MARY REID KELLEY
Working Objects and Videos
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We are delighted to present Mary Reid Kelley: Working Objects and Videos, an exhibition that brings together a rich trove of objects, paintings, drawings, and costumes along with the videos they inhabit. Through a combination of live action and animation, a barrage of puns and wordplay, and a fusillade of visual and literary references, Mary Reid Kelley examines historical eras of societal upheaval. Her characters grapple with change on a seismic scale, addressing us directly from behind their masks, painted faces, and bug eyes. They share the most intimate details of their lives: their fears, their missteps, and their determination to control their destinies—or, at the very least, sway them just a bit.

This is the first collaboration between the University Art Museum and the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, both part of the State University of New York system. We are grateful for the support and encouragement of our institutions, which make it possible for us to produce high quality exhibitions and publications. At the University at Albany, thanks to President Robert J. Jones, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Susan D. Phillips, and Senior Vice Provost and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs William B. Hedberg; at the State University of New York at New Paltz, thanks to President Donald Christian, Provost Philip Mauceri, and Interim Dean Paul Kassel.

Jessica Fredericks, Andrew Freiser, and the staff of Fredericks & Freiser Gallery have been helpful and supportive throughout the complex process of organizing the exhibition and catalogue. We are grateful for the generous loan of critical works from Leslie Cecil and Creighton Michael, Jennifer Danner, Robert Hobbs and Jean Crutchfield, the Hort Family Collection, and one anonymous lender.

The staffs of both museums worked diligently to make this project a success. At the Dorsky Museum, thanks to Curator of Exhibitions and Programs Daniel Belasco, Curatorial Intern Rachel Beaudoin, Program Manager Janis Benincasa, Graduate Assistant Steven Gordon Holman, Collections Manager/Registrar Wayne Lempka, Visitor Services Coordinator Amy Pickering, and Preparator Bob Wagner, as well as the many SUNY New Paltz faculty and staff who assisted with the media aspects of this project. At the University Art Museum, thanks to Registrar Darcie Abbatello, Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation Intern Nicole Herwig, Exhibition Designer Zheng Hu, Exhibition and Outreach Coordinator Naomi Lewis,
Mary Reid Kelley (b. 1979) works in the vanguard of a generation that blends the digital and the analog to discourse with the millennia. From 2008 to the present, her astonishing videos have fused live performance, animation, drawing, sculpture, and digital design. Her poignant characters—a nurse, a prostitute, a bohemian, the Minotaur—confront the limits of their historical situations in droll verse. Blending Homer and Cindy Sherman by way of Virginia Woolf, Reid Kelley tells finely wrought narrative epics, rife with wordplay and art historical references, set in World War I, nineteenth-century Paris, and classical antiquity. Working with archival sources and a range of collaborators, especially Patrick Kelley, her husband and an accomplished artist, Reid Kelley invents a poetic mongrel media. By creating or manipulating all aspects of language, performance, and mise-en-scène, she rethinks the potential of the inauthentic to heighten our awareness of the real. The various drawings, hats, costumes, jewelry, and other items she uses reveal her comfort with mixing the hyper-real and the fake, the cheap and the lofty, to her own aesthetic ends. Barthes wrote of “the reality effect” as the presence of jarring factual detail in the fictional world of Flaubert. Call Reid Kelley’s practice the “unreality effect,” where intensified artificiality excavates the mythic dimensions of individual integrity and political violence.

To date, Reid Kelley has produced six videos, or films, as she calls them. She created the first three—Camel Toe (2008), The Queen’s English (2008), and
Sadie, The Saddest Sadist (2009)—as a master’s student at Yale University School of Art. Shot in digital video with the aspect ratio of 4:3, the three can best be described as character studies of World War I actors at risk of emotional or physical disintegration: a combat pilot, nurse, and munitions factory worker, respectively. The fate of each is expressed and imagined through her or his amorous desires and sexual relations during wartime. The videos introduce Reid Kelley’s main themes of self-delusion and hubris, which affect men and women, heroes and subalterns.

The second phase of Reid Kelley’s video work began with You Make Me Iliad (2010), her first video shot in full HD with a 16:9 aspect ratio. Iliad continues to explore the poetic and sexual economies of World War I. As in Sadie, Reid Kelley performs the roles of both military man and fallen woman, but Iliad marks the expansion of her practice to include the production of a wide range of drawings, costumes, and props. Others perform for the first time, including her sisters Alice and Juliet and brother-in-law Micah. The theme of self-delusion becomes increasingly fragmented and conditional with the proliferation of characters, drawings, and objects here and in her two most recent videos, The Syphilis of Sisyphus (2011) and Priapus Agonistes (2013). These videos are more episodic and discursive, full of tangents and vignettes that do not advance a historically determined narrative but rather immerse the viewer in freeform visual and linguistic play.

Reid Kelley takes a painterly and graphical approach to melding a diverse array of two- and three-dimensional media into a cohesive black-and-white palette and flattened space. Like many video artists, she began her career as a painter, migrating to video to take advantage of the medium’s expansive armature for aesthetic and historical inquiry. However, the transformative power of painting and drawing distinguishes Reid Kelley’s videos from similarly capacious multimedia and performance-based videos by Paul McCarthy or Ryan Trecartin. After her videos are finished, Reid Kelley reconsiders them as sources for “character drawings” or portraits of the fully realized personages, such as the soldier in Iliad [pl. 1], sometimes set in backgrounds, as seen in Sisyphus [pl. 4].

The drawings are the culmination of her lengthy process, from research to writing to costume and prop design to performance to digital sets to editing. “They close the conceptual loop,” she says of the character drawings.2 The video’s status as source for the character drawings inspires the interpretation of all of Reid Kelley’s creative output as components of a larger whole. An exhibition of the full range of “working objects” (costumes, adornments, props, drawings, and furniture) she has created and adapted for her videos asserts their status as gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art; every object, from a drawing to a glass bottle, bears her hand. Installed in three dimensions, these elements produce the larger-than-life space of opera or architecture, an experience that engages the senses and fully immerses us in an artist’s unique vision.3

**DRAWING AND PAINTING OF OBJECTS**

Painting and drawing optically and materially knit together the objects, bodies, and scenery of Reid Kelley’s videos, like graphical camouflage. The palette is black, white, and gray, evoking earlier ages of photography and television. The physical world of her videos, through the flattening effect of the monocular lens of the camera and the illusionistic effects of painting, reads like an animated painting. Reid Kelley takes the same illustrational approach toward the ready-made prop as she does toward sculpted, sewn, or drawn objects. A simple slash of white paint brings a black brush or a wine bottle into her visual universe. Ordinary shoes, hats, and garments are altered with a black or white border, outline, or highlight; contrasting black lines and geometrical shapes painted on the performers’ white-painted skin transform the volumetric human form into a linear cartoon image. She also uses drawings and paintings on paper as visual elements of the videos. They function in three main ways: as backgrounds and scenery, as signs and components, and as textures and patterns.

Drawing as background scenery first appears in The Queen’s English. Small drawings are scaled up in the digital sets. Two drawings, in one-point perspective and co-extensive with the video frame, depict the exterior and interior of a field hospital tent [fig. 1]. In Sadie and Iliad, a larger number of drawings create the four or five interior and exterior scenes. In Sisyphus, Reid Kelley produced significantly more drawings of interiors and exteriors for nearly twenty scenes. Some are historically accurate, while others demonstrate the theatricality of the sketched background. The street scenes of Paris, styled after the period photos of Charles Marville and prints of Edmond Texier,4 are simplified geometrical shapes forming windows, doors, balconies, and the ubiquitous signage for wine [pl. 5]. Many short skits performed by the saltimbansques about Marie Antoinette [pl. 22], Diderot, Napoleon, Robespierre, and Baron Haussmann [pl. 19], among others, appear in front of a single drawn background rendered as a curtain, as if dropped in a vaudeville show.5 The most fantastical interjections in Sisyphus have abstract or organically patterned backdrops, such as the drawings for the three mushrooms [pl. 28] and Sisyphus’s polyamorous wedding. Notably, there are few comparable background drawings in Priapus, with the...
Pl. 3
Sisyphus's Gown, 2011
Cloth, ribbon, tassel, lace, foam, and hoop skirt;
Necklace: polymer clay and acrylic paint

Pl. 4
Sisyphus (Chiffonniers' Vins), 2011
Collage and watercolor on paper
Pl. 18
LEFT TO RIGHT:
Charlotte Corday’s Gown, 2011
Pasiphae’s Swimsuit, 2013
Dandy’s Coat 1, 2011
Priapus’s Costume, 2013
Venus’s Nightgown, 2013
Dandy’s Coat 2, 2011
Volleyball Player (Nude), 2013
Soldier’s Uniform, 2010
Miss Spelt’s Costume, 2013
Dandy’s Coat 3, 2011
Sisyphus’s Straightjacket, 2011
Installation view, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
Mixed media
Pl. 19
Haussmann’s Slum, 2011
Collage, acrylic paint, ink, and charcoal on paper

Pl. 20
The Syphilis of Sisyphus, 2011
Video still
All works by and courtesy of Mary Reid Kelley unless otherwise indicated.

**Videos**

Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley

_You Make Me Iliad_, 2010

HD video, 14:49 minutes; sound


Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley

_The Syphilis of Sisyphus_, 2011

HD video, 11:02 minutes; sound


Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley

_Priapus Agonistes_, 2013

HD video, 15:09 minutes; sound


Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley

_The Syphilis of Sisyphus_, 2011

HD video, 11:02 minutes; sound


Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley

_The Syphilis of Sisyphus_, 2011

HD video, 11:02 minutes; sound


Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley

_Priapus Agonistes_, 2013

HD video, 15:09 minutes; sound


Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley

_Untitled (Set Composting Demo)_, 2013

HD video, length variable

**Character Drawings and Collages**

_Medical Officer_, 2010

Ink, acrylic paint, and charcoal on paper

12 ½ x 9 ½ inches

Hort Family Collection, New York

_Prostitute_, 2010

Ink, acrylic paint, and charcoal on paper

11 ½ x 8 ½ inches

Hort Family Collection, New York

_Soldier_, 2010

Ink, acrylic paint, and charcoal on paper

12 ½ x 9 ½ inches

Hort Family Collection, New York

_Soldier in Helmet 1_, 2010

Ink, acrylic paint, and charcoal on paper

21 ¼ x 29 ¼ inches

Hort Family Collection, New York

_Chiffonniers’ Vins_, 2011

Collage and watercolor on paper

11 ¾ x 8 ¼ inches

Courtesy of Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, New York

_Dandy Saltimbanque_, 2011

Collage, watercolor, and acrylic paint on paper

20 ½ x 12 inches

Collection of Leslie Cecil and Creighton Michael

_Fort! Fort!, 2011_

Collage, watercolor, and acrylic paint on paper

9 ½ x 13 ½ inches

Courtesy of Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, New York

_Hausmann’s Slum_, 2011

Collage, acrylic paint, ink, and charcoal on paper

11 x 14 inches

Anonymous
Working Objects for Priapus Agonistes (2013)

Priapus’s Costume, 2013
Fabric, ribbon, and acrylic paint; Wig: synthetic hair and marker
7 x 4 1/8 x 1 1/8 inches
Puppet “Dick”, 2013
Felt, ribbon, and wood
6 1/2 x 3 inches
Puppet “Hairy”, 2013
Felt, ribbon, and wood
6 1/2 x 5 1/8 inches
Referee’s Shirt, 2013
Polyester
31 1/2 x 25 1/2 inches
Venus’s Bracelet (Large), 2013
Plastic, polymer clay, and acrylic paint
1 3/8 x 3 1/8 inches
Venus’s Bracelet (Small), 2013
Plastic and acrylic paint
7/8 x 3 1/2 inches
Venus’s Bustier, 2013
Cloth, ribbon, and acrylic paint
29 x 10 inches
Volleyball Player’s Uniform (Athens Tank Top), 2013
Cotton, decal, and acrylic paint
30 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches
Volleyball Player’s Uniform (Knosossos Tank Top), 2013
Cotton, ribbon, decal, and acrylic paint
28 1/2 x 23 inches
Volleyball Player’s Uniform (Polo Shirt), 2013
Cotton, acrylic paint, and ribbon
31 3/8 x 23 inches
BIOGRAPHY

Born in Greenville, South Carolina in 1979.
Lives and works in Oliveau, New York.

Education
2009  M.F.A. Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
2001  B.A. St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota

Solo Exhibitions
2013  Sadie, The Saddest Sadist and Prupus Agnemesi, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut
The Syphilis of Sisyphus, The Contemporary Austin, Austin, Texas
Prupus Agnemesi, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Los Angeles
2012  The Syphilis of Sisyphus, The Box at Wooner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio
HGU Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
Performing Historians: Mary Reid Kelley, Salina Art Center, Salina, Kansas
2011  The Syphilis of Sisyphus, Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, New York
You Make Me Iliad, Pilor Corrias Gallery, London
Sadie, The Saddest Sadist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Los Angeles
Bring Superior Forces To Bear, Rochester Art Center, Rochester, New York
2006  Paper Union, ChristianSEN Center Art Gallery, Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Group Exhibitions
2014  Pale Fire, Lefroy Neiman Gallery, Columbia University, New York
Also Video 03: Mario Losang and Mary Reid Kelly, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
2013  Through the Eyes of Texas: Masterworks from the Alumni Collections, Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas
2012  Pencil Pushed, Eweing Gallery of Art & Architecture, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee
Re-generation, MACRO Testaccio, Rome
Buy My Bonnies, Kate Werble Gallery, New York
Rear View Mirror, Space B Gallery, New York
Weighted Words, Zabulowicz Collection, London
2011  Words, Brand 10 Art Space, Fort Worth, Texas
Doubleloop, Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Salt Lake City, Utah
Stagewcraft, Contemporary Art Museum, University of Southern Florida, Tampa, Florida
Images from a Floating World, Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, New York
2010  Mosh Up: Splicing Life, UCOn Contemporary Art Galleries, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut
The Dissolve: Eighth International Biennial Exhibition, SITE Santa Fe, Santa Fe, New Mexico
2009  Fast Forward 2: The Power of Motion, ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany
Slowly, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
2008  Will Happiness Find Me?, Marweli Gallery, New York
Interviews, Journal of Visual Culture, Fall 2008
2007  Uncle Tom to Peeping Tom, Wisconsin African American Women’s Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
2005  Pinko Commiss, Altared Esthetics Gallery, Minneapolis, Minnesota
2004  Draw, Soo Visual Arts Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Interviews
Allan, Emma, “Verbal Play and Venerable Disease: A Q&A with Mary Reid Kelley,” Artinfo, June 2010, online.
Green, Tyler, “Modern Art Notes Podcast,” July 29, 2013, online.
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