

Occultism – Heavy Metal – Superman. Mike Kelley in Düsseldorf

The work of Mike Kelley (Detroit, Michigan 1954–2012 in Los Angeles, California) is experimental, opulent, and disturbing—and is considered one of the most influential since the late 1970s. The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is presenting a comprehensive retrospective at K21, which was developed in collaboration with the Tate Modern in London, the Pinault Collection in Paris, and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

Whether spiritualist ideas, heavy metal, or Superman comics, Kelley draws on images and myths from pop and subculture to pose perennial questions about the place of humans in the world and society. Kelley addresses the influence of politics and educational systems, as well as class and gender affiliation. In the 1990s, for example, Mike Kelley attracted attention with sculptures made of stuffed toy animals and handicrafts with female connotations. Behind their supposed harmlessness, however, something sinister, threatening, and remote emerged. One of his last major work complexes, *Day is Done* (2005), draws on carnival, Halloween, and school theater. In such popular customs, Kelley sees ritualized violations of social conventions. Art itself can also be counted among the places where such rule-breaking can take place. In its midst, Kelley stages the artist as a highly fragile figure.

The title of the exhibition *Ghost and Spirit* is also to be understood in this context. In an early draft of a performance entitled *Under a Sheet*, which has never been performed, Mike Kelley points out a distinction: A ghost is someone who has disappeared, but a spirit is a memory that remains, an energy that has lingering influence. A little more than ten years after his untimely death in 2012, this distinction of the still young Mike Kelley forms the bracket around the retrospective at K21. Is the artist a vanished person, or do we sense his lingering influence in view of the works? What energies does Mike Kelley, whose work has had a lasting influence on three generations of artists, leave behind? Making art means creating things that were not there before, transforming ideas into material objects, giving concepts a body. A creative, magical act that is not coincidentally reminiscent of the emission of ectoplasm, the mysterious secretion that pours out of the orifices of mediums when they come into contact with spirits in spiritualistic sessions. With the multi-part photo-text work *The Poltergeist* (1978), Mike Kelley condensed questions of embodiment, memory, and forgetting in ectoplasm. They form the common thread that connects the fascinatingly diverse work of Mike Kelley through more than one thousand square meters of exhibition space. It leads from the early performances from the late 1970s and early 1980s, whose handwritten scripts are being shown publicly for the first time, and the partially reconstructed work complex *Monkey Island* (1982–1985) to the large-scale project

Half a Man (1987–1991), which dominated the 1980s and also includes Kelley's works with stuffed toy animals.

Mostly crocheted, sewn, or knitted by hand, these stuffed animals marked Kelley's international breakthrough. He found them at flea markets and garage sales. They were used and appeared damaged, mended, dirty, and tattered. Kelley's arrangements, his titles such as *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* and *The Wages of Sin* (1987), and his later use of audio tapes with spoken texts in the *Dialogues* series, undermined the first impression of the cute, cuddly children's toy and alluded to the ambivalences of manual labor, commodity form, and gift. They evoked thoughts about gender issues and power structures within the family. But they were also perceived as sinister and, to the artist's great surprise, many viewers associated them with sexual abuse.

In the mid-1990s, Kelley responded to this public reaction by beginning to explore conspiracy theories, the power of the imagination, and particularly the role of memory. Works from this phase include *Timeless/Authorless* (1995), which refers to American pop culture and psychoanalysis, in particular the repressed memory syndrome popular at the time, the assumption that memory gaps are due to traumatization caused by abuse. Kelley began to read his own (Catholic) upbringing and his artistic training as institutional abuse and showed how all forms of memory, history, and ideas about the future are dependent on belief systems, which he repeatedly questioned through his work.

K21

His last two major bodies of work consistently continue along these paths. In the series *Kandors* (1999–2011), Kelley traces the prototypical American pop myth of Superman and explores the psychological depths of this figure. In the apse of K21, we as viewers symbolically enter the Fortress of Solitude, the secret retreat of the Man of Steel, and experience in a droning environment how memory, trauma, and forgetting and the search for identity and history drift apart. *Day Is Done* (2005) emerged from a study of documents of popular extra-curricular activities in high school yearbooks: theater, music, and band performances, secular relics of religious rituals and customs, and carnivalesque activities of all kinds. In the largest room of the exhibition, Kelley takes us into a turbulent, colorful, and loud world between horror film and musical, between fragment and gesamtkunstwerk. *Day Is Done*—the exuberant celebration is followed by excess, the light and the dark sides of desire, and the sinister side of the night, which often lurks right in the depths of our own psyche.

The exhibition was organized by the Tate Modern, London, in collaboration with K21, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, the Bourse de Commerce, Paris, and the Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Curated by Catherine Wood, Director of Programs, and Fiontán Moran, Curator, International Art, Tate Modern. The presentation at K21 is curated by Falk Wolf.

The exhibition is supported by the ART MENTOR FOUNDATION LUCERNE, the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, and Hauser & Wirth.

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Mike Kelley. Ghost and Spirit

March 23 – September 8, 2024

K21 – Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

Press conference and preview: March 21, 2024, 11:00 am at K21

Opening: March 22, 2024, 7:00 pm at K21

From 10:00 pm: Party with DJ Wolfram (DFA Records / Public Possession / Live from Earth)

Free admission

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Catalogue

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