

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

This Show's as Big as His Career *'Mike Kelley,' a Survey at MoMA PS1 in Queens*

Holland Cotter



'Mike Kelley': Images from the new show at MoMA PS 1

Plainly put, the Mike Kelley retrospective, fresh from Europe to MoMA PS1, knocks everything else in New York this fall right out of the ring. It's immense, filling 40,000 square feet of gallery space, including a sub-basement boiler room. And it's that extremely rare thing, a huge show that should be huge. Kelley earned this blowout; his work sustains it.

In a three-decade career, cut off abruptly by his suicide, at 57, last year, Kelley did it all, in terms of genre: performance, painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, video, installation, sound art and writing. And he wove together — twisted together — all of that into what amounted to a single conceptual project based on recurrent themes: social class, popular culture, black humor, anti-formalist rigor and, though rarely acknowledged, a moral sense, unshakably skeptical, that ran through everything like a spine.

Kelley often complained that people confused his art and his life, yet he constantly mined his past for material.

He was born in 1954 into a working-class Irish Catholic family in suburban Detroit. He was a bookish kid who aspired to be a writer but feared he didn't have the chops, so he went for art. His family scorned his ambitions, but his push-back, perversity-savoring personality saw him through.

Instead of doing sports, he learned to sew.

Although straight, he acted queer, and once wore a dress to school.

His early life and art were both shaped by his resistance to authority in any form, at home, in school and in the world. Normal was a no-go zone. His youthful heroes included William Burroughs, Sun Ra, Gertrude Stein, Basil Wolverton, Abbie Hoffman and the Cockettes.

In high school and college, he hung with the freaks as the utopian tide of hippiedom receded, and anarchist punk rippled in. While an art student at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, he and some friends started a noise band called Destroy All Monsters, which was more about art and language than about music. It confirmed his interest in performance, which he carried with him to graduate school at the California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts, in Los Angeles County.

When he arrived there in 1976, CalArts was a bastion of Conceptualism, art about thinking, to which he added acting and making. Still in a performance groove, he invented musical instruments — he called them “performative sculptures” — that plunked or beeped or just sat around. For his graduate show, and to everyone’s puzzlement, he built a set of wooden birdhouses, of a sort that might have emerged from high school shop class and to which he gave droll extra-avian titles like “Gothic Birdhouse” and “Catholic Birdhouse.”

These are some of the earliest works in the show. They introduced a vernacular crafts aesthetic that had virtually no connection to any art school art at that time but that would become a staple for Kelley. They also carried critical associations with domesticity, maleness and childhood, which were among his recurrent subjects.

To Kelley, the conventional notion that childhood was a benign, prefallen state, or that humans could ever have a state, was delusional. He skewered it again and again. For a 1983 video called “The Banana Man,” he borrowed a character from the television show “Captain Kangaroo” and turned him into a crazed camp clown passing out sex tips instead of sweets.

In 1987, as part of a multimedia project called “Half a Man,” Kelley made sculptures from hand dolls and stuffed animals that he found in thrift shops. Set out in erotic tableaux, sewn together in cruelly jammed clusters, shrouded under old blankets and afghans, they evoked sadness and anger in viewers, of an intensity that surprised Kelley, who meant them to register as provocative but emotionally ambiguous.

These sculptures, which appeared in his 1993 Whitney Museum survey, became his best-known images because they could function as stand-alone objects, a thing critics knew how to write about and galleries knew how to sell. By contrast, the fertile but less graspable range of work that led up to them was dismissed or ignored, and it’s this art that the PS1 show most valuably restores to us.

A lot of it was performance, and doesn’t survive. Kelley refused to have most of his early performances videotaped, insisting that they were one-time-only events, period. Yet many of these events generated sculptures, paintings and installations, and these are still around. One installation, the 1985-86 “Plato’s Cave, Rothko’s Chapel, Lincoln’s Profile,” designed as performance environment, is a classic Kelley blend of scatology and eschatology, with paintings and drawings referring to bodily functions, Afro wigs, Nazis, gender confusion and Jesus.

Like so much of Kelley’s output, this work is meticulously done but looks as if it should smell bad. It’s perfectly horrid. And great.

Another complex environment, “The Sublime,” from 1984, is essentially a poison pen letter to spiritual transcendence, or art’s claim to it, and is punctuated by a trippy drawing of what could be the Big Bang. It looks pretty cosmic until you notice that the energy waves have a knotty-pine

pattern, familiar from rec room walls, and the source of their radiation is a tiny, centrally placed sketch of a suburban home.

Home, in one form or another, is what Kelley kept coming back to.

Sometimes home was blue-collar America, as in the 1987 installation “From My Institution to Yours,” which introduced loading dock graffiti and militant union emblems into a rarefied museum environment.

Home was also school. Kelley spent most of his life either studying or teaching. For the 1995 tabletop piece “Educational Complex,” he created architectural models of every school he ever attended. (If you crawl under the table and look up, you can see the CalArts basement.)

And long after he moved out, Detroit, too, was still home. In 2001, for the city’s tricentennial celebration, he recreated a statue of the astronaut John Glenn that stood in his high school library, piecing the new version together from kitchen crockery and glassware shards dredged from the Detroit River. In 2010, he built a full-scale model of the house he grew up in and had it driven through town on a flatbed truck.

And there was always that psychic terrain, American childhood, the abject state you both didn’t want to revisit and couldn’t escape from.

His largest project ever, the 2005 “Day Is Done,” is basically a multimedia evocation of that state. And far from being a sentimental immersion, it feels like an act of aggravated assault. Inspired by the New Age faith in repressed memory of traumatic abuse, the piece consists of some two dozen filmed re-creations of high school yearbook photos — of sports meets, pageants, proms — with each blast from the past reincarnated as a full-color, hellishly high-volume video.

Finally, home is a utopian fantasy. The “Kandor Project” is a series of sculptures named for the Kryptonite city where Superman was born and which, according to the DC Comics of Kelley’s youth, the Man of Steel kept preserved in miniature form under glass. From 1999 to 2011, Kelley created numerous variations on the Kandor image — the series was unfinished at his death — all cast in colored resin and either encased in sleek containers or set on funky faux-rock stands.

These late sculptures are placed near the beginning of the show, which was organized by Ann Goldstein, director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (from an initial concept by Eva Meyer-Hermann) and installed in New York by Connie Butler and Peter Eleey. It feels odd to find them there, because they’re uncharacteristic of Kelley’s art overall.

Like the wildly elaborate “Day Is Done,” they date from after the time Kelley signed on with the Gagosian Gallery in 1995. He was now a star with a big budget, and the work suddenly looks expensive, machine-tooled, overproduced. The Kandors have the luxury-line gloss of Jeff Koons junk art. What saves them is that they have Kelley’s history behind them.

What a history. No show can encompass it. I wonder what Kelley in the end would have made of it. A committed insurrectionist, he saw the very concept of a counterculture vanish before his eyes. He saw an art world virtually institutionalize the class-based exclusions he despised. He saw art itself retreat from existential politics to escapist playtime.

Of course, it would have been nice — righteous — if Kelley's retrospective were on 53rd Street, though MoMA says scheduling dictated otherwise, and, really, he makes more sense in a former public school in Queens where young artists congregate.

They've always been his best audience. The list of those he has influenced is already long, and it could be — art changes, after all — that his true progeny are still to come.