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Press Release

Mike Kelley. Subharmonic Tangerine Abyss

Hauser & Wirth Hong Kong

27 October – 24 December 2022

Opening Reception: Thursday 27 October 2022, 6 – 8 pm



Widely considered one of the most ambitious and influential artists of our time, Mike Kelley drew from a wide spectrum of high and low culture, mining the banal objects of everyday life to question and dismantle Western conceptions of contemporary art and culture. Beginning 27 October 2022, Hauser & Wirth Hong Kong is proud to present the late Los Angeles-based artist's first solo exhibition in the Greater China: 'Mike Kelley: Subharmonic Tangerine Abyss.' Organized in collaboration with the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, the exhibition includes works from one of Kelley's most significant later series, Kandors, including three distinct kinds of videos that Kelley included in his original Kandors show at Jablonka Gallery in 2007 – videos documenting crystal growth, animations, and a bottle projection.

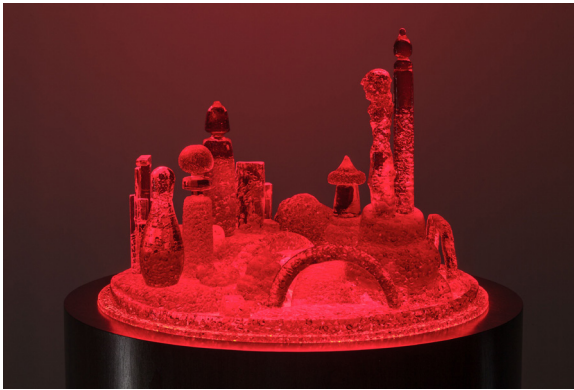
About the Exhibition

Kelley began his Kandors series in 1999, in preparation for a show at the Kunstmuseum Bonn that sought to emphasize and portray 'new media of the past' – retrospective images of an idealized future. In response to the exhibit, Kelley chose to focus on the fictional city of Kandor: the hometown of the popular Superman comics' eponymous hero. According to the books, Superman was sent to Earth as an infant from Kandor, the capital of his home planet Krypton, which was under attack and risked total destruction. Although sentenced to a future of displacement, loneliness, and longing on Earth, Superman uses his alien powers for the good and salvation of mankind on his adopted planet. He later discovers that Kandor still exists, though in miniature form: stolen by an intergalactic archvillain Brainiac prior to Krypton's demise, the city was shrunk to a toy-sized metropolis and preserved inside of a glass bottle. Superman ultimately wrestles Kandor from Brainiac and keeps the city in his Fortress of Solitude, sustaining its citizens with tanks of Kryptonite atmosphere. As Kelley once explained, Kandor functions for Superman as 'a perpetual reminder of his inability to escape the past, and his alienated relationship to his present world.'

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In researching the project, Kelley discovered that Kandor lacks a standardized, consistent depiction across the comics—an oversight that fascinated the artist. ‘It was impossible to reconstruct Kandor,’ Kelley wrote about the project, ‘various partial and contradictory city views would have to be randomly patched together to create a composite version.’ The conflicting illustrations challenged the artist and further probed his interest in the porous nature of spatial memory. ‘The problem I set for myself was to translate the two-dimensional comic-book renderings into three-dimensional sculptures,’ Kelley explained. ‘I wanted them to be sculpturally complex, taking into consideration how they would be viewed in the round yet maintaining the sense of the original comics’ flatness.’

Kandor served as Kelley’s inspiration for a twelve-year long project that explores themes of cultural memory, the perils of utopianism, and the comforting pain of nostalgia. These visually opulent, technically ambitious sculptures—along with videos and large-scale installations—rework the imagery and mythology of the popularly revered American comic book and also reflect the loneliness inherent to modernity’s technological progress.



Visitors enter the exhibition from the upper floor of the gallery and encounter a large-scale video projection alongside a group of vitreous sculptures glowing in a dimly lit room. The video projection depicts ‘Bottle 4’ with an array of swirling, atmospheric light effects inside it, accompanied by an otherworldly soundtrack composed by Kelley. Visitors continue through the space to find a number of miniature metropolises representing the city of Kandor, creating an optically dazzling spectacle of refracted colors. Cities stand on plinths, illuminated from beneath, while their towering architectural skylines are bathed in tones of green, blue, red, black, and white.

Towards the far end of the first room, ‘The Lugubrious Pastel Joys of the Candy-Froth Dolphin Portal’ shows a time-lapse video documenting crystals as they grow inside of a rounded jar—a classic American childhood science experiment. This video, along with the other crystallization videos in the exhibition, features quotidian household glassware and is accompanied by a soundtrack of ‘New Age’ music composed by Kelley. The videos are screened on small monitors which sit atop sculptural platforms or shelves. The compact nature of the works’ size mimics the shrunken nature of Kandor and creates a sense of intimacy with the viewer as they approach the piece, marveling at the fantasy landscapes expanding and contracting across the screen.

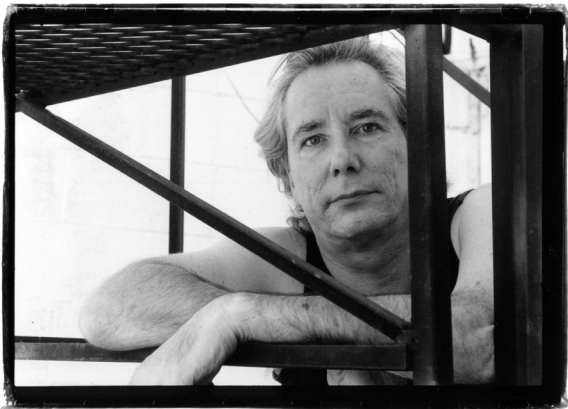


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The exhibition continues on the gallery's lower level with additional time-lapse videos, Lenticulars, animations, and sculpture. In 'Topo Gigio Topographical Model', instead of a city, Kelley placed a series of cartoon figures underneath a glass dome, mounted on a pedestal of black bedrock. Like the bottled Kandor, the three toys in 'Topo Gigio Topographical Model' become an ageless memento of a past that can never be revisited, isolated beneath a bell jar that Kelley found and abandoned on an otherworldly mountain of volcanic mass. The work evokes Kelley's preoccupation with psychology, nostalgia, and repressed childhood memories that runs through the artist's practice as a whole. The lenticular lightboxes feature images of Kandor as it appears in the Superman comics, blown up to a larger size. The lenticulars manipulate the two-dimensional drawings and the illustrations' colors in order to give the image an illusionistic sense of movement and dimension. 'My goal,' wrote Kelley, 'was to highlight the differences between the graphic qualities of the comic-book illustrations and the dimensionalized versions of them represented in the sculptures'. In 'Animation 2' and 'Animation 20', Kelley animated the images of the bottles in the style of popular cartoons. 'Each bottle performs a single emotional sound or body movement: screaming, breathing, cooing, giggling,' wrote Kelley. The animated videos are displayed on flat-screen monitors that hang on the wall like paintings.

Mingling the banal and the absurd, the innocent and the perverse, the comic and the tragic, Kelley's art launches an assault on the purity of aesthetic convention, spearheaded by the artist's dark humor.

About Mike Kelley



Over the course of a career spanning four decades, Mike Kelley (1954-2012) produced a provocative and rich oeuvre that included drawing, painting and sculpture, video and photography, performance, music, and a formidable body of critical writing. Born in Detroit, the artist studied at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor from 1973, before relocating to Los Angeles in 1976 to enroll in an MFA program at the California Institute of the Arts. Kelley's art conflates the highest and lowest forms of popular culture in a relentless critical examination of social relations, cultural identity, and systems of belief. Engaging themes as varied as adolescence, educational structures, sexuality, religion, post-punk politics, pop psychology and repressed memory, Kelley worked through the turbulent conditions of the American vernacular to reveal unexpected connections and expose the defaults, tensions, and contradictions that make it up.

About the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts

The Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts advances the artist's spirit of critical thinking, risk taking, and provocation in the arts. Established by Kelley in 2007, the Foundation seeks to further Kelley's philanthropic work through grants to arts organizations and artists for innovative projects that reflect his multifaceted artistic practice.

The Foundation also preserves the artist's legacy more broadly and fosters the understanding of his life and creative achievements through educational initiatives including exhibitions, educational events, publications and the preservation and care of the Foundation's art collections and archives.

Press Contact

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Bottle 4
2007
Video projection with sound, 18:25 min.
Ed. 3/5 + 1 AP
Dimensions variable

City 20
2011
Tinted urethane on illuminated base
Ed. 2/5 + 2 AP
139.7 x 85.7 x 85.7 cm / 55 x 33 3/4 x 33 3/4 inches

City 3
2007-2011
Tinted urethane resin, acrylic on illuminated base
AP 1/1, Ed. of 5 + 1 AP
144.8 x 52 x 52 cm / 57 x 20 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches

The Lugubrious Pastel Joys of the Candy-Froth Dolphin Portal
2007/2009
Spray enamel, acrylic paint, birch plywood, foam, polyurethane, PVC pipe,
monitor, DVD player, video with sound
120.7 x 198.1 x 97.2 cm / 47 1/2 x 78 x 38 1/4 inches

Animation 2
2007
Video on flat screen monitor
Ed. of 5 + 2 AP
35.6 x 55.9 x 7.6 cm / 14 x 22 x 3 inches

Lenticular 18
2007
Lenticular panel, lightbox
Ed. 1/5 + 2 AP
96.5 x 129.5 x 8.9 cm / 38 x 51 x 3 1/2 inches

Mike Kelley in his backyard, Los Angeles, 2000. Photo: © Gerard Malanga