

Finding the Reason in Mary Reid Kelley's Mad Rhymes About French History

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Installationsansicht von Mary Reid Kelleys Videoarbeit „The Syphilis of Sisyphus“, 2011
(Courtesy Fredericks & Freiser)



"Dandy Saltimbanque," 2011

It's "The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari" meets Dr. Seuss. No: It's "Les Misérables" meets Ryan Trecartin. It's the antic, instantly recognizable world of Mary Reid Kelley, who is just about to close her second solo show at Fredericks & Freiser in Chelsea. Reid Kelley (b. 1979) has been [touted as an artist to watch](#) by super-critic Roberta Smith and [praised](#) by super-curator Robert Storr. She graduated in 2009 with an MFA from Yale's famous painting department, but is really best known for her videos, which pull off the neat trick of being engaging and estranging all at once.

The current show is titled "The Syphilis of Sisyphus" (Reid Kelley seems to have a thing for venereal disease

— a previous video featured a musical number about the clap titled “Roll Back the Foreskin”). A back room showcases concept sketches and costumes, but the centerpiece is her 11-minute film, a burlesque of French history. Everything here is black-and-white. The characters, principally a “grisette” (that is, the archetype of a 'woman of lowly condition' from bohemia) played by Reid Kelley and four “saltimbanques” (harlequin-like tumbler-performers), are all done up in weird black-and-white makeup, with black-and-white period costumes and cartoony patches over their eyes that turn their expressions into masks. The sets are similarly stark, with lots of exaggerated theatrical painting. And, oh yes, the dialogue is all verse, rhyming doggerel chockablock with brainy wordplay. (The gallery offers the printed text in a nicely designed pamphlet, for your appreciation.)

The action begins with Reid Kelley’s grisette, Sisyphus, at the mirror, pondering aloud the fate of woman. It ends with her character being dragged off by the “Morals Police,” apparently consigned to be a test subject at La Salpêtrière Hospital, where French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot infamously submitted female patients to his studies of hysteria. In the middle section, Reid Kelley’s monologue is interrupted by the saltimbanques, who act out exaggerated vignettes about the lights of French history: Diderot, Marie Antoinette, Robespierre, Marat and Charlotte Corday, Napoleon, Marx and Engels, Baron Haussman, and a pair of mincing dandies.

Reid Kelley’s verse is not Molière, but it is pretty amusing, and a lot of the pleasure of “The Syphilis of Sisyphus” is just surfing the tide of language, particularly if you have any interest in the particular history she is riffing on. Wandering Paris’s streets and pondering why more women don’t take revolutionary steps to better their condition, Sisyphus quips that “rational girls / prefer necklace to headless”; later, standing before the male spectators in Charcot’s theater of hysteria, she declares herself in favor of “a womb of one’s own.”

The big debate about Reid Kelley’s work, thus far, seems to be how seriously to take it. Is she just messing around with intellectual references, or is she using the past to say something about the present? In Frieze, Storr described her previous videos as a response to “our current multi-fronted conflict and the sexual politics of warfare.” In Art in America, Brian Boucher [countered](#) that Reid Kelley’s interest seemed to be primarily “historical,” not contemporary. [Interviewed by Emma Allen](#), the artist, for her part, stated, “I don’t think I am trying to make a particularly detailed analysis or

a metaphor,” but added that she was "aware" of the contemporary resonances. So, it's somewhere in between then.

When it comes to “The Syphilis of Sisyphus,” you could see how the extremists and sybarites of French history might somehow reverberate in the present. But I’d say that the film is about the present in a different way, less in its specific references and more in its whole absurdist sensibility. If you unpack Reid Kelley’s rhymes, you find that their theme is women’s need to escape the position assigned to them by history and nature. The aesthetic of the film — with its cross-dressing, flamboyant artificiality, and use of alienating effects — is a formal way of amplifying this sentiment: It's not about looking for meaning in historical material, but about playing around with it.

Since we’re dealing with French intellectual history, the name "Sisyphus" is probably a nod to “The Myth of Sisyphus,” existentialist Albert Camus’s [famous essay](#) on the “absurd.” Which makes a lot of sense. Camus used the fallen Greek king’s torment in Hades of eternally rolling a rock up a hill as a metaphor for modern man, whom he believed is doomed to activity without meaning. Rather than strive for significance, however, the key for Camus was to embrace the essential meaninglessness of history and carry on anyway. “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart,” he wrote. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” Reid Kelley's film, too, is absurd history, both in its highbrow screwiness and in its cheerful sense of the fundamental pointlessness of it all.

Mary Reid Kelley's “The Syphilis of Sisyphus” is on view at [Fredericks & Freiser](#), November 11, 2011-January 7, 2012.