

this is tomorrow

Contemporary Art Magazine

ALMA ZEVI, Salizzada San Samuele, 3357, 30124 Venice, Italy

John Smith: Films in Sheep's Clothing



Title : John Smith, Films in Sheep's Clothing, Om, 1986, ALMA ZEVI, 2017

Website : <http://www.almazevi.com>

Credit : All works are courtesy of the Artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

John Smith: Films in Sheep's Clothing

ALMA ZEVI

8 May - 22 July 2017

Review by Olivia Paterson

In an increasingly earnest art world, visitors to Alma Zevi's gallery off the main sway of the Grand Canal can take relief in the comedic value of mistranslation and mistaken identity. John Smith's films - showcased for the first time in Italy in Zevi's solo exhibition – are arranged into an artful, tightly curated presentation, and span Smith's forty-year involvement at the frontline of British conceptual film-making.

'Film in Sheep's Clothing' nods to the biblical idiom-turn-cultural reference of false teaching, a relevant topic for discussion in a year which has seen headlines dominated by the monikers of 'fake news,' and 'alternative facts.' Smith's earliest work in the exhibition 'The Girl Chewing Gum' (1976) is a masterful piece of directorial subterfuge, and there is pleasure in watching the facade of his control gradually unravel. Pigeons, for example, rarely fly on cue. As those involved pursue their day-to-day activities, the audience's psychological instinct to listen to the 'loudest voice in the room' is laid bare. We learn more about what we are and how we tick from Smith's smashing of our preconceptions, or as the artist succinctly puts it, 'a fictional narrative can sometimes say more about the 'real' world than a documentary'.

'OM' (1986) walks a line between the sombre and the ridiculous; shamanistic chanting slyly merges into a routine buzz cut at a murky barbershop. Structurally, Smith's short films are not only humorous in the realisation of our folly, (and the fact that they do have the ability to amuse) but in their close association to the very anatomy of jokes; that is, the introduction of a story, a gradual sense of tension rising followed by the revelatory punch line. As technology advances, so does the speed of Smith's content. The 16 mm film of the seventies and eighties is replaced with the smart phone technology in 'Steve Hates Fish' (2015) where a language translator app runs amok within a recognisably different East London streetscape to that of 'The Girl Chewing Gum'. Grasping for meaning but never quite getting beyond catchy gaffs such as 'your banger supermodel,' one gets the feeling that Smith still has much to say about the subjectivity of filmmaking.

Staged during a Biennale where the press have predominately focused their attentions on Zevi's neighbour, the Palazzo Grassi and its current resident Cif Amotam II, there is a relief that can be found in watching the narratives of these encounters unravel without pomp and circumstance. Smith's work invites us, in a far more human and contemplative way, to question the validity of what we see.