

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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New Mike Kelley exhibition in Milan is vast and personal

Jori Finkel



An installation shot of "Mike Kelley: Eternity is a Long Time," curated by Emi Fontana and Andrea Lissoni for the HangarBicocca in Milan (Agostino Osio, Fondazione HangarBicocca / copyright by Estate of Mike Kelley / May 21, 2013)

While the Venice Biennale attracts the contemporary art crowd this week, curator Emi Fontana has helped turn Milan into a destination for Mike Kelley fans.

The Milan-born, L.A.-based curator has just finished installing "Mike Kelley: Eternity is a Long Time" in the massive kunsthalle HangarBicocca, one of the biggest shows organized since the artist's death in 2012. It features eight major installations, including two she had exhibited at her own gallery in Milan in 2000 before an eight-year romantic relationship with the artist.

Jori Finkel caught up with the high-voltage, if jet-lagged, curator by phone in Venice. Her show opened last week and runs through Sept 8.

JF: What kind of reactions did you get at the opening?

EF: Some people seemed really touched. People told me the show was almost like getting a peek into Mike's mind, which is exactly what I wanted: to give an idea of his process of making works.

JF: How did your show come about?

EF: Andrea Lissoni, the curator at the Hangar and my co-curator for the show, called me about a year ago with the idea. It was six months after Mike died and I was still in this deep pain. Mike had mixed feelings about the idea of being historicized, so I was doubtful about doing something so soon. I took some time to think about it, before I decided I was going to do it. I realized that

the only way I had to do this was by starting from myself and my own relationship with Mike. Putting together the exhibition, I was trying to get to the core of my passion for his work.

JF: It sounds quite different from the retrospective of his work organized by the Stedelijk that is now in Paris and heading to New York.

EF: I knew that I did not want to do a retrospective or survey. The way I built the show, it's not chronological or logical but analogical, bringing works together by association. It's more intuitive. There are certain works where you find his physical presence in it; works deal with memory. And the show is concentrating on a relatively limited period of time, works from 2000 to 2006 with the exception of 'Banana Man (1983).' The beginning of the millennium is a very important moment for Mike in terms of his creativity: his work becomes very mature but extremely vital and vibrant, and he had put together different practices he had worked with in the past: the performance, video and all the writing that is underneath everything, it all really flourished in that moment.

JF: Where does the title of the show come from?

EF: It comes from 'Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #1'—a work with sculptural and video components that I first showed in my Milan gallery in 2000. [The show's title] is a sentence that one of the characters in a video says to the other, just before they commit suicide with an oven: 'Eternity is a long time, isn't it?'

JF: It's hard not to read the title in terms of Mike's suicide.

EF: It was not my first thought really. I liked the way it referred to a time that is not linear. For me it's about Mike's work— and how to present it within an open structure. It is kind of Mike Kelley unframed.

JF: But did you feel like Mike's death helped to shape the show, or that you were confronting his death through it?

EF: In a specific way, working on the show without him, I had to confront an absence. And the way the show is installed is very different than the way Mike would install his work. He would always fill up the space completely, almost this horror vacui. Instead, in this show because of the size of the exhibition space, there is a lot of space in between the works, so I think it gives viewers a chance to absorb many layers of meaning of the work as well as its sensorial stimulation. I like the space in between, and that's also an absence somehow.

JF: What can you tell me about the piece 'Runway for Interactive DJ Event,' which you showed in your gallery in 2000 as well?

EF: It's a sculpture that incorporates performance in the form of video, so you see Mike himself. He was working with these little clothes that he had stripped off the animals in 'Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites,' the piece that MoMA just bought. He laid the little clothes out on this platform and it looked like a runway. That was at the end of the 1990s when fashion was really coming into the art world, so I think it's satiric comment on that. In the video, you see him picking up all these clothes and giving descriptions of the styles and cultures and subcultures that the clothes represent.

JF: What do you think will be the biggest surprise for people who think they already know Mike's work?

EF: "Profondeurs Vertes (Green Depths)" was commissioned in 2006 and shown at the Louvre and then it was pretty much forgotten. The work is so atypical. It's so beautiful. It starts with two early American paintings from the Detroit Institute of Arts that influenced him as a kid: "Watson and the Shark" by John Singleton Copley and "Recitation" by Thomas Wilmer Dewing. The soundtrack has women's poetry from the 1800s as well as the second chant of Maldoror by Lautréamont in which he is talking about a female shark. People have so many stereotypes of Mike's work as "bad boy" or "transgressive." But this work reveals Mike's attention to gender issues and his deep connoisseurship of art history and also poetry, one of his passions.

JF: Have you ever worked with HangarBicocca before?

EF: No, and the site is amazing. Of all the spaces for contemporary art in Italy, it had the highest number of visitors last year. It's such a big space--it used to be a factory for building train parts. Not to fall into stereotypes again, but as a "good Catholic boy" Mike always wanted to show in a cathedral. And this space really looks like a cathedral—it's so big, the ceilings are so high, and it's very dark in the show, with just the works lighted, creating all these islands of meaning.

JF: Have you seen anything in Venice worth writing home about yet?

EF: Massimiliano Gioni's show "Il Palazzo Enciclopedico" ["The Encyclopedic Palace"] is extremely interesting, with many artists who are not known to the general public or even to the art crowd. I was happy to see in the show artists who are normally considered outsiders—like a great room with paintings and photographs by Eugene von Bruenchenhein. I felt at home because in my house in South Pasadena one of his dreamy outer space paintings from the '50s is hanging above the couch. I discovered his paintings years ago with Mike, who was always very interested in artists not recognized by the art system.