

GAGOSIAN GALLERY ARTFORUM

DETROIT

Mike Kelley

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART DETROIT

Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*, 2010–, opened to the public in its permanent location in midtown Detroit this past May, a little more than a year after the artist's untimely death. The edifice, a full-scale simulation of his childhood domicile in Detroit's working-class suburb Westland, stands as a (anti-) monument to Kelley as well as to the contradictory, financially depressed city that it engages. Commissioned by Artangel and initially comprising the facade and front third of the Kelley family's ranch-style house, the fragmentary homestead was for two and a half years either being transported on a flatbed truck, secured in a local storage facility, or parked on a lot outside MOCAD; in its goofy and vernacular form, it appeared unsuited for its ostensible purpose of social engagement. The seemingly ironic public artwork was then the subject of three surprisingly affecting feature-length videos (all 2010–11) that describe a music-suffused journey between MOCAD and the outskirts of the city, featuring shots of the house-on-wheels intercut with interviews of people who lived and worked along these paths, thereby allowing Detroit to tell its own story.



Mike Kelley, *Mobile Homestead* (detail), 2010–. Installation view, 4454 Woodward Avenue, Detroit.

Now in its final iteration, *Mobile Homestead* is docked to a “mother ship” that forms the rest of Kelley's house, including a two-car garage and a bi-level basement complex made up of small rooms accessible only via various ladders. The ground floor, run by MOCAD's Department of Education and Public Engagement and containing an office for the museum's curator of education, functions like a community center, so far offering resources such as a lending library and trading post. The subterranean areas, meanwhile, constitute a fiercely concealed side of the project: Kelley stipulated that the underground space was to be used for more “covert” production, with no public admission. The Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts now oversees all activities there, which, in the artist's words, are meant to be “private rites of an aesthetic nature.” As he did in *Educational Complex*, 1995, and related works, Kelley here has psychologized architecture, creating an installation whose upstairs/downstairs divide evokes conflicts between public and private, social and antisocial, conscious and unconscious. In keeping with this intention, selected artists will purportedly be invited to work secretly below, their activities hidden from the visitors above. The center is thus now a context for social practice and public art that includes its own critique, a space that highlights the tensions between artists and their audiences, allowing the two to operate within the same structure, while insisting on a divide.

“Goin’ Home,” a small exhibition at MOCAD installed for the grand opening of the project this spring, presented the three *Mobile Homestead* films as well as documentation and e-mails from Kelley. In one message, the artist asks to be fully involved in any discussion of activities at the house during its first few years in operation. At various times, he considered using the location as the venue for a “senior citizens watercolor society” or for a fetish show of leather s/m clothing and implements, and as a postal address for homeless persons. In the absence of Kelley himself, who died leaving the building's construction unfinished, *Mobile Homestead* engenders inescapable feelings of tragic endings, stasis, and death, the labyrinthine basements now lying underneath like a kind of bizarre tomb complex. Yet to read the project merely in terms of Kelley's own biography is to miss its radical nature. Although the artist scavenged his own life, evoking his signature themes of childhood, trauma, and failure in this work, he also blended his personal story with a more common narrative, opening up the space of his past to the general public by mixing truth with fabrication, allegory with social practice, and the creative act with the struggle to shape one's life. Kelley's final artwork—situated in what is now the largest American city ever to file for bankruptcy—sounds apposite notes of curious optimism and mordant despair.

—Matthew Biro