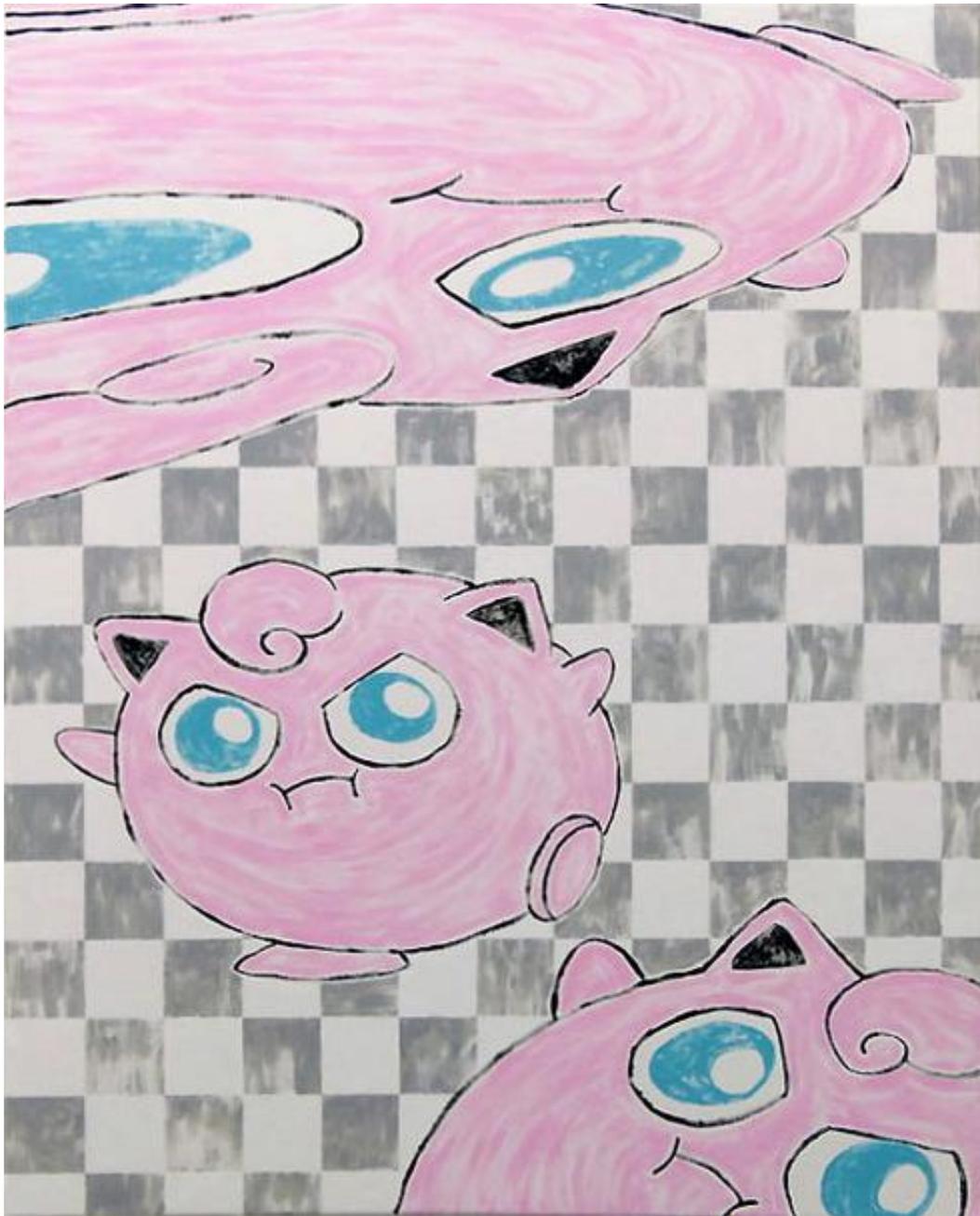
Is there a community around art, do you think?

There are peers – a kind of network. I find London a bit cliquey and I'm not part of the London 'scene'. Online there are a lot more people and I connect with them – Débora Delmar and Andrew Birk run No Space gallery in Mexico City and they came to stay with me last year, when Andrew did his show at Welcome Screen. Andrew suggested me to a show Free Things in Leeds that Jack Fisher was curating that opened last week. We've always putting each other forward for things. Débora's coming over next month – she's doing a solo in Welcome Screen in March but she's also coming over because she's got a big solo coming up at Modern Art Oxford. Back in October, Nico Colón came to do the show and he ended up inviting Francisco Cordero-Oceguera and Puppies

Puppies came over as well.

I've noticed that recently in your work the way you paint seems to have shifted. I've always painted. But it always bothered me that I wasn't sure on painting: I always did it but it wasn't quite right. Then last year, in January, I bought a lot of new materials, started to paint a load of new type of imagery. It was the time Ikea really heavily came in and the same time when I thought nobody's paying any attention to me so I might as well do what I want.

Before I might have been self-editing a little too heavily but then I thought if no one's going to pay any attention, why the fuck am I editing anything? So that's when I just went, 'I love Ikea, I'm just going to go all out. I love Pikachu. I love pop iconography.' I did that very consciously in the beginning of last year. And at the same time wanted to start painting. But even with the Ikea collages and painting, it was flat, it was slick, it was a particular way I thought it should look. I use a lot of pop imagery and I was painting them in flat, solid colours, very sharp. I wasn't enjoying it and it was taking forever, because it was working on oil.



Jigglypuff (Mad Transparent Void) (2015)

Interesting that you'd choose slow and traditional oils to work with such instantaneous imagery.

I use plasticky imagery, but I still want to do painting in oil. I like that dialogue and the historical link with painting. Also, I respond much more to the colour with oil. But the thing needs to be done with a fast energy. Everything I reference and use is a fast image and my energy is a fast energy. I'm referencing mass consumerism and mass production. And the paintings weren't working for that. But there were a couple of paintings I noticed. I let them be a bit scratchy, in a corner, and I really liked that.

Then, in August, I was getting tired with the oil paintings. I was still working at them but I wasn't enjoying it. There were some that were dry but I still wasn't finishing them. So then in August, I thought fuck it, I'm just going to make whole canvases really scratchy and dry-brushed. The bananas came in. The first one I did was a cigarette, smoking. The second I did that, I made five small ones in an evening. The paintings just painted themselves. For me, the imagery has to evolve really quickly. I started bringing in new references and I became a lot less precious about them. I'm not someone who will sit and plan out something for a month and then make it; I'd feel like I was a slave to it then. It needs to be that I don't know really what it's going to be, necessarily, until it's finished. I kind of know the image I want to use but how it might be painted might be completely different to how I expected it. I also don't learn everything by sitting and drawing. My research is also sitting and watching trash TV.

“If I see another café open up in Hackney that has ‘reclaimed furniture’, I’m going to fucking scream”

Tell me more about that. What kind of trash TV do you mean? Teleshopping?

I do like Teleshopping, actually. I think it's really hypnotic. There's a skill there: somebody talks shit about a product for half an hour and you cannot stop watching. And it never ends – they promise you all these things that are going to help you and it's comforting. The thing I want is a halogen cooker, which is just a giant casserole dish with a halogen on top of it, but you can cook a whole chicken in it. Every time it's on, I want it. It just looks really nice.

The TV is there and I don't shy away from the fact that I do watch quite a lot of it. But only stuff I choose to watch: I don't have a TV on, I don't even own a TV. I watch it all online, and it's only stuff I choose to watch. I don't like adverts or things just blaring on. I guess I have edited quite a lot of reality TV out now. I used to love *Big Brother* for years, well after people gave up on it, but I don't watch it anymore.

Rich Kids of Beverly Hills is a good one. I saw the show and I thought it's going to trashy and I thought I was ready to watch it, hate them and really enjoy hating them. But they're such nice people. They all talk like they're on Instagram and I don't talk like that — but that's because I'm a bit older and hashtags didn't exist. For our generation, it was the @ symbol. Do you remember? You'd never use the @ symbol and all of a sudden you'd get cafés with @ in their name. Everything had @ on them: clothing, brands, shops. It was so cool — and now that's so 90s. What's going to be the next character on the keyboard that nobody uses now? Who knows. It'll come along and hashtags will be dated to this moment.

I rewatched *JPod*, recently, the 2008 TV show based on Douglas Coupland's novel. That's not trash TV, though. It didn't feel dated. It's a different world, but I think Coupland tried to be not too specific. Obviously, it's of its time, because it's plasticky and like Ikea, but it kind of just looks like how we are now. 10-15 years ago it was more about everything being shiny and new, wasn't it? Silver, bright coloured shiny surfaces then and now it's all about vintage textures and treatments. If I see another café open up in Hackney that has 'reclaimed furniture', I'm going to fucking scream. How many old stools do people need to sit on in a coffee shop? Now it's all about having these authentic textures. And people are really militant about letting you know they like them, which I find really odd.

But luxury apartments all look like crappy *American Psycho* flats. People are meant to work their whole lives to live in a plasterboarded, overpriced box. And their ads don't even realise what they're referencing.

So you think that Redrow ad (that was later pulled) wasn't tongue-in-cheek?

No! I don't think it was. There's a great JG Ballard quote about obsession in which he said, 'I would say that I quite consciously rely on my obsessions in all my work, that I deliberately set up an obsessional frame of mind. In a paradoxical way, this leaves one free of the subject of the obsession.' That's really something I take on. You don't make excuses — if I like Pikachu, if I like Ikea, if I like a brand, I'm just going to do it. If I

like an image I'm painting, I'll paint ten of them. I'm not going to worry whether there should be only one of them. I make a lot of work and I don't worry about scarcity with it. All the things I'm referencing are already in abundance anyway. And I'm never going to be able to make nowhere near the amount of work that say, Ikea would make of a lamp. The amount of work I make is never going to be even close to how many lamps there are in Ikea. Or Pikachu. It's never even going to come close.



Redrow London Luxury Development Promo

from [Patrick Bateman](#)

01:42 |



Redrow London Luxury Development Promo from [Patrick Bateman](#) on [Vimeo](#).

In other words, you're talking about harnessing not just the associations but also the energy of capitalist machinery.

It's an energy we are all part of. I think capitalism has made the best images ever. You look at the images that have appeared in the past 50 years and they're absolutely amazing. We've now got to the point where we're living in a weird, hyper-real state where you can't the images look so real you can't understand they're not. That's really fucking with people's heads. Before, with an advert, you knew it wasn't real but now you look at those computer generated or photoshopped images and they look more real than our reality. And we try to emulate it. Even the people in the adverts don't look like the people in the adverts. But you still look at the image and think it's the real thing. It's dangerous but I find it really fascinating.

And how do you come in as an artist with regards to that?

I'm not just an observer, I'm a consumer of it as well. I go to Ikea all the time and have meatballs and chips. I watch my TV. I'm not above any of it. I buy all this shit. It's more subversive than critical. Sure, there's a lot to criticise in the way we live but it's also the most amazing period. We have the best healthcare we've ever had, the best technology, the biggest amount of freedom. It's the best time humans have ever existed. There are a lot of downsides but without capitalism, we wouldn't have cancer treatments and the medication. I'm just looking at it and trying to work out what it's made of. It's just about exploring my experience of it. I'm not saying it is a template. But it's fun, shopping and all that – it's designed that way.



I DONT CARE (Lumpy Space Princess) (2014)

How about darker visions of it, like Gary Shteyngart's novel *Super Sad True Love Story*

with see-through 'Onionskin' jeans and machinery that instantly rates the 'fuckability' of the other person?

What I love about that novel is that people in it are live-streaming all the time, and when they're out with their friends they get feedback that they're losing viewers so they have to changing the conversation. They're constantly trying to be in with the game.

Like in Bret Easton Ellis' *Glamorama*.

Glamorama was great, because it introduced the idea of reality TV crews, but you couldn't tell whether it is a reality TV crew or their own ego. Now even the ones that don't have a TV crew have a TV crew in their head. And we have iPhones to broadcast it from.

Have you ever thought about moving to the US?

No. I like London. I guess I'd maybe live there for a little while, but I'm not a traveller. I know some people really get off on travelling and feel like it enriches them or whatever. For me, I enjoy it, but I'm a hermit. I live in my cave.

Michael Pybus has upcoming solo exhibitions at Evelyn Yard, London & NO SPACE Mexico City. His work is to be included in various group exhibitions including shows at Spreez, Munich - DASH, Kortrijk and Bannerette NYC. His gallery Welcome Screen is open on Sundays 1-6pm and by appointment.

www.michaelpybus.com

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