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Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Art review: Mike Kelley at Gagosian Gallery

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Sigmund Freud meets Scheherazade in the Fortress of Solitude, all under the watchful eye of Col. Sanders in a finger-lickin' good body of work Mike Kelley began to make in 2007. Elements of the sculptures, videos and environments even circle back to work he made in the 1980s, when Kelley first emerged in Los Angeles as one of the most potent young artists on the globalizing art scene.

For his first L.A. solo exhibition in nearly eight years -- and his first with Gagosian Gallery here -- Kelley shows a bracing array of 17 works made in 2010. (Earlier portions were a stand-out in the last [Carnegie International](#) in Pittsburgh.) A post-Pop extravaganza by turns trenchant, funny and self-deprecating, the

work is a captivating meditation on origins in our insanely complex world.

The linchpin is Kandor, fictional capital city of Superman's home planet, Krypton, which supervillain Brainiac shrunk to miniature size. In a 1958 DC Comic, published when Kelley was a kid, Superman retrieved little Kandor and kept it in a glass bell-jar pumped full of artificial atmosphere. Kelley's sleek Kandor models, made from illuminated cast-resin, are a mind-bending metaphor for

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the synthetic, scientifically driven, highly infantilized and thoroughly mediated bubble in which modern life is lived.

Several of them also introduce topical themes -- most notably a Near Eastern harem where women are segregated but rule their inviolable Islamic environment. Lenticular pictures merge a harem scene staged by Kelley with a scene from a play recorded in his Detroit high school yearbook.

Nearby, a life-size mannequin of Col. Sanders pulls back a drape to reveal a vitrine in which a tiny figure of Freud, psychoanalyst of childhood trauma complete with phallic cigar, has just stepped off a stage painted in swirling, psychedelic colors. A full-size version of the stage stands behind this sculptural tableau, while its image turns up as the set in a video, where the harem revolts against a princely male intruder.

Kelley mashes up classically revered ancient tales with childhood pop-culture trash. East merges with West, intellectual rigor with cheap sentiment, adulthood with adolescence, and social history with autobiography.

Several objects also recall his own breakout work of the 1980s -- the Fortress of Solitude with his earlier rumination on the philosophical shadow play inside Plato's cave, for example, and an exotic species of blind worm whose form recalls a Kundalini snake Kelley once made from plush toys.



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One significant aspect of the work is its self-evident reliance on production crews -- on actors, fabricators, set decoration and other elements more commonly associated with Hollywood movies and television than with art. Kelley is the artist as writer-director-visionary, but his working life outside "the Industry" imbues the project with a beneficial sense of imaginative play.

Another asset is its subtler uses of memory. Thirteen Persian rugs, rolled and stacked against a turquoise wall at the entry, are hardly noticeable when you arrive at the gallery. By the time you leave, though, catching them out of the corner of your eye, you perceive them as symbols for magical flying carpets fused with risky marketplace merchandise. An ordinary vacuum cleaner plugged into a nearby wall adds a note of workplace drudgery.

Altogether, the shrunken but layered world of Kandor is the place of origin from which we all come, like it or not. The gallery and, by extension, the larger art world comprise an isolated fortress beyond the depredations of ordinary life -- but not without its own coldly detached horrors.

--Christopher Knight

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Gagosian Gallery, 456 N. Camden Drive, Beverly Hills, (310) 271-9400, through Feb. 19. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.gagosian.com

Photos: Mike Kelley, "Kandor 10A," 2010; "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #34 (detail)," 2010. Credit: Gagosian Gallery