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LOS ANGELES

The many influences of Mike Kelley

MANY artists have been vital to Los Angeles, but for some the city's seminal son is Mike Kelley, who committed suicide two years ago, aged 57. More famous names have spawned greater legions of imitators or improved the business side of art in LA. Kelley put down roots here, tapping into the underbelly of America's shiny exterior. Now a sprawling retrospective opens at two Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) locations. It shows more clearly than either of its previous incarnations (at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and PS1 in New York) just how productive Kelley was, spilling forth ideas that continue to inform not just LA and the art world, but mainstream American culture.

Kelley arrived in 1976 to study at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), north-west of the city. He quickly found that he hated driving, a perverse characteristic of someone born in Detroit (America's "Motor City") who then chose to work in a place where cars play such a central role. He also felt trapped by rival factions at CalArts, flanked by followers of traditional painting on one side and on the other by those who preferred the more conceptual art that was in vogue during the 1970s. So he looked for a way out.

Kelley found this first in music—or more accurately, in noise—and then through performance. He also created props for his acts, some of which are in the show. When his Mid-Western parents asked about his profession, he told them he was a stand-up comedian. It was easier than trying to explain his art. Kelley was not fashionable and he never expected his art would sell. He had grown up in a blue-collar family and worked in his 20s to support his passion. "I wasn't pretty enough to be a waiter," he told friends. "I had to moonlight as a night guard on movie sets."

Kelley came to LA just as video was becoming the new canvas for the avant-garde. The MOCA show provides multiple opportunities to experience Kelley's first video work, "The Banana Man". It is a profane, Dadaist parody of a children's show, but one can see in it the seeds of his breakthrough piece, "More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid" (pictured). Kelley became known for his melancholic work with toys and dolls. The MOCA exhibit is being called "The First Comprehensive Retrospective", and it rightly emphasises the importance of his video work.

The main atrium of MOCA's Geffen Contemporary is filled with Kelley's sprawling "Day is Done". This very personal piece, part of a larger planned work, is the first thing people see when they enter the show. At PS1 it stood alone in a claustrophobic former classroom, which did not do it justice. These pieces, which feel like tableaux from a grand passion play, benefit from the large MOCA galleries. Kelley's ideas need room to breathe.

About 20 works have been added to the show. A major piece is the giant two-part sculpture, "Framed and Frame", which pays tribute to LA's Chinatown district—in Kelley's youth one of the centres of the punk-music scene that so influenced his work. Whether making junk-like props for performances or large pop-art sculptures (like the shimmering Kandor pieces from later in his career), Kelley's craftsmanship was never shoddy. The care with which he recreated a real-life, almost Gaudí-like fountain in "Framed and Frame" is impressive; it clearly inspired the ornate "Memory Ware" collages that followed a few years later and which hang on the wall nearby.

Kelley was included in MOCA's first show back in 1983, so the museum used the opening of this retrospective to host a gala evening celebrating its history. After the well-heeled guests filed out of the galleries to the opulent dining tent, the night guards in the museum stayed at their posts. As the evening wore on, they gathered together to take photos of Kelley's art, some of them posing alongside it.

Kelley would have liked the way his work appeals to the smartphone, video-sharing, mash-up popular culture of today. He liked the idea of inspiring creativity in others. Kelley was always collaborating with fellow Angelinos: Ed Ruscha, Paul McCarthy and other artists pop up in various works in the show. Kelley left most of his estate to the foundation he created to assist young artists.

The MOCA show cannot really be called a homecoming. Kelley never left LA, despite his hatred of driving and a growing distrust of the burgeoning art scene here. But seeing this retrospective in the artist's adopted city provides a strong sense of why he stayed. Kelley loved the other artists, young and old, who chose not to go to New York, but rather made Los Angeles home for the same reasons he did. ■