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Working Through Mike Kelley's Lacerating Lifework at PS1

Photo by Matthew Septimus
Installation view of Mike Kelley at MoMA PS1, 2013.

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Mike Kelley as the Banana Man, 1981/©Estate of Mike Kelley; Courtesy Mike Kelley Found. for the Arts; Photo: Jim McHugh.

Mike Kelley has officially become Saint Mike — and for an artist whose work was so rooted in the demonic and the perverse, that's a dangerous position to be in.

Last year, the great L.A. artist took his own life at the age of 57, for reasons that remain obscure. There's magnetism in tragedy, and the sprawling Kelley retrospective now taking over MoMA PS1 (after originating at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam) is just the latest in an unbroken tide of tributes that have appeared since his death (I wrote about the one at the Watermill Center last year). The new, ambitious exhibition is at once amazing and a little unnerving — it's strange to see someone whose work was so powerfully motivated by a kind of cultural anti-authoritarianism given the full Great Man treatment.

The show fills most of the PS1 building, from the dank basement, where an ominous video plays in the darkness of the old boiler room, to the far-flung galleries of the second floor, where there is a partial recreation of his epic, multipart, multimedia "Day Is Done" show from 2005, centering on a series of eerie psychosexual filmed vignettes inspired by old high school yearbook photos. In between, you get a full tour of the many forms that Kelley's work took: the sculptures made from pathetic, filthy stuffed animals that first got him attention in the late 1980s; an amazing series of works called "Educational Complex" (1995), for which he created dioramas that fused all the schools that he had ever attended into one interconnected labyrinth; his late-period, high-production "Kandor" works, which spin a series of amusing and demented sculptures and animations out of an obscure element of the Superman myth, the Man of Steel's discovery of his supposedly destroyed extraterrestrial hometown, miniaturized by a villain and stored beneath a bell jar — a metaphor for the ways that formative memories haunt you.

Kelley said that he wasn't really interested in Freud — or rather he was interested in Freud as a literary rather than philosophical influence — but his works have a theoretical framework that feels relentlessly Freudian: Over and over, he looks at some memory, object, or experience that feels wrong or raw and then builds something around it, teasing out its uncanny energy. As a result, his work can sometimes feel at once awkwardly unfiltered and hyper-methodical, intimate and overthought. Some pieces are incomprehensible without an understanding of some (usually outlandish) intellectual underpinning: One room features Kelley's outhouse-like recreation of the psychoanalytic guru Wilhelm Reich's "Orgone Energy Accumulator," a contraption meant to release psychic orgasms;

another work, a wall-filling installation, pairs paintings of cartoon frogs and transsexual prostitutes, the juxtaposition making most sense when you read that Kelley is inspired by Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic account of the fairytale "The Frog Prince" as a metaphor for sexual repulsion.

Yet if the most evident interests are the uncanny and trauma, the covert key to Kelley's work lays somewhere else entirely, in something less obvious: his dialogue with feminist art. He arrived in L.A. to study art in the mid '70s, in the long wake of the feminist art movement, and it was feminism that made intimate confessions and cast-off craft materials licit, as opposed to the more macho refinement of industrial sculpture that was then the rage. In an interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson, Kelley once described his oeuvre as a form of aesthetic "cross-dressing," because it drew on these strategies (one of the rooms in the blueprint for his "Educational Complex" is labeled "Soft Sculpture 'Women's Art.'") Feminist art theory also made an awareness of the dark side of the "male gaze" an unavoidable part of the discussion. Kelley's obsessions are relentlessly, pointedly masculine, all comic book iconography and punk aggression — but they are masculine obsessions aware of their own dark side, driven back on themselves, parodying themselves, doubting themselves, conceived of as compulsions and screens for repressed and unnamable desires.

In one particularly outlandish work at PS1, Kelley inserts his collection of covers from the bawdy humor magazine "Sex to Sexty," full of buxom cartoon women and slavering horndog men, into a grid among squares of color redolent of the more industrial type of Colorfield painting, forming a hybrid, multi-panel construction. This may be a joke about the disreputable machismo of the abstract painting scene; but at the same time, the act seems really to be some kind of weird and tortured way of redeeming "Sex to Sexty," which obviously held some genuine fascination for Kelley — he wrote an introduction for a compendium of the mag for Taschen's "sexy books" collection. It's as if this grotesque boyhood relic had to be adequately quarantined so that its freakish humor could be embraced in some kind of camp theoretical way.

As I passed through the PS1 galleries, a woman led a group on a tour, gesturing at a large black-and-white ink drawing from the series "The Sublime" (1987) depicting a dictionary with a skull-and-crossbones lock holding its cover closed, under the words, "If You Don't Want to Know the Definition, Don't Open the Dictionary." "I love him so much," the guide commented. "He's such a *wiseass!*" It was just an offhand remark, but it still points to the reductive adulation that often accompanies artistic beatification. Because a work like that is not just a joke, or if it is, it is a joke the sense Freud talks about in "The Joke and Its Relationship to the Unconscious": an indirect way to surface anxieties and desires. The subtext of the drawing is how the truth is marked as poison, how trying to define the terms of your world honestly might actually lead you to some dark places — places you may not want to go. Mike Kelley is a hero now, and part of the canon, but if you're not a little troubled by him, then you may not be looking hard enough.

"Mike Kelley" is on view at MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, Queens, through February 2, 2014.

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