

# Looking for Answers in the Watermill Center's Sobering Mike Kelley Tribute

by Ben Davis

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One of the rooms of the exhibition that includes video projections, models, posters and Kandor 17.

(Photo by Lovis Dengler)



Mike Kelley in "THE BANANA MAN,"  
1983, video

Six months ago, the artist [Mike Kelley](#) took his own life, at the age of 57. Everything the great abjectionist made is now lit by the terrible mystery of his suicide — you can't help but return to it looking for clues. Numerous tributes have been staged or are planned, the latest being a survey of mainly videos currently at the [Watermill Center](#) in the Hamptons, curated by the collector Harald Falckenberg. This show's very name, "Mike Kelley: 1954-2012," seems to ask you consider it as a kind of memorial reflection on his preoccupations.

The exhibition makes a kind of tragic hero of Kelley. "The art system has radically changed in the last decades... [Mike Kelley](#) reluctantly accepted the new order but refused stardom and corporate engagement," Falckenberg writes in a wall

text. “Kelley may be regarded as a role model for young artists who have to decide how far they are prepared to compromise with the art system.” Yet this premise should actually be kind of chilling. What does it say about art today if someone who is the “role model” for handling its contradictions found it ultimately intolerable? The art world doesn't just eat its young.

Certainly, the work itself offers plenty of evidence that Kelley's art drew great strength from the sense of being out of place and ill at ease. Kelley [had his roots in punk](#), and made a career channeling his blue-collar Catholic guilt into performances and installations that were assaultive and uncanny. His works could seem nihilistic, but they preserved a genuine countercultural texture. At the same time, you must remember that he was MFA-trained, and a savvy manipulator of art historical tropes. He could perform like a madman, and [talk like a professor](#). Much of his work is, in fact, about this tension, about how the raw matter of trauma filters its way up into acceptable forms, disturbing them, making them shine with eerie light, but also being displaced and smothered by them.

The many videos in the Watermill show (too many videos, all chattering over one another) give an opportunity to see how this insistent underlying theme morphed over time. At one extreme you might take “[Family Tyranny](#),” a collaboration with fellow L.A. art outlaw [Paul McCarthy](#) from 1987, a burlesque of childhood sexual abuse filmed in the style of an instructional public TV program. It concludes with Kelley, playing the abused son, curled under a blanket squealing in terror, while McCarthy, as the maniacal father, presides over a table above him, jamming a baseball bat over and over into a sloppy bucket of plaster in a pantomime of rape. It's disturbing — at least in part because the two men appear to be acting out the blood-curdling scene as a kind of camp theater.

At the other end of the Kelley spectrum is his late-career “Kandor” project (2000/2007-2011), which occupies the sturdy core of the Watermill show with colorful projections of magical storms raging beneath glass jars. This is Kelley at his most allusive and allegorical, taking off from an episode of the Superman story where the caped hero discovered that his Kryptonian hometown of Kandor was not actually destroyed in an extraterrestrial holocaust, as thought, but preserved in miniature form by a mischievous villain; Superman contrives to keep the numinous diorama under a jar in his hideout. It is not hard to see the appeal of this comicbook fable for Kelley: A childhood object, lost to trauma, re-found, preserved in a kind of

pathetic artistic form, and obsessed over — this is the distilled script of much of Kelley's work.

To most viewers, the final work of Kelley's career will be more palatable than the early, because it is less directly grotesque, more aestheticized. "Kandor" is much more collectable than "Family Tyranny." For an artist who essentially made art as a kind of guerilla warfare campaign at the edge of rationality, you have to imagine that there is a kind of dilemma in the increasing pull of refinement. The Watermill show concludes with his most recent work, "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #36 (Vice Anglais)" (2011), a dark though [expertly produced](#) video in which, among other things, young people in goofy costumes engage in a sadomasochistic ritual of sexual humiliation — a recent example of a project for which the artist took images of pageants and school plays from old high school yearbooks, and then used them as the inspiration for perverse video vignettes starring a variety of actors.

I first saw the "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction" series in "Day Is Done" at Gagosian in 2005, where it was shown in a labyrinthine environment of half-formed theatrical sets, complete with motorized spinning paintings and strobing neon signs. In retrospect this was a pivot in Kelley's career — he remembered it as completely changing the wider reception of his work. He also stated that the attendant video cycle was somehow autobiographical, a sentiment suggested by the haunted [promotional image for the show](#), which featured Kelley, face shadowed, brooding into the camera as the sun sinks into the sea behind him. "Day Is Done" was Grand Guignol stuff, a multimedia tour de force (it prompted Jerry Saltz [to coin the term "clusterfuck aesthetics"](#)). At the time [I was critical of it](#), saying that it prophesized a turn in contemporary art towards being essentially a producer of adult theme parks (a trend that has, indeed, [been felt powerfully since](#)).

On the whole, "Day Is Done" was a fairly successful balance of big budget spectacle and personal weirdness. But I don't think it would be wrong to say that Kelley was aware that the higher he flew, the longer the journey back to the authentic shit and mud that his art was rooted in. At the Watermill Center, a quote plastered on the wall suggests exactly this: "I started out as an anarchist and a hippy, and now I'm an entrepreneur with 15 employees." In [his final interview](#), a depressed-seeming Kelley spoke about how Gagosian gallery, the broker of his new megastar status, was dishearteningly corporate, not the "familial" environment he had known at his

former representation, Metro Pictures. [Apparently](#), reviewing the transcript later, Kelley freaked out, finding the quotes about his personal background too “raw,” a striking concern for an artist whose work characteristically dwells on the raw material of his personal background ([his final work](#) was a literal recreation of his childhood home). He was particularly alarmed by the quotes about the gallery — “No way about the Gagosian stuff, why would I allow my career to be jeopardized?” — and demanded to edit the interview to his liking, only to leave it almost unchanged. This is the behavior of a man internally divided by the price of success.

The Watermill’s Kelley show opened to coincide with [the institution’s annual gala](#) — and the experience of seeing the exhibition alongside the glamorous event, while incongruous, was actually quite clarifying. Somewhat ghoulishly, the attractions at the famous fete, which draws out the biggest names to support Robert Wilson’s worthy Center, were [meant to be loosely inspired by Kelley’s troubled oeuvre](#). So there was Karen Black and her bevy of nude, body-painted sibyls, hauling an enormous phallus through the tony crowd; there was performance artist Janice Lancaster Larsen, writhing suggestively amid the earthworms in a pit of mud as guests chomped hors d’oeuvres and stared. And at the center of it all — the high-society crowd dressed to the nines swarming obliviously around it — was the contribution of Kelley’s longtime peer, [Paul McCarthy](#): a towering inflatable buttplug. The moral of this cartoonish spectacle, it seemed to me, was this: No artistic subject matter is too intimate, too outrageous, or too offensive to be transformed into cocktail party patter or party décor, to be denuded of its personality and rendered banal by its audience, becoming a sort of scatological chic.

Kelley had personal demons that went well beyond whatever he found in the professional art world — and who knows what chemical specters haunt the mind, or what calls them up? We know he had broken up with a girlfriend when he made the decision to end his own life. This fact gives the anhedonic melancholia and psychosexual angst that pervade his work alarming new resonance. But we know also that he was depressed by the state of the contemporary art world. He found it to be soulless and materialistic. He thought that if he had to do it over again, he would not make it as an artist. “He found himself at the top of his game and then found that the world he was at the top of was a world that he didn’t like,” a former lover [told the L.A. Times](#). Kelley leaves behind such haunted sentiments as his epitaph, and if we don’t really process them, then every tribute to his spirit becomes its reverse.

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