

Stefan Nikolaev

VTO East End

Two men's faces are projected onto large adjacent screens. Smoking anxiously, each man follows the familiar routine. Cheeks contort as they drag deeply on their cigarettes and faces disappear behind vaporous clouds of smoke. Intense concentration is contradicted by their appearances, though; one has his beard covered in shaving foam, the other has foam plastered over his skull. The tension heightens between serious mood and silly appearances, until an involuntary smile finally breaks across one face—only for the video to loop and the process to begin again.

Much of Stefan Nikolaev's work seems to be about undermining the visual. A grey vacuum cleaner is parked at the end

of a corridor that has grey carpets, grey walls and grey drapes. This monochrome harmony is fractured by the sound of someone singing unselfconsciously, as you might when doing the housework. The Bee-Gees' 'Staying Alive' is given a breathless, frantic and tuneless rendition.

The most effective piece is another smoking video, this one featuring the artist. It's a compelling performance; with all traces of a cigarette removed by nifty editing, Nikolaev inhales and exhales smoke as if his lungs were creating it. With his facial movements seeming like involuntary contortions, the apparently meaningless twitches of muscles exert enormous fascination. To fill the screen with a single face is a familiar fine art device; but this is one of the best uses to which it has been put.

Mark Currah

