



## SHALLOW HAPPINESS NEVER LASTS

By: Jim Cook (originally published by Flash Art, October 1999)

Micha Klein is too happy. This should not, in any way, be misconstrued as a sign of this artist being simple. Or simpleminded. His demeanor is that of a fun-loving urban bohemian but his work has influenced a great many within Europe and beyond's club culture and in some ways, he has been created and sampled from the very sphere he plays, spins and, well, has fun in. If the name is unfamiliar to some of you, then this may be the time for many of you to sit up and back-space. He is the initiator and visionary behind the rather novel idea of VJing which began in Amsterdam's club scene during the rave craze which took over the UK, the Netherlands and later Belgium in the early 90s and the rest of the world after that.

That unique concentration and polarization of hybrid, moving images via Barco projectors with chart hoppin', feet stompin ' club music, VJing (not to be confused with your local generic music television versions) is the hypnotizing force we dance and sway to as we swirl and jam on the music, with images of *Artificial Beauties* dancing in our heads. It's a concept which has steadily maintained its street credibility with DJs worldwide and a multitude of clubbers. Along with his solo show at the Groninger Museum last year, his invitation to attend Lisbon's World Expo in 1998, and his recent summer of Club Love in Ibiza (his very own Amsterdam club posse taking over the island in a series of neon-lit, party-your-ass-off, art extravaganza club nights) have securely and firmly embedded Klein's colorful facade in the REM's of universal night owls and ad execs worldwide. His multi-coloured dayglo fingernails, peroxidized hair, and ready smile should not be mistaken for a man with an identity crisis or long in the tooth either. Instead this is an artist who packs a mean conceptual punch which may not overtly reveal such resonance with seemingly childfriendly titles as *Virtualistic Vibes*, *Love*, *Peace & Happiness* and his forthcoming *Elves* series.

His work, seemingly influenced by the worlds of Madison Avenue and magazines for the entertainment of certain gentlemen, is a colourful, psychedelic e-mail to the future sans machismo. A mixture of iconography past and present, Klein's world is a computer generated wake-up call to the masses and art historians alike. The man who'll most likely be remembered for bringing the club kids to the museum and the museum directors to the clubs.

**Jim Cook:** *So the mouse is winning the war against the brush...*

**Micha Klein:** The situation between the brush and the mouse, it's a bit like the Stone Age versus the Information Age. Art should integrate with mass media at this point in history. It's important that art find its way to the masses you know; but it shouldn't necessarily be this thing, the whole fetish thing going on with painting, that there is only one, that it can only hang in one certain place. Computer generated art is such that it is much easier to communicate with and to distribute because basically, in some ways, it is becoming immaterial.

**JC:** *So how do you, as an artist, get this across to an audience?*

**MK:** By using my work in different ways on different levels like making specific pieces for the museums but also doing things in the clubs, like VJing, which basically is an art form developed in the clubs as well as for the clubs. So this is already much more mass oriented.

**JC:** *So, whereas the church, the original house, maybe five hundred to six hundred years ago, was the inspiration for art and artists, you've in a sense utilized the new house club culture as an inspiration for your work.*

**MK:** Yeah, definitely. It's where the new spiritual background is and where art is happening now, instead of the church, it's the club. The house of love.

**JC:** *But why specifically club culture, why not shopping mall culture, or multi-cineplex culture ? Or is that just too wack?*

**MK:** It was something that fascinated me when it all happened. I come from a punk-rock background, with this sort of do-it-yourself type of attitude; and then, at a certain point, when the art market was really at its lowest, it was a really disgusting, boring time, this period during the late 80s. And then house music started with this completely new impulse, with new drugs, with new imagery, new sounds especially with the advent of acid house and along with this was the emergence of computer graphics which seemed to go so well with this whole movement that it seemed only logical for me to work in this direction.

**JC:** *Did you initially begin as a photographer ?*

**MK:** No, more as a painter and musician. And then later I began using photography but in a painterly way specifically in dark room experiments similar to what Man Ray had done along with many others: Warhol, Walt Disney, Picabia, Beuys. They were very inspiring to me. When I eventually noticed the capabilities of what the computer could do, it became so obvious to me. I had to use it. Computers for me are the all embracing technology. It's like in the old days when they used to call cinema the mother of all the arts and in our time, presently, computers have inherited the title because it too embraces all these technologies, you know audio, video, whatever. It brings them all together, even film and 3-D graphics, the whole thing.

**JC:** *Your series Artificial Beauties deals with the very serious notion, or concept of genetic manipulation and to some degree, the aspect of cosmetic surgery, the redefining of self, making oneself a little better than what you started out with; maybe this too comes a bit from hangin' in the club scene too long. All those beautiful people posturing and posing with their neon club wear and gold tooth smiles...*

**MK:** It has a bit to do with that, this obsession with beauty, but we see this within society at large. That's why I felt it was such an interesting concept, also it had something to do with the idea of master painters who had recombined faces with the most beautiful things they had seen, that, along with the whole genetic engineering thing, this weird science idea of having created the ultimate beauty. All of these references were spinning around when I began this series. Also it was a sort of *tour de force* for the computer just to generate super models faster than they are born. It was a very interesting concept for me to take this whole idea with the obsession of beauty by the speeding up of the whole process. I began photographing the ten most beautiful photo models in Amsterdam and then began making a "family." And then with morphing techniques, I placed two girls together to make one new face. And as you look at the work, the beauty of the second or the morphed face is actually more beautiful than the two used previously to create it. And this pattern continues as you continue the morphing process. It's a sort of artificial beauty overdrive; you sort of develop these quintessential beauties. It's very surreal in a way.

**JC:** *It's sort of a form of cloning...*

**MK:** Yeah, it has a lot to do with this in some ways, the tools which tend to lend themselves in discovering beauty.

**JC:** *If all of these ingredients were the purpose in developing Artificial Beauties, what*

*issues were you looking to explore when you created Pillman? For me, Pillman represents the archetypical pill that we all, in some way, use in daily life. The idea that science is the mother of all invention; that that one single pill will cure all that ails you, whether it be prozac to chill...*

**MK:** Or Viagra to get it up or ahhhhmmmm...

**JC:** Or ecstasy to let it all hang out...

**MK:** Or to lighten up and get in touch with your higher vibration. People are altering themselves in chemical ways these days. We've become more aware that we've been doing this for ages basically and Pillman is a sort of symbol for that. It was developed of course during the rise of acid house and the widespread use of ecstasy. Now that it's become a sort of 90s icon and slightly controversial. It has this duality where it has this innocence of Micky Mouse, this Pillman dancing. When it first came out in 1993, people were laughing their asses off when it would appear on the dance floor and everyone when dancing, would try to imitate its moves. The appearance of Pillman also caused some controversy here in Holland when a program with journalists from the national newspapers here were used as a panel to discuss the issue and hype surrounding raves with Pillman dancing on a screen behind them in the background. I could tell from that moment on that it could be used as a potentially controversial agent, the way the panel members were really freaking out about it. My whole thing is that we're all influencing our minds with chemical substances only some drugs have been approved by certain governments while others are dismissed as being bad. But that's because we have been getting false information about that.

**JC:** *About drugs in general...?*

**MK:** Yeah, sure... It's definitely a terrain that would be interesting to explore just a little bit

more. I've always wanted to curate a show about art and drugs. It's something artists, indeed all of humanity, have been involved with. Shamans and priests would more than likely be involved with these things as they're more interested in obtaining a larger perspective.

**JC:** *And your series Love, Peace & Happiness, what was that about?*

**MK:** *Love, Peace & Happiness*, which included *Pillman*, was also part of "Klein's Goodies Show" from 1993 at Bloom (gallery in Amsterdam). This whole show was very much inspired by the ecstatic house party scene, combined with a certain video game aesthetic. *Love, Peace & Happiness* was basically an homage; I wanted to create three very strong shining positive icons that were uplifting and that would cheer you up when you woke-up. These images would instantly give you a boost and a positive vibe for the whole day.

**JC:** *Would it be fair to say that Love, Peace & Happiness is basically a 90s spin of that same type of feeling brought forth from the 60s?*

**MK:** Of course there is some talk about these things, high tech hippies or zippies. That is something that is emerging from this culture, this merging of a punk look with a sort of hippies' love, peace & harmony thing along with the spiritual stuff mixed in, as well as a lot of technological interest. The 90s are of course a great deal different from the 60s, but there are a lot of things borrowed from that era, certainly in *Love, Peace & Happiness*.

**JC:** *I believe one of the terms you used in describing why you work in the way you do is because you feel that we, society in general, are constantly bombarded by visual stimulants; that you as an artist must also be constantly aware of ways in which to make your work as exciting and as interesting as those we see at the movies or in some cases in advertising.*

**MK:** Exactly. Everything is like a video game, blasting off in every sort of direction, advertising images, massive billboards everywhere...

**JC:** *Therefore you feel your work has to be as strong and as seductive as say the next Gucci or Prada ad...*

**MK:** Yeah, more so, otherwise it'll be neglected, it won't be really there. When *Virtuatistic Vibes* came out, it was an amazing portrayal of an emergence of a new youth culture. It was at a time when I was seeking other ways of presenting my world, of proliferating the world in other ways rather than in just museum shows and galleries. Also because the other more traditional art institutes were still very hesitant about platforming the work and the new technology. What I was seeing was that people from my generation and younger were much more willing to go with it and accept my work. Therefore, I began to seek other outlets for my work, principally I began to move towards magazines and VJing; *Virtualistic Vibes* was initially done for *Wave Magazine* here in Amsterdam. The world itself is basically a classic group portrait. It's done in four stages or four seasons as I like to say. There's a night image and a morning image or in this case, a morning after image. The concept is that the kids are in their own world, in their techno-fashion reality state, playing and working in their computer studio, working as well as hangin' out. Advertising agencies all of a sudden became immediately focused on this work and I found this interesting, this idea of artists being challenged and able to continue to push those boundaries even further within this particular arena.

**JC:** *Another aspect of your work which is highly recognizable is the use of color...*

**MK:** Color is just so sexy...

**JC:** *Sex again, Micha?*

**MK:** Yeah, I like it, it does something to you. If you see red, it gives you such a feeling. I love to work with it. It's happy, you know.

**JC:** *Now when you say happy, do you mean lite? Should it be mistaken for being lite when it's happy?*

**MK:** I believe art can be very life-affirming. Art can be very happy and can have beauty and this can be attained without the work being shallow. Happy can be very deep.

**JC:** *How deep is deep?*

**MK:** (He laughs) Very deep. Don't equate happy with shallowness. Shallow happiness neverlasts. .

*Jim Cook is a writer based in Amsterdam.*

Micha Klein bom in Harderwijk, The Netherlands. Lives and works in Amsterdam.

Selected solo shows: 1989: "Light Boxing;" A'pert, Amsterdam; 1992: Witzhausen/Meijerinj Art Space, Amsterdam; 1993: Bloom, Amsterdam; 19%/98: Groninger Museum, Groningen; Sfeir Senunler, Hamburg; Six Friederich. Munich; Bloom, Amsterdam; 1999: Robert Sandelson, London.

Selected group shows: 1992: "The ChiJI Cave;" Torcb, Amsterdam; "The Comfort ffine;" The Living Room, Amsterdam; "Fodor Longa Res Brevis;" Fodor Museum. Amsterdam; 1993: "Landrob, Franciscus Klein;" Snoei, Rotterdam; "Morgen gemaakt;" Alti et Amicitiae, Amsterdam; "Peep 0;" Artolux, Gbent (Belgium); 1994: "Portraits of Reflection;" Artotheek Oost, Amsterdam; 1995: "Peiling 4;" Groninger Museum, Groningen; 19%: "Het oog als las- apparaat;" Stedelijk

Museum, Schiedam (The Netherlands ); 1997: "Cyberrealism," Pbotology, Milan; 1999: "Tendance;" Abbaye Sainte-Andre, Meymac (France); "Visions ofthe Body: Fashion orinvisible Corset;"The National Mu- seum of Modern Art, Kyoto; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.