

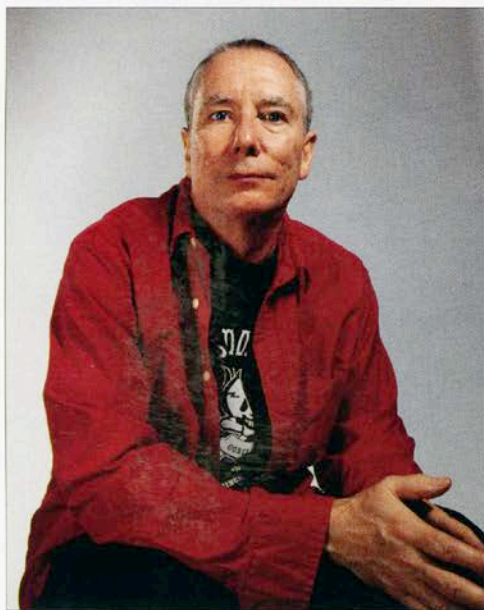
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NEWS

Making Success From Failure

Mike Kelley gave voice to the impure, the idiotic, and the pathetic **BY KIM LEVIN**



Mike Kelley, the grand master of Abject art, died in his home on January 31 at the age of 57, an apparent suicide. Anarchic and provocative, the multitasking artist was hugely influential. He not only managed to change the world's perception of Los Angeles art in the 1980s and '90s, but his "bad taste and good ideas"—as one British critic put it—altered the whole tenor of contempo-

rary art, as well as the terms of its esthetics.

Kelley's connection with visual art began with his participation in the Detroit music scene. While studying psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, he cofounded the proto-punk noise band Destroy All Monsters at the tail end of 1973, with fellow artists Jim Shaw, Niagara, and Cary Loren. Their first gig was on New Year's Eve at a Detroit comic-book convention, where they played two lines from Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" over and over against a wall of feedback and got unceremoniously thrown out. Kelley moved on to CalArts in 1978.

With his messy but complex work made up of comic books, yearbooks, grungy toys and blankets, buttons, cloth banners, and found objects, including trash, Kelley demonstrated his insatiable curiosity and radical creativity. His work was confrontational, catholic, and insistently working class; it had to do with defects and demons, childhood and scatology, the monstrous and the uncanny. The drawings, paintings, sculpture, photographs, video, constructions, performances, and installations that made use of all of them at once, helped put Los Angeles on the art-world map.

He gave voice to the impure, the idiotic, and the pathetic, embracing not only kitsch and the vernacular, but also the concept of failure. The short-lived Abject art movement still permeates our taste. His work had to do with class struggle, repressed memories, and psychological, physical, and mystic space. He parsed the difference between normality, crimi-

nality, and perversion, once even including in a major piece a painting by a Sing Sing convict. Ultimately, the subtext of his work was rebellious adolescence and the loss of childhood innocence.

For a while Kelley staged dramas with battered stuffed toys and old crocheted afghans. His 1987 wall hanging *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, which was almost instantly bought by the Whitney, is an improbable security-blanket masterpiece. He restaged institutional environments, as in *Educational Complex* (1995), which, he wrote, was "a model of every school I ever went to, plus the home I grew up in, with all the parts I can't remember left blank," and to be sure the art world got it, he compared his use of repressed memory to Hans Hofmann's push-and-pull theory. In 2010 he returned to Detroit to rebuild his childhood home as a public work on wheels and titled it *Mobile Homestead*. His documentaries resulting from this project are in the current Whitney Biennial. In 2011 he showed a series of chilling glass-skyscraper works, called "Kandors"—the name of Superman's hometown on the planet Krypton.

Throughout his career, Kelley frequently collaborated with Tony Oursler, Paul McCarthy, and John Miller, and also did projects with Raymond Pettibon, Dennis Cooper, Bob Flanagan, Michael Smith, and the band Sonic Youth. He participated in countless major shows, including the 1992 Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, survey "Helter Skelter." In 1993 the Whitney organized his midcareer retrospective, which was titled "Catholic Tastes."

The day after he died, his studio, colleagues, and friends posted the following message on his homepage: "For Mike history existed only to be reconstructed, memory was selective, faulty and willful and life itself vibrant but also dysfunctional. We can hear him disagreeing with us." In the words of his hero, the film legend John Waters, who influenced him and later collected his work, Kelley was "the man who made pitiful seem sexy." ■

Kim Levin is an independent art critic and curator.