DIRECTIONS

MIKE KELLEY: "HALF A MAN"

FEBRUARY 20 - MAY 19, 1991

Exsicated Corpse, 1989. Stuffed toys; 71½ x 99½ x 166 in. Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles.
MIKE KELLEY'S ART IS CONFRONTATIONAL. His particular fusion of high and low culture is heavily weighted toward the low. Inspired by such unexalted arts and crafts as felt religious banners, cartoons, hand-crocheted blankets, and stuffed toys, Kelley's work questions the sanctity of certain culturally hallowed myths.

Essentially conceptual, Kelley's art is project-oriented. He investigates a particular topic, such as the link between artistic creativity and criminality or the romantic notion of the sublime, and then, inspired by these studies, produces an assortment of work in varied media. Kelley combines paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, and banners to create installations. In the past, he has ended these projects with a performance in which many of the objects functioned as props. Kelley's last project-related performance, "Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile," was presented at Artists Space in New York in 1986, but his recent "presentations" or "readings," as he calls them, have not been directly related to specific projects. In his performances as well as installations, Kelley's stance is that of an adolescent—he ridicules authority by using taboo sexual and, at times, scatological imagery to question the validity of sacred myths.

In 1987 Kelley began the ongoing project "Half A Man," which includes felt banners, black-and-white "symmetrical" paintings, "garbage" drawings, refinished furniture, and stuffed animal objects. He has stated that these "works address...the issues of gender-specific imagery and the family." In the stuffed animal works presented here, Kelley also confronts the rigid hierarchies of formalism and the myth of childhood innocence.

To create his bizarre tableaux, Kelley uses old, dirty toys—stuffed animals that he finds in second-hand stores. He sews or ties them together, then either carefully places them on baby blankets or hangs them on the wall or from the ceiling. These stuffed toys are elemental depictions of animals with a dose of cuteness added.

Early on, Kelley developed a flat cartoon-like style for his paintings and drawings. He is interested in that clearly legible technique because it allows him to communicate a variety of themes and is thus effective as "a carrier of information." Similarly, the stuffed animals allow him to express specific ideas. The toys, however, have another function in that, as found objects, their previous "lives" become an integral part of the work.

Kelley's chosen toys are soiled and worn or particularly silly-looking animals, the sort of playthings fashioned by loving hands for a grandchild or a neighborhood church sale. Such toys can embody the sentimental ideas about childhood many adults hold dear. Kelley has stated that "the stuffed animal is a pseudo-child, a cutified sexless being which represents the adult's perfect model of a child—a neutered pet." Kelley desecrates this model of perfection by re-presenting toys that have been discarded after years of service. With their stains or missing limbs, the embattled playthings thus undermine the adult notion of the purity of childhood.

The sexless nature of stuffed animals reflects the adult belief in the chastity of childhood. Far from innocent, childhood was characterized by Sigmund Freud as a time of sexual discovery. Freud locates the initial stirring of sexuality in the infant's suckling, an activity quickly transformed from hunger-satisfaction to pleasure-satisfaction. From that time, the child...
evolves through ever-complex stages of sexual discovery of itself and others.

Kelley’s much-fondled toys have an unmistakably sexual presence. The phallic snake form of *Plush Kundalini* and *Chakra Set*, 1987, refers to the Hindu “Kundalini, with its overtones of sexuality and power, [which] reinvests back into the dolls what has been left out.” The snake, a Freudian symbol as well, reappears in *Eviscerated Corpse*, 1989 [cover], which spills out over the floor from a wall-bound, vagina-like mass of stuffed animals. A related sculpture, *Fruit of Thy Loins*, 1990 [fig. 1], is a stuffed rabbit whose progenies emerge from its torso. Some of Kelley’s animals are performers in hilarious sexual follies. In *Arena #8 (Leopard)*, 1990 [fig. 2], the spotted cat seems involved in a frustrating erotic activity. *Double Figure (Hairy)*, 1990, and *Double Figure (Polka Dot)*, 1990, depict more gymnastic maneuvers. In *Four Sock Dolls*, 1990, dolls hang upside down so that their skirts fall over their heads, exposing the stuffed socks that represent their “private parts.” Curiously, the upended dolls appear quite phallic. The element of low humor in these pieces is typical Kelley: the wicked, naughty laugh of the adolescent.

Nothing is sacred to Kelley. Religion and guilt are frequent motifs in his work, perhaps because he grew up in a Catholic family. *I Am*, 1989 [fig. 3], consists of two cushion-like craft items, with the words “The Way Is. I Am” stenciled on each, that engulf a crocheted bear head. “I Am” is a translation of Yahweh, a rendering of the Hebrew name of God from the Old Testament that was considered so sacred it could not be uttered. Through reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council, in the 1960s the Roman Catholic church became more populist and began using the vernacular instead of Latin in the liturgy. The cushions reflect the spirit of those reforms. *I Am* is related to a series of felt banners Kelley created as part of the “Half A Man” project. These works were inspired by the brightly colored religious posters of a Catholic nun, Sister Mary Corita, which were popular in the 1960s.

The messy, additive quality of Kelley's installations contradicts the orderly, reductive model of Minimalist sculpture. Inherent in Kelley's approach is a critique of formalism. The late critic Craig Owens described the modern period as a time when the authority of the work of art lay in the acceptance of the universality of its forms. These forms represented the dominant, European-based vision. The contemporary postmodern period is characterized by an acceptance of a plurality of cultural visions, claiming no such universal authority. Postmodern art, in fact, aggressively refutes these claims of authority.5

By using hand-sewn and crocheted dolls and blankets, traditionally considered "women's work," Kelley borrows a feminist strategy of presenting crafts as art to confront the hierarchies of modernism. In a recent article, he examines the gender attributes of hard (male) and soft (female) forms and lists Salvador Dalí, Claes Oldenburg, and Peter Saul as examples of "male artists using supposedly feminine softness so as to attack and destabilize the hard patriarchal order." He also points to such women artists as Sherrie Levine who use hard, geometric modes to criticize this same male order. "What it boils down to is a kind of artistic gender-bending." This gender-bending is obvious in the five-work series entitled "Manly Craft" from 1989. The two handmade yarn dolls—twisted, tied, and hung upside-down—that make up each work could be strange fetishes, but they are decidedly not "manly." The very idea of a man sewing and manipulating old dolls to make art contradicts the heroic modernist image of the male artist using industrial materials to fabricate imposing sculptures. The irony of the "Manly Craft" works is that they resemble male genitals.

Kelley actually considers his stuffed animal works more formalist than his other efforts because he emphasizes the formal properties—color, composition, structure—of each. He has described the process of arranging the different elements as being similar to painting because it involves moving around areas of color.8 In Double Figure (Equal Weight Orange), 1990, the title describes a specific compositional detail. Other works refer to modern painting styles. Arena #3 (Green Circle), 1990, a tablecloth populated by two big-eyed bugs (or bug heads), could be a generic biomorphic surrealist picture by, for example, Joan Miró. Arena #4 (Zen Garden), 1990, a crocheted afghan thrown over presumably frightened stuffed animals, looks not only like a meticulously raked Japanese pebble garden but a standard color-field painting.

The serial nature of much Minimalist sculpture is alluded to in such works as Four Yarn Figures, 1990, and Four Wire Sculptures, 1990. What subverts their being merely formalist works is their unorthodox materials.

A preoccupation with the body and its functions is apparent in Kelley's art. He has depicted and evoked images of body parts, entrails, feces, organs, and bodily fluids as a strategy of social critique. Kelley has traced the political uses of anal and fecal imagery to Greek comedies and the political cartoons of the French Neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David.9 This marriage of taboo materials and caricature to ridicule authority parallels Kelley's use of pathetic-looking stuffed animals to challenge the tenets of Minimalism.

This focus on the body as a political arena is reminiscent of the early performance work of Vito Acconci and Chris Burden, both of whom have used aggressive imagery offensive to conventional mores. Other, contemporary manifestations of this strategy are the photography-based work of Cindy Sherman and the performances of Karen Finley. Bruce Nauman's early Process works, in which traces of his or others' bodies are left in soft materials to make sculpture, as well as his overall intermedia approach are another influence. These artists also share the use of shock value to varying degrees in their art.

Inherently anarchic and tenaciously iconoclastic, Kelley revels in exposing the absurdities and inconsistencies of certain commonly held belief systems. Made of banal or even ridiculous materials and images, Kelley's very humorous works gradually reveal their biting edge.

Amada Cruz
Assistant Curator

4. Ibid., p. 11.
7. Ibid.
8. Based on a February 1990 conversation with the artist.
BIOGRAPHY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1981 Mizuno Gallery, Los Angeles.
1988 The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.
1989 Jablonka Galerie, Cologne; Galerie Peter Pakesch, Vienna; Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1981 Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Meditation on a Can of Verrons.
1983 Pilot Theater, Los Angeles, Confusion: A Play in Seven Sets, Each Set More Spectacular and Elaborate Than the Last, Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center, Venice, California, Monkey Island, X-C (collaboration).
1984 The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Sublime: Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center, Venice, California, Godzilla on the Beach (collaboration).
1985 Artists Space, New York, Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile.
1989 929 E. 2nd Street, Los Angeles, Pansy Metal/Cloveden Hoof (collaboration).

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
———. "Three Projects by Mike Keiley at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago." White Walls 20 (Fall 1988): 8–12.

CHECKLIST
Estral Star 1, 1989. Stuffed toys; 31 1/2 x 12 x 6 in. Mr. and Mrs. Melvyn J. Estrin, courtesy Thea Westreich Associates, New York.
Eviscerated Corpse, 1989. Stuffed toys; 71 1/2 x 99 1/2 x 166 in. Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles.
Frankenstein, 1989. Stuffed toys, basket with spoons, thread, pin cushion, felt, 12 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 28 in. Judy and Stuart Spence, South Pasadena, California.
I Am, 1989. Craft items, stuffed toys; 10 x 20 x 3 1/2 in. Private collection, Los Angeles.