

ARTFORUM

Krasinski, Jennifer. "Jennifer Krasinski on Michael Mahalchick." *The Online Edition of Artforum International Magazine*, 1 Dec. 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202110/michael-mahalchick-87251>.

Michael Mahalchick

The unsung moment of real terror in classic Hollywood monster movies happens when the camera pushes in for a close-up on some bloodthirsty fiend, only to reveal a pair of human eyes peering through the prosthetics. It's a momentary rip in the fiction, divulging the fact that a person, an actor no less, is at the center of the fear, mayhem, and death unfolding before us—proving that underneath it all, we ourselves are the monsters. Michael Mahalchick's aptly titled show



View of "Michael Mahalchick," 2021.

"US" starred approximately four hundred latex masks cast from the cheap store-bought kind, to which he then adhered still more layers of latex in a creepy rainbow of colors at once garish and soothingly familiar, including Pepto pinks, jaundice yellows, Hulk greens, and zombie whites. Mahalchick started constructing his creatures in 2018 as a means of understanding and materializing the "deplorables"—as Hillary Clinton so memorably described Donald Trump's supporters in 2016—and would work on them as he watched television. Here, tacked to the gallery wall as a daunting, haunting horde, the masks were literal no-bodies: limp, lifeless, inert. No two were the same, but familiar pop archetypes recurred throughout: Witches, clowns, wrestlers, superheroes and heroines all lurk beneath Mahalchick's oogey weirdos, some of whom were so thickly gunked they hardly looked like masks anymore. A choice few even resembled our reality-television-born, fake-news-spawning former president. In one particularly vivid iteration, his plumped lips were as round and ready to receive as a blow-up doll's.

Mahalchick's "Masks," 2018–, call to mind the otherworldly oddness of the work of Belgian painter James Ensor, who deployed skeletons, puppets, and carnival masks in tableaux offering up fantastical allegories of mortality. One might also think of the many faces Cindy Sherman has built on top of her own, her shape-shifting often satirizing the roles women play. (More recently, she has taken to Instagram, posting hilarious and grotesque selfies fabricated via Facetune and other makeover apps. Two of her targets: the digital image and how it fuels our delusions.) Via Mahalchick's IG, one can see other-ies of him wearing his masks—un-slick, decidedly analog disguises that renounce any such chic cheek, instead upending the platform's falsely prettified world with their freakish features, #nofilter.

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Where does a soul live if there is no body? “US” also displayed other works in latex, including *Cosmetic Case x16* and *Cockring x40*, both 2021. Comprising multicolored casts made from the packaging of their titular tools of seduction, these pieces present themselves as misfit paintings, or steamrolled sculptures. *Bad Guy*, 2019, a vinyl-and-latex Sasquatch of modest size, seemed content just hanging from the ceiling. Far more menacing was *Untitled*, 2021, a pair of Dickies coveralls, stuffed and lying on the floor. Without head, hands, or feet, Mahalchick’s working stiff is a bona fide good-for-nothing. “Television produces corpses,” theorist Avital Ronell offered up in her 2010 book *Fighting Theory*, noting that a popular subject, and source, of American family entertainment is trauma. (Let this parenthetical admit the revelations of Ronell’s own monstrosities, while holding a place for her public reincarnation.) Screens long ago replaced the campfires around which we once warmed ourselves and told one another scary stories. Tech and media, ravenous beasts, have since cultivated our death drive in such a way that we now aspire to distance ourselves from—or, perhaps more accurately, to rub out—the sacred messiness of life. Mahalchick’s unsightly yet tender stuff memorializes, with terrific compassion and humor, what or whom we call grotesque or label garbage or banish from view, without glossing over the uncomfortable textures and unavoidable tarnish of what it means to be human. Just look around to see the horrors that besiege us when we pretend to be otherwise.