

Mary Reid Kelley at The Hammer

May 23–
September 27, 2015

A triad of new short videos by Mary Reid Kelley, produced in collaboration with Patrick Kelley, play freely with the ancient Greek myth of the Minotaur. In Kelley's version, athletes from the "Athens Baptist Church" play indoor volleyball to determine the annual sacrifice to the Minotaur. Pasiphae, the wife of King Minos, is cursed by Venus (not Poseidon, as in the Greek original) to fall madly in sexual love with Minos' snow-white bull. After seducing the bull, the Minotaur that is born to Pasiphae is female, not male. And it is Priapus the fertility god, not Theseus, who enters the Labyrinth to slay the Minotaur.

Reid Kelley is an anti-realist. The videos unfold on highly wrought sets that are elaborate displays of artiness. Their designs are a pastiche of art-historical references ranging from German Expressionist cinema to the fabricated set photography of Lucas Samaras. Garish animal print fabrics, striped tube socks and athletic armbands, silly wigs, repeated brushstroke patterns, and hand-drawn schematic backgrounds festoon nearly every frame. Goofy, emphatically handmade props like a painted paperboard edition of *Interspecies Astrology Magazine*—

"I mythed you" reads the personals column—make light reading for the horny, lovesick Pasiphae.

With the help of digital compositing, Reid Kelley herself plays nearly all of the characters in the drama, using the same speaking voice for each. Priapus is a half-man, half-fish goblin with a boy-band hairdo. In place of the permanent, massive erection that distinguishes Priapus in classical depictions, Reid Kelley plays a Priapus whose briefs are stuffed with ripe bananas. On most of the female characters, every curve of breast and buttock is outlined loudly in what looks like black paint, over a pale-toned bodysuit. Pasiphae wears a checkered swimsuit that is fringed with messy black yarn at the crotch. These characters have ping-pong balls for eyes, with dots in the center for pupils, and painted dark circles around them. The simple, lightly comic props and costumes are dramatically indifferent, and that's presumably the point. The characters are dimensionless caricatures, vehicles for Reid Kelley's writing. (Free copies of the scripts of all three videos are made available in a wall-mounted bin in the gallery.)

One text is an adaptation. The middle of the three videos, *Swinburne's Pasiphae*, employs a recently discovered fragment by the Victorian-era poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. Written in the style of classical verse, the poem is structured as an exchange between Pasiphae and Daedalus,

the brilliant Minoan craftsman who builds a cow decoy for Pasiphae to crawl inside in order to sexually receive the bull. It's a florid, red-hot paean to bestiality, unpublish-able within the poet's lifetime.

Reid Kelley's chief literary technique is the god-awful pun. Pasiphae brags to Venus that "*I still insert my clause in every handsome Bill I meet.*" Priapus boasts of how he "*tyed Jason into Argo-knots.*" Ariadne, deep in a depression at the end of the cycle, needs a "*raisin to live.*" "*Love's a vulture, and must carrion,*" Priapus offers. Anagrams, too, are in the house. When Daedalus speaks of the "*warm violences*" that will be visited on Pasiphae by the bull, the video shows a 2-D motion graphics sequence of the letters in the phrase, compressed by a cartoon hammer and brush, re-formed into the phrases "*ram nice vowels,*" "*visceral women,*" *rev slow cinema,*" and finally, "*new liver comas.*" A handful of critics have saluted Reid Kelley as an authentically virtuosic zany punster.

Puns can be used both to insinuate and to harass, as when Hamlet blocks his would-be interlocutors with phony misunderstandings. But in a supercharged poem about a woman desperate to get fucked by a bull, why the innuendo? Reid Kelley's deliberately tedious, wince-worthy wordplay doesn't draw out the meanings of the texts it references so much as strangely rebowdlerize them, this time through the giddy sensibility of a

precocious, peppy young theater major. In a contemporary culture where poetry has lost all mainstream force, the pauseless, uninflected, high-toned theater-talk that swells the video's soundtracks is more barrier than bridge. Reid Kelley's logocentrism doesn't heighten the subversive sexual content of Swinburne's text so much as smother it in unsexy zero-budget theatrical frippery. As in the video work of Mike Kelley (no blood relation, but an obvious influence) the meaning lies in the mood: a medicinal cocktail of lowbrow entertainment, expropriations of the Western canon, and a calculatedly nagging friction between the two.

***Tongues Untied* at MOCA Pacific Design Center**

**June 9–
September 13, 2015**

It's easy these days to forget the strange confluence of cultural factors which brought gay rights into the American mainstream. Chief among these is the AIDS epidemic which, at its peak not so long ago, terrorized and polarized the American public. Art and entertainment created in response to the epidemic played a crucial role in increasing its visibility: in the late '80s and early '90s, you might have learned about AIDS through Rock

Hudson, Magic Johnson, the B-52s, Robert Mapplethorpe, *Life Goes On*, or all five (as I did). The artists of this time period—many politically demonized, like Mapplethorpe, David Wojnarowicz, and Karen Finley—created work relentless in its exposing of societally-sanctioned homophobia and visceral in its processing of personal and public grief, confusion and anger.

It should surprise no one that art of the AIDS crisis is currently undergoing reappraisal and canonization (and I'm sure rising in sales price). That this is happening twenty-odd years after the fact keeps with the structure of historical impulse; revisiting only after the cool remove of temporal distance.

Welcome though this belated recognition may be, it leaves me suspicious. And so I entered MOCA's *Tongues Untied* warily, while appreciating the timeliness of this exhibition occurring at a moment when casual misuse of PrEP and the recession of AIDS as a death sentence threaten the hard-won gains of the safe sex movement.

MOCA's exhibition trades survey for snapshot, focusing on works shown at MOCA during the peak of the AIDS crisis. In doing so, *Tongues Untied* evinces a smattering of voices rather than a cohesive identity—mirroring an essential characteristic of the political dimensions infusing much of the work on display. The potent cocktail of politics, anger, mortality, and impotence in the face of a monolithic illness (and a

largely indifferent America) produced a polemicized art which fused sexuality, scatology, and the funereal.

So what of the politics? Gran Fury's aggressive reworking of the language of propaganda is adjacent to a recording of Ron Vawter's searing monologue on the subject of the homophobic lawyer (who later died of AIDS) *Roy Cohn* (1995). Elsewhere, Adam Rolston takes Prince's "pocket full of horses" a few steps further, stacking entire boxes full of (now-expired) Trojans on the gallery floor. In the near-artless purity of its safe-sex politics, Rolston's and Gran Fury's work provide both contrast and context for the subtleties of much of the exhibition's remaining work.

John Boskovich and Nan Goldin each reject the presentation of the PWA (person with AIDS) as a sanitized martyr, instead portraying their outcast subjects as messy, contradictory, and occasionally transcendent. In so doing, Goldin and Boskovich portray the interior and social worlds of their subjects without apology and with grace rather than stridence. Goldin's photographs of ruffled bed sheets and graffiti skeletons getting it on allude much more than they declare. Boskovich is both more aggressive and more subjective at once, capturing drug use, sex, *Valley of the Dolls* and a host of other minor events unfolding in the small hours of the night.

(Review continues on pg. 56)

Lauren Cherry & Max Springer

We're in This Together
2015

Approximately the size of your head
Acrylic, cardboard, ceramic, epoxy putty,
ink, paper, stone, wire, wood
Edition of 10

Nora Slade

*I've been a lot of places,
seen so many faces*
2015

Dimensions variable
Tee shirts, dye, bleach, cardboard hanger
Edition of 8

Ben Medansky

VESSEL // CINS
2015
8¾ × 8¾ × 2¾ inches
Ceramic
Edition of 4

VESSEL // PERF
2015
8 × 2½ × 8 inches
Ceramic
Edition of 4



Jenny Gagalka

Top-Down Bottom-Up

2015

9 × 12 inches

Inkjet print on dibond with L-hook

Edition of 10

This edition began with a monotype print using both an additive and a reductive process; coming at it by two seemingly opposite ends and note taking with classic Bic inspired blues and reds. The approach is top-down bottom-up, as in image and thought processing, speech perception, business management, software development, and computer programming. This piece began as a print that was scanned and output as an inkjet print then finally mounted to lightweight aluminum sheets sandwiching a polyethylene core. This way up.

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Felix Gonzales-Torres goes even further, pushing beyond the figurative in the oblique, minimal animism of *Untitled (A Corner of Baci)* (1991) and the gentle, poignant allusion of *Untitled (March 5th) #2* (1991). The latter consists of two 40-watt light bulbs hanging side by side, their cords trailing down and over to the nearest outlet. Positioned at the top of a staircase, this piece lends itself to a variety of readings: as testicles (figuratively), as the provider of intimate incandescence for an upstairs room (the site of potentially lurid happenings), or as two bodies transfigured into everyday objects that still retain body-like warmth. Gonzales-Torres skirts the rim of direct meaning despite the aching simplicity of his material palette.

It is Karen Finley who provides the exhibition with a striking and singular balance between the political and the aesthetic, particularly in *The Black Sheep* (1990). On two cast bronze panels a long poem is inscribed, reading as both an organizing philosophy and a valedictory address to the “black sheep” community of PWAs and their loved ones. The panels are the sort you might see in a corporate lobby listing bigwig donors, their cast names heavy, present, important. In Finley’s hands, the simultaneous gravity and familiarity of this material becomes imbued with particular resonance, directly and powerfully addressing dignity, dying

and the prejudice of her contemporary moment:

Sometimes, some Black Sheep are chosen to die

so loved ones, families, countries and cultures can finally say

Your life was worth living

*Your life meant something to me!*¹

Similarly, the exhibition’s video centerpiece, Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*, interweaves direct address with nuance, and poetics with blunt, sometimes wooden politics. Riggs’s voice-over poignantly asks, “Where is my reflection?” (In the media, as I pass away?). As a black gay man, Riggs did not see himself reflected in his own community or the larger public. In the unevenness of *Tongues Untied*—in its protests, doo-wop singers, street-voguing men, and ponderous, singular rumination—Riggs captured a crucial quality of life as experienced through art: its miraculous paradox and selective clarity. *Tongues Untied* acts as a nagging voice throughout the rest of the exhibition (literally—you can hear it from every corner); a veering, wandering reminder of the search for “simple shameless brazen truth.”²

That the AIDS epidemic’s massive death toll acted as the catalyst for both great art and expanded gay rights is, perhaps, the silver lining of catastrophe. Ultimately, the social repercussions of AIDS and of public indifference to

the crisis often overwhelms contemporary artworks yoked to the twin bridle of politics and aesthetics. In 1992, United Colors of Benetton ran a highly controversial ad, *Pieta*,³ showing dying AIDS activist David Kirby surrounded by family in his hospital room. The photograph is striking and strange, Kirby’s lifeless, wooden appearance contrasted with the middle-American averageness of his grieving family. The power of its politics and its artistry, however, are undermined in an oily manner by the appearance of the United Colors of Benetton logo, the ad’s only text. That the ad raised awareness of a deadly illness as it drew one’s awareness to a particular brand is central to its arresting disquiet.

Tongues Untied, though less unruly in its stew of politics and art, does its work a great service simply by allowing them to be heard, seen and experienced. The preciousness of the work, particularly as an outcome of its relegation to a specific and always-receding historical moment, fuse with the candor and rage of its politics. The politics of *Tongues Untied* which feel inarguable, even exhausting now, were anything but at the time, and herein lies the exhibition’s major strength: the quiet framing of a moment not so long ago that somehow feels very different from our own.

1. Karen Finley, *The Black Sheep*, 1990. Two bronze plaques, each 40 × 24½ × ½ inches.

2. Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied*, 1989. Video, color and sound, 55:00 minutes. Courtesy of Frameline.

3. *Pieta* refers to highly dramatic religious iconography showing Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus.

No Joke at Tanya Leighton (L.A. in Berlin)

May 2–
June 27, 2015

“What is the difference
between the drunk bus
and a joke?”

...Berliners can't take a joke”

No Joke, a recent exhibition curated by Sanya Kantarovsky at Tanya Leighton, included works spanning the last 75 years. Seminal works by the kings of artistic comedy are central to both the original gallery with its iconic gray stairs, as well as the newly-minted addition directly across the avenue.

Michael Smith's *How to Curate Your Own Group Exhibition (Do It)* (1996), is a deadpan step-by-step instructional video; a now all too familiar *Saturday Night Live*-like sketch which trains the viewer on the “transferral of curatorial responsibilities into the hands of the artists,” as well as on being “an artist who simply wants to get into more group shows.”¹ A collection of rantings and ravings could be found in Ad Reinhardt's *Selected Comics* (1946–61), which wittfully call into crisis art world tropes. The works were positioned squarely in the entrance of the second gallery space, reading as a central subtext of the exhibition. Herluf Bidstrup's energetic cartoons and Saul Steinberg's photographs

cleverly utilize visual puns as an accessible platform for illustrating the systemic ethos of the artists' contemporary moment.

Soaking with complex, juicy, and satirical irony, these works required some healthy time to digest; with the artists wittfully splashing and jabbing in order to keep their heads afloat in an ocean of sink or swim reality. While these seminal works in the exhibition displayed a persuasive poignancy through narrative gumption (that could turn an apple into thinking it's a pear), they also gave way to their surrounding generational offspring. The work by contemporaries that shared the stage with these canonized compatriots seemed to stem from an incestuous birth of Uncle Satire and Auntie Irony: a coupling that resulted in constrained formal paintings that were too inbred to make fun of anything but themselves.

Math Bass's *Newz* (2015) paintings punctuated both gallery spaces. Her mindless but mesmerizing graphic compositions slowly reveal nuanced semiotics that straddle pure form and raw symbolism. Laeh Glens *Eyeballs* (2015) and : (2015) are extremely reduced but highly stylized paintings that unabashedly represent facial expressions; a declaration of painting as a mirror and a forced empathetic player in the portrayal of the human condition. While these newer works demonstrated a highly constructed humor, their jokes often seemed to be missing, unless the joke was (though hopefully not) on painting

itself. Perhaps this is where Kantarovsky's “tragicomic self-reflexivity”² enters stage left. After all, “It takes a degree of solipsism to be an artist.”³

The exhibition demonstrated a marked split: the younger works lacked the specific jestful aggression of their forbearers and instead offered a dryly sophomoric regression highlighting their own awkward, ambiguous existence—two dimensional freaks turned thespians. Set against the dogmatic works of Reinhardt, Herluf, Kelley, and Grosz, there seemed to be something missing within the work of the younger artists presented—be it risk, conviction or necessity—and they hung on the edge of one-liner formalism. After all, “humor is not resigned, it is rebellious.”⁴

Luckily, a few of our youngsters spanned the gap between seasoned complexity and tender-footed vacancy. Sean Landers *Dark Trees (Hello!)* (2014)—a trompe l'oeil canvas scribbled with melodramatic, desperate, and sometimes nonsensical tree carvings—contrasts between humor's power to postpone the thought of our inescapable death and our attempts to leave a lasting impression (both physically and culturally). Allison Katz' *Janus* (2011), paints two tragedy/comedy masks frozen in a mirrored state of neurosis, melding the two traditionally disparate emotions into a stasis of skeptical optimism.

No Joke oscillates between subversive discourse

Stephen Kent

1. Michael Smith, *How to Curate Your Own Group Exhibition (Do It)* (1996).

2. *No Joke Exhibition* press release.

3. *No Joke Exhibition* press release.

4. Sigmund Freud, *On Humor* (1927), pg 162.

and nonsensical nihilism, and Berlin is no stranger to either. From Berlin's cultivation of German philosophy and literature, to its Weimar-Era Dadaism, the existential attitude for the Berliner is a natural one, and is almost required for all outsiders requesting a visa. But this attitude is not known for its nonchalant self-reflexivity. The actors in *No Joke* performed with a refreshing (and much needed) air of capriciousness, yet the overall emphasis on cool-kid formalism and blase humor ran the risk of missing the punchline when it comes to German ethos. So which is more solipsistic, the one who tells a joke in the wrong context or the one who refuses to get it?

“No joke but art joke. So at best one may be in on the joke.”⁵



1



2

1
Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *Swinburne's Pasiphae* (2014), video still. HD video, black and white, sound. 8:58 min. Courtesy of the artists; Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects; Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, New York; and Pilar Corrias, London.

2
Production still from Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied* (1989), video. Image courtesy of Signifyin' Works.

3
Herluf Bidstrup, *Masterpiece* (1967), silkscreen on wall, 47 ¼ x 33 ½ inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.



3

5. Vanessa Place, *Art is a Joke* (28.2.2013). UC Irvine (lecture).

Review and Snap Review Contributors

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Edition Artist

Jenny Gagalka is an artist who used to study physics and math in Vancouver, BC. Since moving to Los Angeles in 2014, she has participated in the Mountain School of Arts and is currently an MFA candidate at UCLA in the Painting and Drawing department.