



Art Review: Mike Kelley Retrospective: All Hail the Knit Wit King

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by Sandra Hale Schulman

The Mike Kelley retrospective that fills all four floors at MoMA PS1 in Long Island City is equal parts fun house, insane asylum and shrine.

The Los Angeles based artist, who killed himself in 2012 at the height of his career at age 57, has a cult following that seems in equal measures deeply felt and deeply weird. The PS1 exhibit, including more than 270 works from the 1970s to 2012, shows why so many artists, collectors, musicians, and general misfits were fascinated by Kelley's darkly funny oeuvre.

Kelley's work has never been shown so completely as it is here, encompassing every wild hair aspect of his anti-art crusade. Using things not thought of as art "materials" - particularly the creepy crochet - he drove these scruffy ragtag daggers straight to the heart of the matter, eliciting responses that are unexpectedly emotional, sentimental and disturbing."I make art," Kelley once said, "in order to give other people my problems."

They were out in droves on Oct. 13, 2013 the opening day. Lines snaked around the block, particularly for the two rare performances of "Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof," a performance/dance piece by Kelley and choreographer Anita Pace from 1989 inside the geodesic dome in MoMA's courtyard.

It was a head-banging, grand way to start the exhibit, the first time one artist has been featured in every room of the museum. After being ushered inside, viewers were told to sit on the floor in a circle around the raised platform in the center of the dome. Four dancers—two men and two women—took the stage wearing white leotards under floor length silk panels screened with Kelley's designs of a corn cob, skulls, clovers and crosses.



"Pansy Metal Performance." Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

As Motorhead's "Orgasmatron" roared to life over the loudspeakers (emphasis on the loud), the dancers began to stomp and whirl around the stage like possessed zombie dervishes. The dark, harsh lyrics shouted of war, domination and death, among other cheery topics, but the overall effect was like a gleeful cackle from the dark side: They know where it's all heading but it's worth dancing about in the meantime. And now the silk screened panels from the "Pansy Metal" costumes hang in the hallways that lead to the stairs.



Silk screened panels by Mike Kelley. Courtesy MoMA Ps1.

Heading into the exhibit—so extensive that maps are handed out to help visitors locate the more than 270 works on view—I was repeatedly struck by what novelist Jim Lewis observed of Kelley’s work: “You can tell the Kelley work because it’s the stuff that itches, the stuff that reeks, the stuff that looks like it needs a good bath.”

Everything is a bit dirty, in context and in actuality. Case in point is *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites* from 1991, a series of hanging planet-like clusters made up of scruffy thrift store stuffed animals jammed together over round frames. Being able to walk through and around these color-coordinated balls of plush made me feel cosmic and cool like a spaceship. Then I noticed all the faces are turned inward and I was orbiting a universe of Care Bear butts.



“Satellites” by Mike Kelley. Photo by Joshua White.



Detail of “Satellite” by Mike Kelley. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

Kelley’s affection for cast-off knitted and fabric creatures is replayed in several other works. In a lineup of animal head mug shots, *Ahh...Youth* from 1990, he includes his own portrait, looking as beat and worn as all the rest. Experimental noise band Sonic Youth used one the portraits, of a knitted teddy bear, for the cover of their album, “Dirty.”



“Ahh...Youth” by Mike Kelley, 1990. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.



Sonic Youth album cover by Mike Kelley.



Opening day visitor in plush ball jacket. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

Lumpenprole, 1991, is a huge knitted blanket that covers the floor of one gallery room and has strange shapes lurking underneath, an unsettling work that alludes to the monster under the bed.



“Lumpenprole” by Mike Kelley, 1991. Carpet with objects. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

A school theme is omnipresent and actually leads to a school-within-a-school work in foam board of mini-versions of every school the artist attended, called *Educational Complex*. MoMA PS1 was a century-old school in its former life, and still retains that feel of creaky floors, high ceilings, bells in the hallways and adolescent angst. Add in the fact that Kelley was both a teacher for more than 20 years and the bratty kid drawing crude pictures in class and this exhibit feels right at home.



“Educational Complex” by Mike Kelley. Photo courtesy MoMA Ps1.

The partial *Kandor* installation that was so beautifully displayed at Watermill Center last year is given a huge berth here, taking up an entire eight-room corner section of the museum. *Kandor* was an ongoing art series that unfolded over 10 years and the installation at P.S. 1 is a sprawling look at Kelley’s obsessive recreation of the fictitious city. *Kandor* was located on Superman’s home planet of Krypton and shrunk by the super villain Brainiac and tucked into a bottle prior to the planet’s destruction.

I was an intern at Metro Pictures Gallery in 1982 when Mike Kelley had his first solo show in New York City, held at the gallery. The show featured the extended series *Monkey Island* (1982-1983) which is also exhibited here. The work is a series of drawings, paintings and text Kelley called an “epic poem” inspired by a visit to the Los Angeles Zoo’s Monkey House. I remember him being quite shy and awkward, though the representations of chimps doing nasty things is brash and bold and sexually charged.

I was particularly struck by *Memory Ware*, 2000-2010, a series of small objects embedded in large

putty-filled frames that look almost like a Pollock in their controlled drippy lines.



“Memory Ware” by Mike Kelley. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.



Detail of “Memory Ware” by Mike Kelley.
Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

Day Is Done from 2005, a sprawling installation of films and set pieces, is screened on multi-panels in a dimly lit room and heightens the theatricality of the piece.



“Switching Marys” by Mike Kelley, 2005. Part of the “Day is Done” Installation. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen.

Down in the basement, a theater screens loops a number of Kelley’s films. I sat through about an hour of it, and while he was a prodigious filmmaker, I found most of them to be garish and crude and hard to watch; Kelley seemed to enjoy making people squirm.

The better screening room is a few doors down in the old boiler room of the school. The huge iron boilers have been cleaned up and gold leafed (not by Kelley), but the room remains raw and musty. There is a small crude bench and the film “Bridge Visitor” (2004) runs on a TV set and feels much more at home in the dank basement than in the cushy screening room.

The cult of worship piece *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin*, 1987 is in full scruffy glory here. The blanket of crocheted critters hangs like a sacred tapestry with an altar of candles next to it. Upon Kelley’s death, a Facebook page and a shrine of that name sprang up in LA in an empty lot near his home. For months, mourners brought stuffed animals and candles, re-creating his best known work as a virtual altar to an artist who gave the misfits a real home in the art world.



“More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid” and “The Wages of Sin” by Mike Kelley, 1987. Photo courtesy MoMA Ps1.



Mike Kelley memorial in LA. Photo courtesy More Love Hours Facebook.

Room after room, floor after floor, the work assaults the senses here in some way, too much to take in on a single visit. And this show still doesn't even cover it all: in the Book Store there is a listening station for music Kelley made with Destroy All Monsters and other groups.

Kelley had a complicated relationship with his life and work, which he often denied in interviews but revealed in his art. It can't have been easy living in that skinny man/boy psyche, showing the world the acne scarred face and the dirty little secrets. But the janitor's son from Detroit, a now bankrupt city, found a way to make his smeary mark at the top of the art world. And then he thumbed his nose at it.

BASIC FACTS: "Mike Kelley" runs through Feb 02, 2014 at MoMA PS1, 2-25 Jackson Avenue, Long Island City, NY 11101. (718) 784-2084. It is the the largest exhibition of the artist's work to-date and the first comprehensive survey since 1993. For programming and exhibition information, visit www.momaps1.org.

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