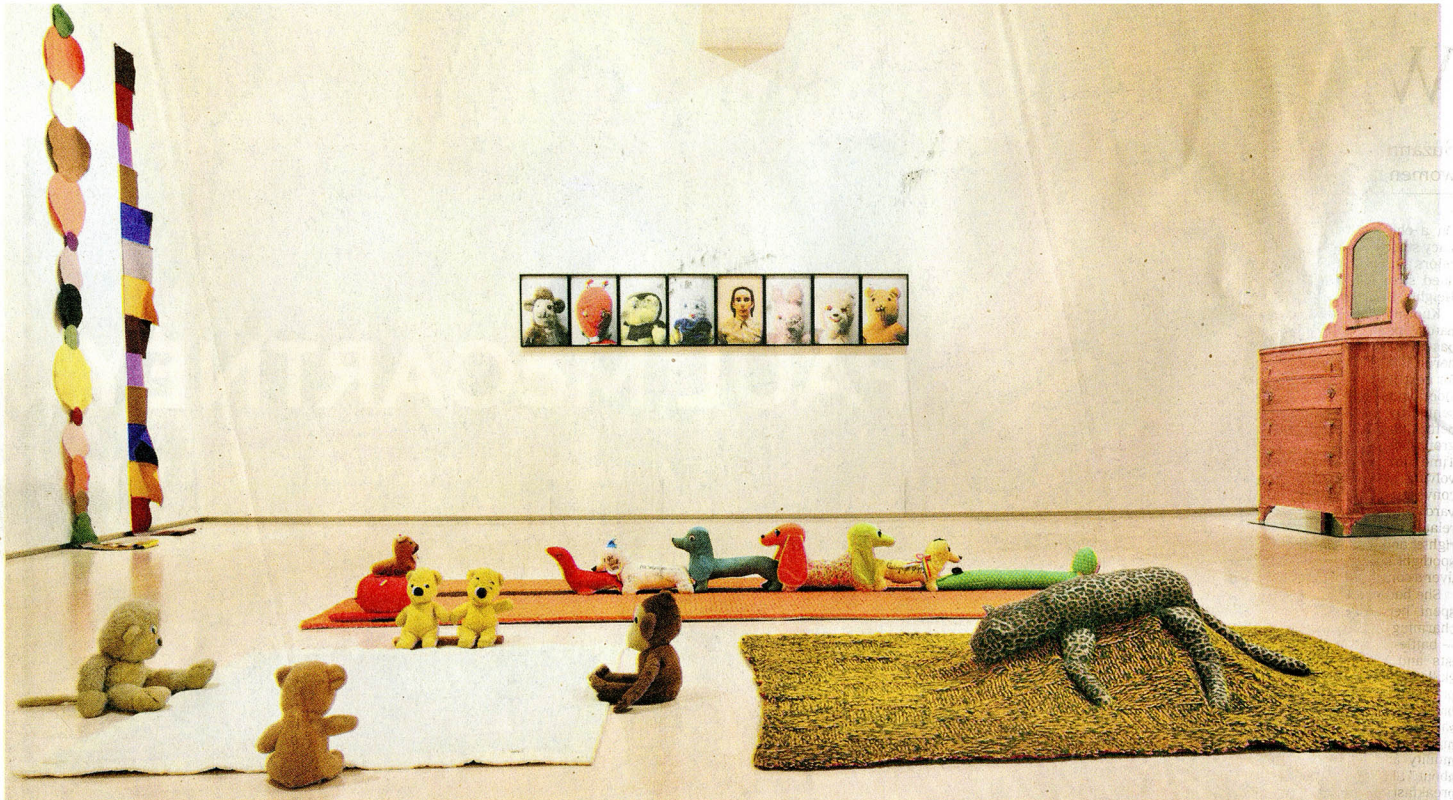


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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A Maverick as Student and Teacher

A Mike Kelley retrospective completely fills MoMA PS1.

By RANDY KENNEDY

Only a few days after the artist Mike Kelley committed suicide last year by sealing himself inside his bathroom in South Pasadena, Calif., and asphyxiating himself with fumes from a barbecue grill, an impromptu memorial sprouted near his studio in Los Angeles.

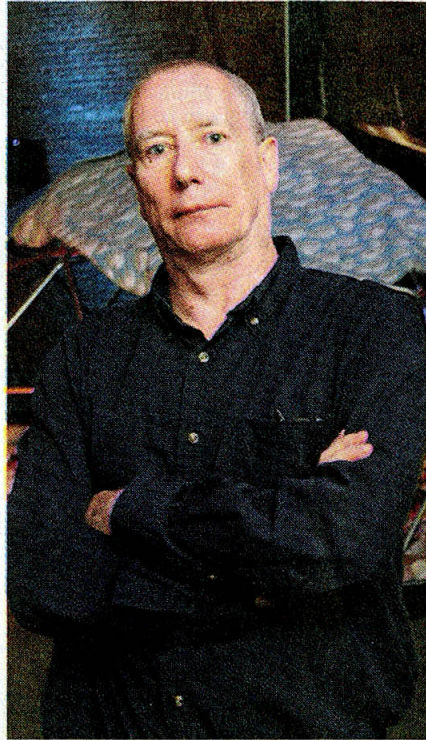
Next to an empty lot, friends and fans filled an abandoned carport with many of the things that had come to be seen as Kelley's formal calling cards: stuffed animals, crocheted blankets, melted candles and other crafty castoffs he said he was drawn to because they were usually invisible as aesthetic objects, and about as antiheroic as art materials could be. The memorial's location could hardly have been more fitting for an artist who spent much of his time scavenging in America's cultural cul-de-sacs.

But if you were to try to imagine a fitting place to see the breadth of Kelley's work, you might come up with something like this: a defunct school; a cavernous, looming neo-Romanesque one whose walls breathe civic religiosity and generations of public education. Again and again in his career, Kelley — whose father was a public school janitorial chief in Detroit — returned to the school as the crucible of American identity, of values (some of which we'd be better off without), of high and low culture, of repression and cruelty and of modern folk rituals.

Beginning on Sunday, his vast, very dark and very funny body of work will completely fill such a school building, the century-old one that houses MoMA PS1, the Museum of Modern Art's affiliate in Long Island City, Queens. It will be the first time the entire building has been given over to one artist, with a survey that covers almost three decades of video, sculpture, performance, painting and installation, and seeks to make a case for Kelley's career, even cut short, as one of the most important and influential in contemporary art.

"In a term that Mike would have probably used, it's uncanny that the show is going to be there in a school building," said the curator Ann Goldstein, who originated the retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in late 2012.

In New York, the show will contain, sometimes literally, schools within schools. "Educational Complex," a 1995 work, is a huge white architectural model that clusters together every single school Kelley ever attended, a comic accumulation that looks like a military complex gone mad. It is a riff less about Modernism and Minimalism than about the idea of education — specifically art education, the received no-



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tions of art history itself — as a kind of abuse. (Using the psychological concept of repressed memory syndrome, the parts of the schools that Kelley couldn't remember are rendered as blanks.)

"Since I am an artist," Kelley once wrote, with a characteristic bone-dry wit, "it seemed natural to look to my own aesthetic training as the root of my secret indoctrination in perversity and possibly as the site of my own abuse. My education must have been a form of mental abuse, of brainwashing."

But of course Kelley, who was raised in a Roman Catholic family in the suburbs of Detroit, was a deeply academically trained artist. He not only went to graduate school but also was a beloved teacher at one, the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, for almost two decades.

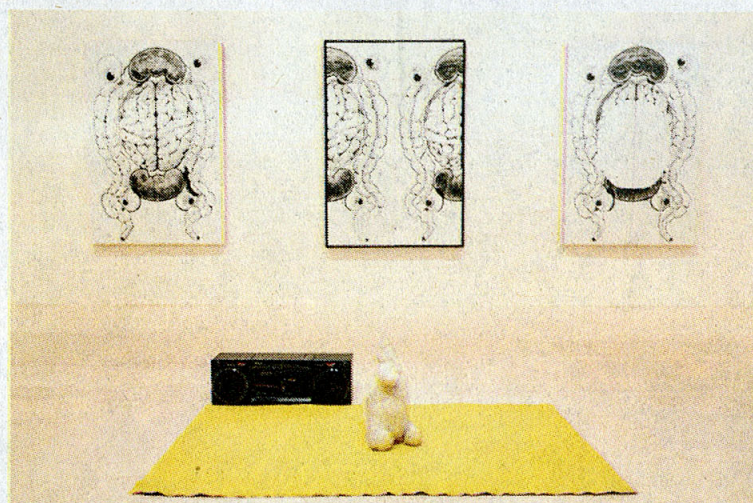
He was an incisive, sometimes dizzyingly erudite writer about his own work and that of others, sweeping from Egyptian funerary practices to Penthouse letters in the space of a single essay. And he approached the subject matter that defined much of his art — mass culture, trash culture and all manner of subcultures — with a taxonomical zeal to rival that of any sociologist. His knowledge of things usually considered beneath serious cultural consideration, much less study — U.F.O. theorists, donkey basketball games, horror films, sci-fi illustration, Satanism, '70s smut magazines, Superman, Mexican wrestlers, antiquing, yarn dolls, Basil Wolverton drawings — was prodigious.



COURTESY MIKE KELLEY FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

Top, a room from the Mike Kelley exhibition opening on Sunday at MoMA PS1. Above left, "Ahh... Youth!" (1991/2007); above right, "Antiqued (Prematurely Aged)" (1987). The survey covers almost three decades of Kelley's video, sculpture, performance, painting and installation.

'It's uncanny that the show is going to be there in a school building.'



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Top left, Mike Kelley in 2009. Top, his "Catholic Birdhouse" (1978). Above, on the floor, "Dialogue #5 (One Hand Clapping)" (1991); and on the wall, from Kelley's "Incorrect Sexual Models" series of 1987, from left, "Utopia," "Hermaphrodite" and "Mommy's Penis."

And yet he repeatedly made clear that he did not particularly like pop culture. "I think it's garbage," he said in one interview. "But that's the culture I live in, and that's the culture people speak. I'm an avant-gardist. We're living in the postmodern age, the death of the avant-garde. So, all I can really do now is work with this dominant culture and flay it, rip it apart, reconfigure it, expose it — because popular culture is really invisible. People are really visually illiterate. They learn to read in school, but they don't learn to decode images." (The director John Waters once aptly called Kelley a "terrorist and a healer.")

The art historian Thomas Crow, who taught a semester-long seminar on Kelley at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts this year, described his work as pivotal. "I see him as having been a figure who was a bridge from the breakout '60s generation of minimalists and conceptualists, who took art away from a rather

austere sense of itself and made it into something that could touch on almost every aspect of experience."

He added: "I taught the seminar because I felt that something should be done in response to that great loss. I'm always very interested in looking at artists who are asking themselves the question of why they do what they do, who are looking at deep decisions about how we're going to live our lives. I thought Mike was somebody who right from the beginning did that implicitly as well as explicitly."

In large part because of that, fellow artists were drawn to him from the beginning, and he was the rare contemporary figure who could be described as both an artist's artist and, by the end of his career, a commercial luminary, showing at the Gagosian Gallery and commanding million-plus market prices for works.

"When I first knew him in the late '70s and early '80s, only artists had his work up in their homes and collected him avidly," said the painter Lari Pittman, whose work Kelley also collected. "And a lot of those artists found that they had to sell that work because then they could afford to build their own studios or houses. It became worth that much." Mr. Pittman and other friends of Kelley's said they believed that his emergence as an establishment art star was both a vindication and a burden he struggled to carry.

"He was fiercely competitive, as he should have been," said Mr. Pittman, who added that he was "anguished over his death."

"And I think he was always trying to figure out what was going to be best for his work."

The musician and artist Kim Gordon, a longtime friend, said: "I think he was on a ride, and he just didn't quite know how to get off it. He was so driven and he was working all the time."

The idea for a survey of Kelley's career was under way while he was alive, and he worked actively with the curator Eva Meyer-Hermann on what would have been a thematic exhibition at the Stedelijk. But in late 2011 and early 2012, his battles with depression and drinking deepened, and his death at 57 transformed the show into a retrospective in every sense of the word, a fact curators have had to keep constantly in view.

"There are many ways people will want to make sense of the suicide through his work," said Peter Eleey, PS1's associate director of exhibitions and the organizer of the New York version of the show along with Connie Butler. "But I think our job is to try to create more room around the work, so it's not bound to that, and you can come at it from lots of directions."

"In some ways, it's strange," he added, "because the work can feel very complete

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when you look at it — like a mathematical proof in its elegance.”

Klaus Biesenbach, PSI’s director, visited Kelley in Los Angeles three times in 2010 and 2011 as PSI and the Museum of Modern Art were exploring being sites for the survey. “I didn’t know him that well,” Mr. Biesenbach said. “But he seemed very strong at the time. He was challenging me in a way that was impressive to me. He wanted to figure out a way to make a show that was something different and unexpected.”

Asked if he thought Kelley would approve of how the scope of his career was being presented in his absence, he said: “I don’t know if he would have liked it, but with Mike what was important was both ‘What did he like?’ and ‘What did he like to not like?’”

On a recent afternoon, crates from museums and private collections around the world filled several floors of PSI, as dozens of works — beautiful, banal, creepy, hilarious and abstrusely intellectual — were being installed. One from 2006, “Rose Hobart II,” is as good an example as any of Kelley’s stylistic compass. Situated by itself in an otherwise empty room, it is a plain black geometric structure that looks something like a failed doghouse or a Minimalist work by Robert Morris.

But the shape is inspired by the movie production studio, nicknamed Black Maria, that Thomas Edison built in West Orange, N.J., and by megaphone-shaped structures that Kelley made early in his career. And the sculpture is not simply to be looked at; it’s to be crawled inside of, where the visitor can peer through peepholes and watch the shower scene from the 1982 sex romp “Porky’s,” edited down by Kelley to be accompanied by passages from the electronic music pioneer Morton Subotnik.

For those who worked with Kelley and helped run his studio, assisting in the minutiae of the retrospective has been a difficult job. “We’re in this position of standing in for Mike, as it were, although it’s impossible for anyone really to do that,” said Mary Clare Stevens, who worked closely with Kelley for a decade and is now executive director of the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, which he created before his death. “It’s been a rough process. It brings up a lot of things, but it’s also kind of healing. I had a lot of doubts initially about whether it was right to go ahead with a retrospective so soon, but I think it was the right decision.”

“I’m just sad,” Ms. Stevens added, “because Mike always had an unbelievably

For Kelley, what was important was ‘What did he like?’ and ‘What did he like to not like?’

huge backlog of work, and if he had lived to be 90, I don’t think he would have been able to do even a fraction of what he wanted to do.”

If he had lived to see the work come to PSI, she said, he undoubtedly would have been brimming with ideas about how to use the old school building, and he would have created new pieces for it. One such piece might have been truly memorable, a melding of two American institutions in a way that could occur only in a Kelleyian universe.

“Before he died, he was talking a lot about mud wrestling,” Ms. Stevens said. “He was really fascinated by it. So my fantasy was that we were going to have mud wrestling matches there, probably somewhere down in the basement.”

“Arena #10 (Dogs)” (1990), foreground, and “Arena #8 (Leopard)” (1990), among Kelley’s stuffed-animal works.