



MAILINGLIST

Critics Page

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Learning from Mike Kelley

by Holly Myers

When Mike Kelley died in January 2012, a hush went over the L.A. art world. Kelley was an important artist by any measure, in any city—his obituary ran all over the world—but in Los Angeles in particular his influence was profound. He lived here, for one thing, moving from his hometown of Detroit in the late 1970s to attend CalArts in its heady early years. For decades after, he taught at Art Center. From the start, his work could be seen to epitomize the raw, free-wheeling, irreverent spirit that gave L.A. art its real distinction. He was one of a handful of artists who, building on the success of the Baldessari generation, caught the attention of Europe like no other previous and secured once and for all L.A.'s global ascendancy—without ever really seeming to try.

The nature of Kelley's influence is complex. He was, by all accounts, a dauntingly intelligent man, extensively read and sharply critical, yet he is recalled as a warm and encouraging teacher. Though massively successful by art world standards, he had none of the glossy detachment of the star. Canonization, as a rule, is slow to set in in a system as defined as the L.A. art world is by networks of pedagogy and studio labor: there is simply no room to hold oneself apart and Kelley's modest, blue collar demeanor gave the impression that he wouldn't have wanted to. Brilliant as he was, famous as he became, Mike Kelley was never not one of us. It was adulation but also association. He'd become the chief embodiment of an image of success that emerged in the pre-recession years, fueled mostly by hope and a scrap or two of evidence: an image in which talent, income, and international fame were positively correlated. When Kelley took his own life, whatever his reasons, this optimistic image in some way died with him.



Mike Kelley, "Ahh...Youth!," 1991. Set of eight silver dye-bleach (Cibachrome) photographs, 24 × 20" / 61 × 50.8 cm each; one at 24 × 18" / 61 × 45.7cm. Courtesy Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All Kelley Works. Copyright Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All rights reserved.

I never met Mike Kelley personally and, though I went along nodding when his praises were sung, privately I knew my appreciation was limited. Mike Kelley never changed my life; he was not the reason I came to L.A. (as I've heard others declare) or the reason I devoted so much of my time to grappling with contemporary art. I never had that aha moment that gives one the sense of an emotional stake. The truth

was I never felt certain I got the joke and throughout the 15 years I covered L.A. art as a critic, Kelley remained in my mind an open question, to be resolved, I hoped, at some future date when I'd seen enough, read enough, heard enough from others to make reasonable sense of what he was getting at.

The retrospective I'd long been waiting for—the opportunity to experience Kelley's work not in disparate, perplexing fragments but in a suitably spacious spectrum—finally made it to L.A. this year. I saw it at the Museum of Contemporary Art in July, in the last few weeks of its final engagement, long after everyone important had seen it, after all the reviews had been written, read, and forgotten and the world had moved on to other matters. I saw it not as a critic but as a person, one among thousands, with no expectation of ever slotting my response into print (an expectation that, for better or worse, changes things). I'd not written a review, in fact, for more than a year and found that in that time my mental orientation had changed: any pretense I'd felt obliged to maintain as a critic concerning what I knew or didn't had diminished, which shifted the burden of understanding away from the intellect into other channels. I could take the show in without *needing* to make sense—and make sense in a way that could be cogently (and yes, impressively) communicated—and in this new looser, lower stakes mode of engagement, there were two things in particular that struck me quite powerfully.

One was Kelley's remarkable breadth. He made paintings, sculptures, films, installations, performance art, music—everything, basically, that an artist could make. If this seems, as a method, not so unusual now—most young artists try their hand at everything—it is largely because he and a handful of others did it first. But here is the difference: he did it *well*. There was not a piece in that show, whatever the medium, that, whether it “worked” or not, did not feel full throttle. Contained in the cavernous space of the Geffen Contemporary—a big, beautiful shell of a building that brings a great show to grandeur and shrivels the aspirations of a poor one—the exhibition practically vibrated, pulsing with a kind of energy that one is inclined to call superhuman, that is the result of vision, determination, hard work, and discipline pitched in excess of the capacities of most of the rest of us.

The other was the work's sheer emotional intensity. I'm not sure why this surprised me as it did—looking now, it was obviously there all along. But in a single work seen here and there, in catalogue reproductions or an essay, it is a force much easier to discount or second guess. When one is trained to appreciate contemporary art—as all but the most casual observer is, in one way or another—one is trained to think, to interrogate; not principally to feel. The feeling comes in around the edges, of course, else no one would care about this stuff at all, but it is rarely spoken of directly, in public. Here, however, it was inescapable. In Kelley's work, a formidably sophisticated analytical apparatus is held at the fraught emotional pitch of childhood and adolescence. It is a strategy I once mistook for nostalgia, because in the work of so many artists it *is* nostalgia. With Kelley, I found, it is something quite different: the utilization of a certain frequency of energy to draw out, scrutinize, illuminate, and flay the desperation at the root of American culture. The effects are not pleasant. I came away from the show feeling sickened and sad, but also awed by the scope of this tremendous intellect, this one short, fierce life spent plumbing the depths without the resort that fame often brings to the shores of self-satisfaction and complacency.

Not long before I saw the Kelley retrospective, I saw a group show of mostly young L.A. artists that struck an unusually vivid chord of anger in me, and after the Kelley show, I understood why. Kelley's influence was apparent in one way or another in nearly every piece in that exhibition: in the use of found objects; in

the lack of adherence to any one medium; in the fastidious-bject style of installation; in themes of adolescence, dejection, and depravity; in the use of pop culture; in the cultivation of a sardonic perspective. And yet the show, as a whole, was entirely vapid.

What angered me was not so much the efforts of the artists, none of whom could be blamed for not being Mike Kelley. It was the unquestioned standing in L.A. and elsewhere of a critical and curatorial establishment that has come to condone and encourage a brand of reasonably literate mediocrity that plays well in press releases and short, inobservant reviews without saying anything of real human consequence or posing a serious threat to anyone. There is a sense, in these shows—and there are countless examples, which is why I'm neglecting to identify this one—that a collection of gestures is all that we're left with here at the dawn of this new century, and all, indeed, that we even need, as if we've forgotten that content is even possible. Twitter art, we might say. More insidious still is the ethos this fosters: a polite, inoffensive, undemanding demeanor, eager to impress but not inclined to disrupt and thus safe to display among wealthy donors. The surprise is not that this has occurred—like many large institutional systems, the art world claims innovation while rewarding conformity—but that so few seem to even mind. Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, Eleanor Antin, Barbara T. Smith, Llyn Foulkes, Ed Kienholz—they were great, sure, but they were messy and difficult. Is there not some way to have all the same stuff—the paintings, the performances, the junk scattered around the floor—without the inconvenience of feeling sickened and sad?

It seems strange to say that my aha Mike Kelley moment, when it finally came, stemmed from the simple recognition that his work was *about* something. As enthralled as L.A. has been by his influence, I left the show fearing that we had all somehow missed the forest for the trees. The most quantifiable elements of his distinction—the materials, the themes, the motifs and patterns—were merely extensions of a deeper, driving force set on churning up the packed soil of our culture. While there is much in Kelley's work to be "got"—all that scholarly ink has not exactly been wasted—it made much more sense to me and became much more valuable when I realized it was also there to be *felt*. We must be sensitive to the ways in which our language anesthetizes by seizing upon the quantifiable, and also by the ways this language shapes things—by encouraging work, for instance, that *is* quantifiable, or by fostering modes of viewing that privilege comprehension over awe, fascination, or empathy. Reading over the many articles that came out in the press after Kelley's death and that follow his retrospective along its posthumous tour, it is striking how often one or another informed observer says something about "seeing the world through Mike's eyes." But what good is that? The phrase makes art sound like a carnival ride—it's not. If there's anything to which Kelley's life attests, it's that this world of ours is real and important and immensely interesting; art is a tool, and a crucial one, not a diversion. I don't presume to know what Mike would have wanted, but I can't imagine he would have put much stock in an endless reverential loop through the morbid funhouse of his imagination, frozen now in time by his death. Better to take in his vision, his conviction, his hard work, and his insight, then go see the world through your own eyes, but richer—go and do your own work, but better.

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appeared in *Zyzzyyva* and *Joyland*. Her story "The Guest House" was anthologized in *New California Writing 2012* (Heyday).

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



Pimp This Shit

by Bruce Hainley

FEB 2016 | CRITICS PAGE

A little over a decade ago, Mike Kelley confessed: "Art is the only arena in American culture in which difference is tolerated. I mean, I don't even think it exists in politics."

INCONVERSATION



ALEX DA CORTE with Jarrett Earnest

APR 2015 | ART

For his solo exhibition *Die Hexe*, Alex Da Corte transformed Luxemborg & Dayan's elegant Upper East Side townhouse into a haunted mansion, covering every inch of its three floors. Embedded within his complex tableaux are objects by Mike Kelley, Haim Steinbach, Bjarne Melgaard, and Robert Gober. Da Corte met Jarrett Earnest there to discuss the ways colors create space, memories, and feelings.

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