

REVIEWS

PAUL PFEIFFER
The Project

THE MYTHOLOGY behind iconic music superstar Michael Jackson is a complex mix of pop culture history and sordid controversy, which creates ample fodder for artists willing to use one of the world's most recognized media figures. Some of the better-known examples include Jeff Koons' ceramic sculpture *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* and Paul McCarthy's appropriations of Koons' work, *Michael Jackson White*, *Michael Jackson Black* and *Michael Jackson Gold*, not to mention *Michael Jackson Fucked Up Big Head Big Foot Carbon Fiber Blue. The Man in the Mirror*, a video by Aimee Morgana (Aimee Rankin) shown at the Whitney Biennial in 1989, featured a 25-minute collage of images of Michael Jackson. Morgana's video is the most similar to Paul Pfeiffer's current solo exhibition at The Project on 57th Street in Manhattan, where he resurrects the "King of Pop" for a whole new generation.

Pfeiffer, the much-heralded manipulator of found video, who has previously used sports figures as the dominant players in his looped dramas, here takes on a touchier subject. His two-channel video installation, "Live from Neverland," is based on the media circus, investigation and trial relating to the child molestation charges leveled against Michael Jackson in 2003. In the first darkened room of The Project's space, a monitor on the floor plays a televised statement by Jackson, where he defended himself against the allegations and portrayed himself as a victim of police misconduct. The audio, however, comes from the second gallery, where a video projection of a group of 78 college-age students stand on a riser, reciting Jackson's speech word for word.

While the details of the speech are not entirely audible, the fact that a large group is delivering the retort is key to the work. Reminiscent of a Greek chorus, these young students' rehearsed presentation isn't flashy or glamorous, and comes across like a staged performance with serious conviction. Dressed in virginal white, their attire alludes to Jackson's alleged misdeeds, as well as his skin tone. The young men and women also take turns speaking, turning to the right, then left, in a stilted, choreographed manner. Jackson's facial gestures are artfully tweaked by Pfeiffer to match the student's oration, creating a synchronized video that raises larger issues of group dynamics and their disturbing uniformity.

Pfeiffer's choice of using students who are barely adults relates to Jackson's childhood, which is said to have been stolen from him, since he had been thrust into the entertainment world at the age of seven as the lead singer of the Jackson Five.

How to read Pfeiffer's take on this overexposed topic can also depend on which side of the Michael Jackson fence you're on. Settling out of court in 1994 led many to believe he was guilty of molestation, while his complete acquittal in 2003 hasn't seemed to sway his most vocal detractors. But let's not forget he still has a devoted fan base claiming Jackson has been framed and misunderstood. Three hundred of them gathered in Tokyo recently, paying \$3,500 for a meet-and-greet photo op with their idol, including artist Meredith Danluck. Her exhibition at Renwick Gallery in Manhattan, "Michael Jackson, Jesus Christ...Coca-Cola," running concurrently with Pfeiffer's, juxtaposes footage of her meeting with the real Jackson in Japan and a professional Jackson impersonator in New York. What's even more engaging than dissecting the various readings of Pfeiffer or Danluck's videos, is the fact that artists are still making work about Jackson, who is well past his prime. This guy has staying power.

-Chris Bors



Paul Pfeiffer, *Live from Neverland*, 2007; video still