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Installation view of Mike Kelley's "Day is Done" at Gagosian Gallery



Photos from Mike Kelley's "Day is Done"

## I WANT MY MIKE KELLEY by Ben Davis

"Day Is Done," Nov. 11-Dec. 17, 2005, at Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

Mike Kelley's new show at Gagosian's gargantuan Chelsea gallery jackhammers the viewer with noise, music, shrieking voices, motion and color. The space is packed with a maze of different installations, from freewheeling disco lights and living rooms with furniture that swivels wildly as if possessed, to giant chess pieces and a 15-foot-long missile designated as the "Gospel Rocket."

Chattering audio channels roar on and off as videos continuously pop on in different portions of the space -- sometimes high up on the wall, sometimes on multiple screens at once -- jerking your attention here and there as new pieces of the show surge to life.

Displayed around the perimeter of the gallery are photos of various teenagers in costumes, taken at Halloween parties, school plays and other pageants. These black-and-white shots have the appearance of old yearbook images, and each is paired with a color photo recreating the same picture using actors. The conceit of this show, titled "Day Is Done," is that Kelley -- the king of scabrous West Coast installation art, to Paul McCarthy's ace -- has collected these photos, and used them as starting point for videos in his own freaked-out style.

Thus, an old photo of three girls posed in black leotards for a modern dance performance, their faces painted white like mimes, comes alive in a strangely perverse, dream-like film. Three dancers shimmy suggestively through the halls of a high school, making breathy choo-choo noises. At one point, a man in a devil costume appears, bends enthusiastically to let the lead girl grab his fire-red testicles, then proceeds to lead them on a conga line by his balls.

Elsewhere, there is a photo of a wholesome-looking girl, apparently taken at some kind of community pageant, dressed in a large straw hat and overalls stitched with the word "Fresno" in sequins. This image becomes a kind of farm-themed burlesque number, a blond women wiggling through a goofy bump-and-grind while belting the musical come-on, "Do you want a hayride?"

And a picture of a sweet-faced overweight girl at what appears to be a church confirmation becomes a dark ritual in which her video doppelganger lights candles and suggests that it is every Christian's duty to "convert the Jews." As soon as she states this, she is confronted by two young men dressed as Nazi bikers -- who perform a rap about how they love sex with fat women.

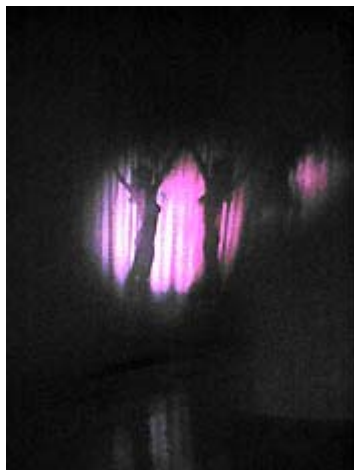
On first approach, this clamorous funhouse seems to fit right in with Kelley's oeuvre. This is an artist known for dwelling on the grotesque and the irrational -- one of his famous works was, after all, a



Photos from Mike Kelley's "Day is Done"



Image from Mike Kelley's *Fresno* (2005)



Mike Kelley  
*Pink Curtain*  
2005

drawing of a baboon's behind -- offering amoral perversity as some kind of antidote to contemporary alienation.

And there's no doubt that Kelley remains true to this nihilistic perspective in "Day Is Done." In one of the videos, *Singles Mixer*, a character breaks into a lengthy parable about a race of scum-people who live at the bottom of a pond and possess what she describes as the "power of the formless," an in-joke reference to Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois' celebratory gloss on Kelley's previous work in their *Formless: A User's Guide*.

But the pieces in "Day Is Done" gain an added level of complexity through the use of the yearbook pics as seed material. The rhetoric around Kelley's previous work suggested that he was directly exposing his viewers to the unspeakable desires that percolate below the surface of everyday life. By contrast, Kelley's camped-up, flamboyantly artificial, fetishistic high school restagings suggest that such subterranean desires can themselves only be approached as fantasies, in this case fantasies that adults project onto teenage sexuality as something that is fascinatingly out-of-control (title cards introduce the videos as "projective reconstructions.") Emblematically, as is so often the case on TV, Kelley's precocious young people are played by adults.

With its lascivious focus on youth combined with its ironic intellectualism (one of the films is titled *Structuralist Mimes*), "Day is Done" has the amped-up sex appeal of Hollywood while remaining acceptable to the cerebral set. Installations like *Pink Curtain* -- a darkened room containing a motorized, rotating curtain, projected with the undulating silhouette of a female dancer that splits and changes shape as the fabric sweeps in circles -- are like attractions from a true hipster carnival.

If there is a dark underbelly or disavowed desire that Kelley brings to light, it is certainly that of the art world itself. With its carnival atmosphere, ADD pacing, calculated irreverence, snarky quotations of junk culture (you gotta' admit, a soulful portrait of Garth Brooks staring at a nude breast is pretty funny) and unabashed kinkiness, Mike Kelley has finally made high art as good as MTV.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of Artnet Magazine.



Painting of Garth Brooks in Mike Kelley's "Day is Done"