

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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An Intellect Highly Developed, but Not Superman

By Ken Johnson



Examples from Mike Kelley's "Kandor" series at the Watermill Center in Water Mill, N.Y.

WATER MILL, N.Y. — Mike Kelley, the celebrated Los Angeles artist who took his own life at 57 this year, was a hero to many. But partly because he so determinedly defied traditional laws of stylistic consistency and coherence, the number of people who fully grasped what he was about is probably small.

For anyone trying to understand Kelley — and also, perhaps, for those who think they already do — a visit to “Mike Kelley: 1954-2012,” at the Watermill Center, on Long Island, is in order.

The show is not a career overview but a revealing two-part presentation of a single major project that Kelley was pursuing in his last decade, and a number of videos from earlier in his career, which began in the 1980s. It was organized by the German collector Harald Falckenberg, who wrote an informative and insightful essay for the catalog.

The main attraction here is the “Kandor” series on which Kelley was working when he died. Kandor, as only the most devoted of comic-book fans are likely to know, was Superman’s birthplace, the capital city of the planet Krypton, which blew up just after Superman’s parents sent his infant self off to safety in a rocket.

But Kandor was not destroyed. For some malevolent reason, Superman’s enemy Brainiac had miniaturized the city and put it in a bottle, which Superman recovered and kept in his Arctic Fortress of Solitude, hoping to return it to normal size one day.

At the start of the exhibition a video shows a man in a Superman costume gesturing toward a large bottle with architectural models within and passionately but unintelligibly declaiming. The

title of this piece, from 1999, explains, “Superman recites selections from ‘The Bell Jar’ and other works by Sylvia Plath.”

Featured in the main space is a glowing, sculptural vision of the bottled Kandor: a cluster of translucent spires immersed in purple-tinted water within a tall bell jar. It is displayed on a tiered pedestal that could have been designed for a sci-fi television series.

Incongruously, an old compressed-air tank lies on the floor, a hose connecting it to the bell jar. The reason for this is shown in a set of video loops projected on the gallery walls. Each pictures in close-up a bottle holding a different colored liquid that is swirling and bubbling because of a stream of air running into it. Thus you behold Kandor in pristine miniature under glass and, in the videos, the chaos that nearly consumed it.

A large banner hanging on one wall announces a coming event called “Kandor-Con.” Kelley had planned to organize a convention around the Kandor project that would spoof the annual comic-book convention called Comic-Con.

In the Freudian terms that Kelley himself favored, I imagine that Kandor represents a grown-up’s fantasy of childhood as a blissful golden age: an idealizing vision that represses memories of real-life suffering. Viewed sociologically, Kandor is the crystal city of Modernism, the utopian culmination of enlightened reason.

The ideological implications are clear: Modernity represses awareness of its own traumatic history. So it is paradoxically fitting to have Superman, champion of truth, justice and the American way, reciting passages from Plath’s literature about the horrors of patriarchy.

I cannot help thinking that Kandor and Superman meant something more personal to Kelley, too. Seen as an image of order and integration in a bottle, Kandor might represent a part of Kelley himself, his own highly developed intellect. Superman, the busy multitasker constantly saving the world in great and small ways, could be the alter ego of Kelley, who, as a globe-roving exhibitor, employed as many as 30 people to keep his enterprise going.

But he paid a price for his superhuman efforts. Shortly before he died, Kelley complained in an interview that he was exhausted and terrified by major exhibition commitments he’d made. He spoke of retiring from art. He was not Superman, after all.

Kelley’s ambivalence about order and chaos is vividly evident in the exhibition’s second part, which consists of seven videos dating from 1983 to 1992, running on large flat screens. On one floor, four are playing out loud at the same time, creating a cacophonous din. The three upstairs you can listen to on headphones, which, however, hardly keep out the recorded sounds of Kelley’s noise band the Poetics booming from speakers in the room. (Mr. Falckenberg has said that that is how Kelley would have wanted it.)

By turns funny, messy, confusing, tedious and revelatory, the videos are rife with preoccupations having to do with the body, Oedipal conflict and popular myths. The standouts are two that Kelley made in collaboration with Paul McCarthy, the West Coast dean of polymorphous perversity. “Heidi” is a gross-out version of the beloved tale of Alpine innocence. In “Family Tyranny” Mr. McCarthy is a mumbling, abusive father figure in lederhosen, and Kelley his cowering son.

The exhibition's two parts suggest a struggle to integrate the shattering oppositional tensions in Kelley's work. He probably would have rejected the goal of holistic resolution.

He told one interviewer: "I became an artist to fail. I wanted to do something that rules out success and makes sure I'm not a useful member of society." Another time he declared, "I don't believe in anything."

But I do not believe that. I think he was an idealist of the first order, but a deeply disappointed one.