Those Are Grown-Up Laughs for a Big Baby

Michael Smith is a big baby. Well, not all the time. But when he gets into his droopy diapers and lacy bonnet, adds sunglasses and a pacifier, and totters around on his stumpy legs as Baby Ikki, he's as riveting to watch as any real toddler, albeit larger, hairier and a bit scary. Mr. Smith, the multitalented performer, video maker and multimedia artist, has been doing this character for about 30 years, and it never gets old.

For his latest escapade Baby Ikki went to Burning Man, the weeklong celebration of all things psychedelic that takes place every summer in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. A film crew followed him as he wandered around the festival in white Crocs, and the resulting footage is the heartbeat of “A Voyage of Growth and Discovery,” a wonderfully entertaining and slyly thought-provoking collaboration between Mr. Smith and Mike Kelley, the Los Angeles artist known for, among other things, sculptures made of old, grubby stuffed animals and children’s blankets.

Occupying the SculptureCenter’s main space, the installation features a half-dozen large flat screens showing various phases of Baby Ikki’s day and night peregrinations, which cumulatively add up to an odyssey. In the gallery is a set of tubular metal structures resembling children's playground climbing equipment, which includes one shaped like a rocket and a geodesic dome skeleton whose floor is covered with stuffed animals. This emphasizes a view of Burning Man as an essentially juvenile gathering. The boisterous optimism of Modernist futurism — as in the inventions of Buckminster Fuller — is evoked by these jungle gymlike sculptures.

Looming over all is a colossal sculpture of Baby Ikki made of welded-together junk metal, which parodies the towering wooden sculpture with the emblematic figure that is climactically set on fire every year at Burning Man.

The videos start with Baby Ikki playing in the motor home

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When night comes, he visits some of the elaborate, walk-in environments created by various campers and observes people dancing, twirling flaming batons and otherwise expressing themselves. At one point, three minimally dressed women pull him onstage and write around him like lap dancers. Finally, all tucked out, he finds a cushion-covered floor and falls asleep.

Baby Ikki seems to fit right in amid all the zanily attired burners, but he’s not one of them. He’s a kind of mole, a secret agent with his own agenda. Clearly Mr. Smith and Mr. Kelley designed their project not to celebrate but to mock the Burning Man circus.

To substitute a giant baby for its wooden avatar is to suggest that the festival is driven by infantilism.

Contrary to the old hippie fantasy that expanding consciousness through unbridled fun, creativity and hedonism — and of course, psychotropic drugs — will transform the world for the better, they imply that Burning Man is naive and disingenuously complicit with capitalist consumerism.

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