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Untitled (Green)
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Screen Space

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Untitled (Green)

SCREEN SPACE

Michael Vale

Back in 1989, the great year of revolutions, from Tiananmen Square to the Berlin Wall, I created a fictitious museum in New York called “The Museum of Contemporary Ideas”. Notionally, it was the biggest new museum in the world with a budget of billions of dollars that flowed from the Cameron Oil fields in Alaska. Initially, it only existed through its press office, and I sent press releases around the globe to Reuters news agency and Associated Press, to museum directors, and the world’s leading art magazines. I also sent them to my friends, most of whom were artists. I now count Michael Vale among them, and he is one of about fifty artists around the world whom it has been my pleasure to meet, and who create what I call Superfictions. I’d like to tell you about his new work.

Vale has titled his new video work *Untitled (green)*, bringing to mind the ‘high’ abstract paintings of artists such as Pollock, Twombly, Rothko, Klein and Richter. Even Andy Warhol used this nomenclature, albeit satirically, in such works as *Untitled (green cat)* and *Untitled (green pea)*. More recently, Anish Kapoor and Peter Doig have used variations of the title, sans irony.

Vale’s motive is, of course, pointedly ironic, casting this anti-narrative title as a microbe invader from outer space – one that is as deadly as kryptonite for, amongst others, Napoleon. Here the colour green itself is an alien invader, a sleeping force that threatens to take over our planet.

In recent times, green means good - environmentally aware; but earlier associations with the colour are far less positive – envy, illness, naïveté, even the colour of the devil. Think green slime, ‘little green men’, gangrene, green teeth, snot!

In earlier Superfiction projects, Vale has taken satirical tilts at conventional notions of artistic value (*Le chien qui fume / A Smokey Life*, 2002 . . .) and the prescience of the avant-garde (*R.I.P.*, 2009). In this work he once again weaves real history (Napoleon’s wallpaper, Emily Dickinson’s ‘green’ poems) with wild flights of fancy and subtle critique.

Low-tech and fragmented, this latest work merges text and collage with primitive animation, found footage and acted sequences. Featured performers are Ian Scott (who has worked with Patricia Piccinini, James Clayden), Tamara Searle (the *Murray Whelan* TV series) and the forgotten vaudeville performer Roy Smeck, with much of the camera work by esteemed cinematographer László Baranyai (*Noise*). The result is a patchwork and ludicrous narrative that seems to borrow as much from 1950’s sci-fi and early experimental film as contemporary video practice.

Vale’s work, humorous and multi-levelled, is simultaneously accessible and obscure, and in most cases visually beautiful. *Untitled (green)* is a work that requires several viewings and is likely to plant ‘spore’ in your mind that will have you thinking about it long afterwards.

Michael Vale’s Superfiction aesthetic sits alongside Res Ingold’s fictive airline in Switzerland, Joan Fontcuberta’s invented zoological creatures given form through taxidermy, the Seymour Likely group in Amsterdam, UK artist Alexa Wright’s computer-generation of phantom limbs, Melbourne’s wonderful collective DAMP, New Zealand’s multi-headed Patrick Pound, and David Wilson’s Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles. It has been a pleasure to know them all and to enter their strange worlds. None more so than Michael Vale.

Dr Peter Hill

Dr Peter Hill is an artist and writer and adjunct professor of fine art at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is currently writing a book called *Matisse and the iPhone: Why Do Art Movements Change?* He will be exhibiting 25 years of his “Superfictions” at the Margaret Lawrence Gallery (Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne) in March 2012.

