

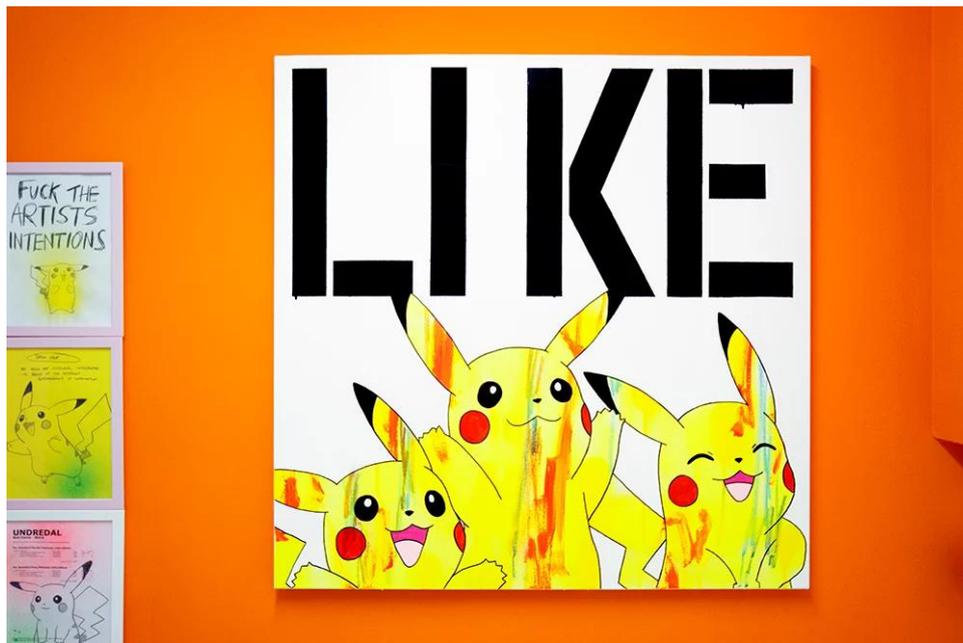
HOME ABOUT

Works O Mercy



Michael Pybus on How to Navigate the Social (Media) Landscape

June 3, 2018 | London,
UK



LIKE 2018 Acrylic, oil pastel and gloss paint on canvas 100x100cm
Installed in 'I'm sure they have very different paintings on their own walls' at Jelato Love, Palma Mallorca, Spain March 2018
<http://www.jelato.love/>

This is a very special post, due to the fact that it's composed by Mr. Michael Pybus, an artist that I've gotten to know personally over the last couple of years. Michael's art often displays a playful and witty blend of kitschy popular culture and meta art, where he refers to cartoons, social media and famous artists' works. In his social media presence Michael often times also reveals himself as a thinker by sharing texts online. He is not only a good artist but also an inspired writer. Sometimes his views have sparked controversy and he strikes me as a passionate debater, which I find very refreshing in a world, that for some reason seem increasingly less tolerant to a broad spectra of opinions. Therefore it is a true pleasure to now introduce a longer piece by Michael, where he dwells on this topic and also gives some advise to his fellow artists. I hope you will enjoy this as much as I have. - Axel

2015 was the year that things really changed for me career wise. I'd moved to London to study art in 2001 and up until 2015 basically nothing had been going on for me. (I find it hard

to get my head around the fact that a kid born in 2001 will be a legal adult next year). Anyway June 2015 was the first time I had a solo exhibition in a commercial gallery here in London, and that was then followed by my first solo in NYC a few months later.

I was apprehensive about getting on a plane to NYC by myself. Growing up my family never took holidays and I'd never really been anywhere far from home so things like flying and travelling freaked me out. I asked my friend Mark to come over with me as I knew he'd be fun to travel with and a good distraction from my crazy anxieties. I met him years ago when we worked in the bookshop at Tate Modern. He's just opened a gallery in the basement of a pub in East London, it's called Lungley, you should go check it out! www.lungleygallery.com. Gladly everything in New York went well and after a month over there I was back in London, relieved I managed to handle it all ok.



Installation view of 'IF IT WORKS, IT'S OBSOLETE' at Johannes Vogt NYC, USA October 2015
<http://www.johannesvogt.nyc/>

A couple of days after I returned, Carl Kostyal, a London based art dealer, got in touch and asked to come over to my studio. We hung out and he said he wanted me to do a solo show in the gallery he was opening in Stockholm in early 2016. He invited me to go over and see the space that week and booked me an early morning flight to Stockholm, returning back to London later that evening. This was the first time I was going to have to fly by myself. I was nervous but I have always followed whatever direction my art has led me and it has always done me right so off on the plane to Stockholm I went.

In Stockholm I met up with Jim Thorell and Karl Norin, a couple of artists who also worked for and exhibited with Carl Kostyal. They showed me round the new gallery space and then they spent the rest of the afternoon with me, showing me around Stockholm before I left in the evening. We went to get food at an indoor market place, where you sit on bleachers like the ones you see in gyms in American high school films. This is where Axel a friend of Jim and Karls came to join us. I said hello but we didn't really talk as we were all sitting in a line due to the bleacher seating arrangement. I talked with Jim and Karl and Axel chatted. Eventually the time came where I had to leave to catch my flight so we all left. Karl and Axel were heading to the nearest Metro station, which was also the direction Jim and I were heading so we headed out together. On the street I approached Axel and told him how much I liked his name. For a British person Axel is a pretty cool name but he told me that in Sweden it's not seen as such and we continued to chat as we walked the 5 or so minutes to the Metro station, where Karl and him went on their way and that was that.



Installation view of 'Karaoke' at Carl Kostyal Stockholm, Sweden April 2016
<http://www.kostyal.com/>

A few months later Axel's face popped up on that "People you may know" algorithm on Facebook. I clicked 'add', he accepted and over the past couple of years we've stayed in touch, hung out and got pizza, he's visited my home and studio and even bought a couple of my paintings and, well, now he's asked me to write something for his art blog so here I am taking the linguistically scenic route in relaying to you, the reader, how we came to meet.

You may even be thinking; does it even matter how we met? I think it does. It's so easy, if not almost demanded from us today, that we meet and socialise digitally. The analogue elements of life are increasingly being edited out in favour of detached virtual interactions filtered through our technology. Regular interactions have been primarily reduced to passive daily stalking through our feeds and repeatedly clicking 'like' to soothe the overwhelming need for validation this new world order has birthed.

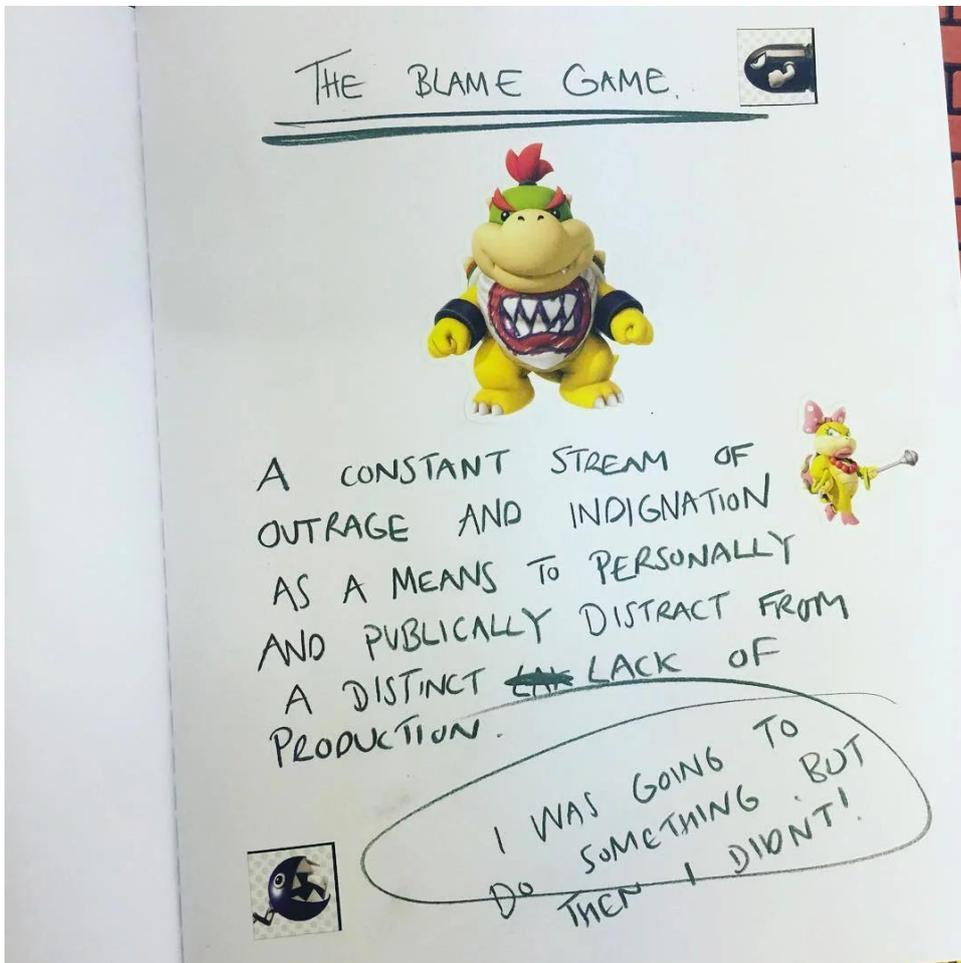
When Marshall McLuhan stated 'The medium is the message' he couldn't have been more correct. For it's not the content of a medium that holds the power. The power is to be found in the invisible properties and demands that the medium, carrying the information has, that really shapes how we can communicate, think, express and evolve as a culture. Such as the very nature of television being a box, housing moving, bright pictures and sound, helped transform our culture into one that primarily operated in images. As a society we began to understand and then to expect the world to be portrayed and expressed through snappy dialogue, slogans and laughter tracks, regularly interrupted by advertisements telling us all how lacking we are but how this new product will complete you. To show concern about television in 2018 though, seems so quaint by today's standards. We now truly inhabit a hyperreal environment where appearance and perception are more important to so many people over real action and true beliefs. We now aimlessly swipe through an endless stream of others' lives, shopping options, cat videos whether we be on the train, at work, walking down the street or sat on the toilet.



Shine 2017 Gloss acrylic and oil enamel on plaster and muslin over mixed media armature 88x36x37cm
 Installed in 'Anything in life can happen, especially nothing...' at Tatjana Pieters Ghent, Belgium October 2017
<http://www.tatjanapieters.com/>

Living in a moment where every individual can broadcast to a global audience from the palm of their hand, is an amazing achievement and one that happened so quickly that I don't think we have yet been able to understand and process the immense powers we now all hold. I can't say, though, I would want to go back to a world without smartphones and social media. Without Instagram as a platform to upload my work I would most probably still be waiting for my own career to pick up. However it never fails to disturb me how this insidious technology has nurtured a hive mind tyranny in our culture. Growing like a sick angry tumour from both ends of the political spectrum, eating away at the foundations of free expression and dialogue.

Thoughts and ideas can be messy and at times somewhat disturbing and nasty. No one is born with all the answers to life. As humans we are designed to grow and evolve through life. Open and honest dialogue is crucial to this development. I often don't know what my thoughts and opinions are on a subject until I am given the opportunity to express them with others, where I can listen to their reactions and opinions to what I say, allow that that sink in, process it and then repeat. This is the nature of healthy dialogue, but online we no longer seem to have (or want?) that. Instead of open and honest conversation we have an increasingly polarised environment that appears to use misery and victimhood as weapons in this perverse virtual Hunger Games. This act of casting oneself as the victim or the oppressed (or saviour of the victim or oppressed) is so astutely utilised now to create an invisible barrier, which the holder believes places them in a zone where their statements and motives cannot and should not be questioned or explored deeper by others. This has led to a situation where many people refuse to share their view points and thoughts for fear of mob attack. A depressing situation so saturated in posts of competitive victimhood and virtue signalling that it feeds into a collective inertia or deafness towards people and groups who are indeed fighting for a voice.



Michael Pybus, Notebook entry January 2018

I get the feeling this 'good' vs 'evil' storyline is in some way a defence mechanism to the extreme amount of information we are all bombarded with every second. In the face of an unprocessable torrent of input I can see how one may find comfort in simply applying a binary filter to it all - I like it so it's good vs I don't like it so it's bad. This thinking may make someone feel comfortable and 'right' but it renders them completely incapable to have a layered complex conversation with multiple view points. And to be clear, just because I am writing this does not imply that I think I am 'right' - what I am doing is expressing my thoughts and feelings at this moment around a situation I find myself in, but these may change and evolve as time passes and my life experience grows. This is one of the most beautiful things about the human experience, it's one that allows us to be many different people over a lifetime with many different thoughts and I believe whole heartedly that having the freedom to express one's ideas and thoughts and not to be judged and damned eternally by one opinion or thought, shared at one moment in time, is a fundamental human right.

I often get verbal abuse and huge assumptions about my beliefs and character thrown at me when I post of my thoughts online, often by people that have never met me. They pounce on my willingness to say what's on my mind as a perfect opportunity to ride in, 'destroy' me and then ride out to a virtuous applause of 'likes'. I accept it is the nature of the social media beast but I refuse to partake in that downward spiral. What I find most telling is the amount of people that reach out to me privately with messages of agreement and support, people who wish to recount their experiences and stories online but who are too anxious to post their opinions publicly for fear of shaming from the online mob. I can understand the urge to keep quiet in social media land, - it can be a chore to deal with and at times it's just plain mean but as an artist I very much believe my role in society is to express my perspective as clearly as I am intellectually and technically capable to at that given moment. It can be very tempting as an artist to behave like a neutered puppy, keep your mouth shut and make pleasant looking pictures for people to hang on their walls. The pressure to conduct yourself in such a way is even more potent now when we communicate and broadcast through software which has encouraged us to interpret the success of someone by how photogenic their feeds are and the amount of virtual validation they receive.

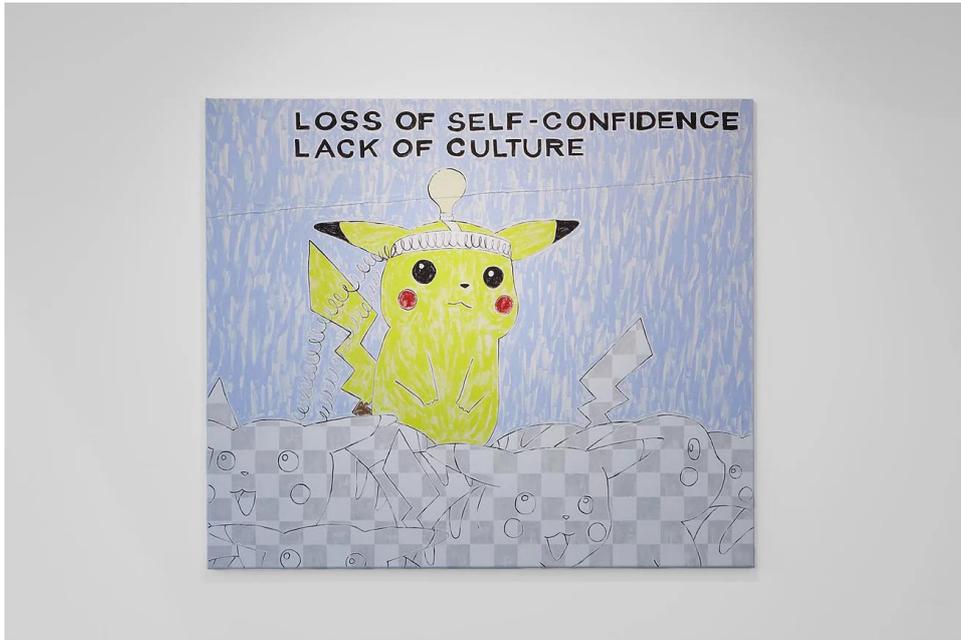


Installation view of 'Karaoke' at Carl Kostyal Stockholm, Sweden April 2016

In case you haven't worked it out yet, I am not a people pleasing artist. I spent my 20s longing for an art career but not achieving one and yeah, I was pretty pissed about that at the time, but looking back I am so grateful that I had to wait until my early 30s for some form of professional recognition. By that point in my life I had given up trying to please anyone but myself and that, I believe, was the key to creative breakthrough.

I remember the turning point. It was January 2014. I was 31 and admitted to myself that there was basically no interest in my work. A hard pill to swallow for any artist. However, it was in this realisation that I found myself as an artist. Throughout my time at art school painting had always been seen as 'artlite' against more 'serious' mediums. My pop subject matter and aesthetic, looked upon as a little shallow against the academic investigations. For years I attempted to 'smarten' up my practice and try and drive the works to some kinda polite destination but that January I just cracked. It was as if a switch flicked on in my head and I thought if no one was paying attention to me, then why the fuck am I trying to play someone else's game when I can write my own script?! It seems so obvious to me now, but up until that point I had not given myself the permission to fully go where I wanted to go creatively. From that moment on I went into overdrive. I took that frustration of professional failure and personal censorship and directed it into production. I created the world I wanted to see. If people were into it they would come to me and if not no loss as at least now I was being true to manifesting my ideas. I now understand that you can't build a healthy and long

career out of being a follower. Artists should explore new terrain and create new demand for their work, not slot into the landscape like a jigsaw piece.



LOSS OF SELF-CONFIDENCE LACK OF CULTURE 2015 Oil and aluminium particle paint on canvas 95x110cm

Within the year I was able to live from sales from my work and was regularly exhibiting. I guess what I'm trying to say to anyone who finds themselves in the position I was a few years ago is stop searching for validation and likes even though our culture would have you believe they are the be all and end all to success. Instead go full throttle on your work, create a universe and when opportunities come knocking be gracious and as unburden-some to the people you are working with as possible (without being a doormat). Support other artists, as the only person you're in competition with is yourself and the money you make put it back into the work and let it grow. Take responsibility for your thoughts and ideas, share them and don't be afraid of conflict or critique. As artists we do ourselves and the world no justice when we mould and edit our vision to please the demands of others.

If you want to discover Michael Pybus' work, please go to:
www.michaelpybus.com