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Exploring Formative Moments

Mike Kelley's Classroom-Inspired Installations at MoMA PS1

Kelly Crow



Mike Kelley as the Banana Man in 1981. (c) Estate of Mike Kelley/ Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts/ Jim McHugh (photo)

Mike Kelley, a Los Angeles-based artist who committed suicide last year at age 57, earned an international reputation in part by making elaborate installations that explored the ways in which people's identities are shaped in the classroom—and in the scrappy schoolyard beyond.

So it is tantalizing, and fitting, that his first New York retrospective in two decades will open Sunday at MoMA PS1, which is housed in a former Long Island City elementary school.

In a rare move, MoMA PS1 has devoted its entire space—from its boiler room to the classrooms above—to "Mike Kelley," which runs through Feb. 2. The 250 pieces in the exhibit arguably represent some of his best.

Mr. Kelley grew up in a middle-class suburb of Detroit, where he watched the art establishment chase after Andy Warhol's slick appropriation of soup cans and Hollywood starlets. He, however, felt more drawn to lower-end pop culture artifacts like cheeky comics, frat-party fliers and soiled stuffed animals. By focusing on the overlooked ephemera of America's basements, he influenced generations of thrift-store artists who followed, such as Sterling Ruby.

MoMA PS1's show includes Mr. Kelley's 1987 masterpiece "More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid," a cheery yet unnerving tapestry he created by sewing together dozens of crocheted dolls and handmade stuffed animals he found at flea markets, objects of homespun affection that had been tossed out. The Whitney Museum of American Art owns this work,

which has been traveling with the retrospective that opened last fall at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. Next spring, the show will make its final stop at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art.

Peter Eleey, a curator and associate director at MoMA PS1, said he is adding several new Kelley works that haven't been seen in the show's previous iterations. He is also trying to take advantage of the "friction" of PS1's school setting.

In a sunken space near the entry, visitors will see "From My Institution to Yours," Mr. Kelley's 1987 series of oversize posters that echo the har-har jokes that often get taped to office refrigerators or factory locker rooms. One example shows a stooped-shouldered mouse accompanied by a caption: "Shall I Rush Your Rush Job Before I Start the Rush Job I Was Rushing When You Rushed In?"

Mr. Eleey said the artist, who was teaching art at the California Institute of the Arts at the time he created the installation, always wished he could string a red ribbon from these posters to the private workroom of whatever museum or school displayed them. In a nod to these wishes, Mr. Eleey suspended a 50-foot-long ribbon along the museum's basement ceiling leading from the posters to an area close to PS1's own workroom.

Another highlight is "Educational Complex," a vast, architectural model of all the schools Mr. Kelley attended, including CalArts. The artist left blank whatever parts of these buildings he couldn't recall.

Moreover, he suggested that he may have experienced some form of trauma in these areas but had repressed the memories, Mr. Eleey said. Because Mr. Kelley often employed the motif of repressed memory in his artworks, collectors have often wondered whether he suffered some form of abuse during his lifetime.

Mr. Eleey said the artist didn't—but he was intrigued by the fact that people often made nefarious assumptions along these lines merely by seeing the materials he worked with, like stuffed animals and felt posters. To Mr. Kelley, getting a bad part in the school play or getting hassled by a bully could prove as formative to a child's identity as anything being taught in textbooks.

After all, Mr. Eleey said, "growing up is always traumatic, right?"