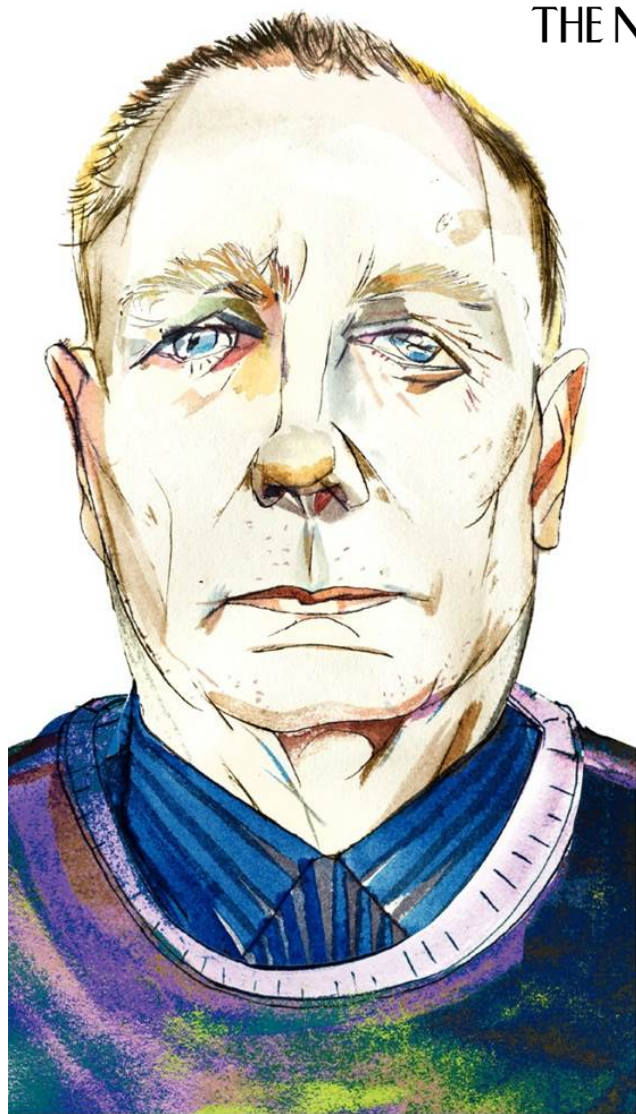


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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WORKING-CLASS HERO

Mike Kelley's brilliant insolence comes to MOMA PS1.

THAT A MAJOR MIKE KELLEY retrospective opens this week at MOMA's PS1 annex, in Long Island City, rather than at the museum's West Fifty-third Street basilica feels disrespectful. It might have pleased Kelley, who gloried in being an underdog and chafed at his international fame as the artist laureate of the punk generation. His last years suggested an inverse ratio of worldly success to personal happiness. He committed suicide in January, 2012, at the age of fifty-seven. The loss still hurts. Whether you like or dislike him, as you might by turns, he felt as indispensable as a compass in the darker woods of contemporary experience.

Kelley, who lived for thirty-four years in Los Angeles, grew up in a suburb of Detroit and marinated in the music scene that gave

the world Iggy and the Stooges. He brought west with him a bitterly humorous, worm's-eye view of American society and culture. Upon graduating from the avant-garde California Institute of the Arts, he commenced a rolling *Gesamtkunstwerk* of drawings, sculptures, collages, assemblages, installations, textile banners, videos, and live performance. Quaking sensitivity and a rigorous intellect inform the work, which resolves the Warholian conundrum of high versus low by embracing the irredeemably squalid.

Kelley upended the dewy narcissisms of hippies and the "Me" generation by opposing their spires of grandiosity with subbasements of antic melancholia. He did it with insolence, anguish, and inexhaustible flair. "PANTS SHITTER & PROUD," reads an early epithet. Kelley's masterpiece, "More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid" (1987), incorporating a mountain of found handmade stuffed animals, amounts to a visual translation of W. B. Yeats's line "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." A similar despairing mockery attends satires of Sister Mary Corita Kent's saccharine peace-and-love graphics, which had afflicted Kelley during his Catholic boyhood. He tapped a brackish geyser of blue-collar humor by filling art spaces with the sorts of raucously obscene cartoons that adorn garage offices and factory locker rooms. Elaborate architectural models replicate all of the institutions that Kelley ever attended; they have blank zones, which, if you apply Freud's theory of repressed memory, may represent sites of traumatic abuse. His last major work is a full-scale replica of his childhood home, a modest bungalow that resides as a public sculpture in his painfully beloved Detroit.

Kelley still seems omnipresent, because his influence is so wide and deep. Beyond his frequent collaborators in L.A., notably Paul McCarthy and Jim Shaw, artists of many stripes have insured that the news he delivered stays fresh. Now that the world's lower classes confront the upper across a widening economic and social abyss, the location of the show, relative to MOMA's headquarters, makes for a succinct allegory, ranged on either side of the East River.

—Peter Schjeldahl