



Title

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Cover image: **Fig. 2** Still from *The Futurist Ballet*, by Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw. 1973. Video, duration 27 minutes. (© Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Artists Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; exh. Tate Modern, London).

Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit

by Matthew Cheale • 28.02.2025

Mike Kelley (1954–2012) once declared that ‘art is some sort of interesting area where dysfunction is allowed’. His work often engages repressed aspects of culture: ‘embarrassing things, like sexual dysfunction and the scatological’.¹ In the artist’s performances, such concerns emerge in ways that are incomprehensible and opaque, uncomfortable and funny, offering no solace in the attempt to make sense of what has occurred. Instead, Kelley leaves the viewer in a chaotic aftermath of jokes, riddles, sub-cultural self-styling and base vernacular. Kelley was born in Detroit amid a backdrop of prevailing economic decline and political unrest and died in Los Angeles on 1st February 2012 from an apparent suicide. His early exposure to the activism and countercultures of Detroit played a substantial role in his artistic development. As he later recalled, ‘the White Panthers were centred in Ann Arbor, a college town, and my interest in their activities led me to related avant-garde music, theatre, film, and political events. This is what caused me to become an artist’.²

Disappearing into this labyrinth of biographical salvage might be the most pertinent strategy for exploring what is still so bewitching about Kelley’s work. As Catherine Wood astutely notes in the catalogue that accompanies *Ghost and Spirit* at Tate Modern, London – the artist’s first major retrospective in the United Kingdom – ‘bits of autobiography seep into Kelley’s work and writing’ (p.16).³ His ascent to becoming a leading multimedia artist, known for his deadpan-weirdo style, took place against an image-ridden backdrop of strangeness, radical havoc and public acknowledgment of shape-shifting sexual tastes. The exhibition is organised chronologically across ten rooms, each of which focuses on a particular thematic concern or a significant work. It begins in the 1970s, when the artist was studying at the California Institute of the Arts, Santa Clarita (CalArts), a school known for its experimental and conceptual approaches to painting and sculpture and emerging feminist and performance art. The gallery dedicated to Kelley’s time at CalArts, titled ‘Spirit Voices / Early Performance’, includes photographs, sculptures and works on paper that document his explorations of concepts of identity and authorship, which would later come to define his style. In the photo-text work *The Poltergeist* **FIG.1**, for example, Kelley appeared, according to an exhibition press release at the time, as ‘some kind of sooth-sayer, making incantations to the spirits’ (p.21).



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit* at Tate Modern, London, 2024–25, showing *The Poltergeist*, by Mike Kelley. 1979. Gelatin silver prints on paper, 7 parts, overall dimensions 213.4 by 513 cm. (© Tate; photograph Lucy Green).

Kelley first experimented with performance in Detroit in 1973. His inaugural live work, *The Futurist Ballet* FIG.2, made with Jim Shaw (b.1952), was a low-fi remake of *Balli Plastici* (1918) by Fortunato Depero (1892–1960), based on a rare surviving photograph of the production. Although Kelley said of the performance that ‘few people turned up, and those who did thought it a disaster and quickly left’ (p.17), it was nonetheless a formative project for the artist in his ‘extrapolation of photodocumentation to make a live work reanimating the ghosts of live performance past’ (p.17). As Wood notes, it also marked the beginning of his ‘experiments with materials, action and text [that] formed the DNA of his broader body of work’ (p.18). In 1983 Kelley turned to video with *The Banana Man* FIG.3, which is based on his experience at school of hearing other children talk about a fictional character called the Banana Man, who appeared on the television series *Captain Kangaroo*. Having never seen the programme, Kelley developed his character from second-hand accounts, reimagining him as a tragic and flawed protagonist who has a peculiar anxiety about abandonment.

The gallery titled ‘Educational complex’ brings together Kelley’s stuffed toy animal works: objects that were once loved, then neglected and now sewn together and hung from the walls or strewn about. In *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* and *The Wages of Sin* FIG.4, perhaps his best-known toy collage, these grubby relics of childhood are flattened into a canvas-like structure – a jumbled square of craft and chaos. The title references the sacrificial nature of love, particularly of a parent towards a child. ‘If each one of these toys took 600 hours to make then that’s 600 hours of love’, Kelley remarked in a 1991 interview,

'and if I gave this to you, you owe me 600 hours of love; and that's a lot'.⁴ In Kelley's work these raggedy toys – rendered dysfunctional – serve as symbols of this psychic domain, exposing a repressed narrative: of the sadism, as opposed to the needs, of the child, and the losses incurred by the parent.



Fig. 2 Still from *The Futurist Ballet*, by Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw. 1973. Video, duration 27 minutes. (© Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Artists Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; exh. Tate Modern, London).

One of the most conceptual rooms of the show is dedicated to Kelley's pivotal installation *Monkey Island* **FIG.5**. Marking the point at which Kelley began to develop his performances into gallery-based installations, *Monkey Island* is a fantasy world conceived through the single-point perspective of a solipsistic explorer's map. It is, as Wood writes, 'the territory of the poltergeist, the "monkey-phantom" that [Kelley] has told us is the spirit of adolescence. It is an installation built out of a surreal map of that monkey's world' (p.36). Drawings, texts and objects line the walls, while a floor installation comprises a large 'X' motif, cardboard boat-like shapes – two of which have been painted to resemble eyes – and two metal cages containing lightbulbs. Diagrams and maps invite the viewer to inhabit Kelley's Surrealist 'projection of the isolated human being's ability to see, imagine and believe made geographical' (p.36). The drawings have a strong foundation in language, combining image and text in compositions that structure seemingly improbable, imaginary connections and remembrances.



Fig. 3 *Portrait of Mike Kelley as The Banana Man*, by Jim McHugh. c.1983. Photograph. (© Jim McHugh; exh. Tate Modern, London).

Alternative landscapes also surface in the artist's *Kandors* series (1991–2012). The exhibition text for this gallery describes the imaginary city in dream-like terms: 'Kandor survives the destruction of Krypton by being shrunk and preserved under a glass bell jar by the supervillain Brainiac. Superman eventually discovers the shrunk city and transports it to his secret base but is unable to restore it to its original size'. In several tinted urethane resin sculptures, the fabricated fortress glows in various fluorescent colours. Architectural protuberances are congealed and anchored in their rough, rocky bases and encased in bell jars FIG.6. Unlike this presentation, when *Ghost and Spirit* was shown at Bourse de Commerce, Paris, in 2023, the full series of twenty-one miniature cities was included and shown in an extraordinary installation FIG.7.⁵ The sculptures resemble the colourful fake rocks found in aquariums and fish tanks, evoking an unstable, underwater atmosphere – one that is underscored by the vapours and bubbles animating the associated videos FIG.8. Nearby, in a

seven-minute video work, an actor dressed as Superman recites selections from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963): 'I felt like a hole in the ground', he quotes from the book, 'you feel it's really you getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier'.

Kelley's spirit can be uncontainable and unacceptable, even, and therein lies much of its attraction. In *Ectoplasm Photographs* (1978/2009) – a series comprising images originally taken for *The Poltergeist* – the artist's eyes roll back into his head so that the whites glimmer. Thick strands of cotton 'ectoplasm' appear to stream from his nose and float above his head. It is this irreverent, radical spirit that can make Kelley's work challenging to curate. It can be chaotic and unwieldy; it defies categorisation and rebels against orderliness. The dysfunctional forms of his output can also require curators to make complex and occasionally awkward decisions. In this respect, Wood and her co-curators, Fiontán Moran and Beatriz García-Velasco, have expertly navigated the difficulty of configuring the enormous variety of his practice. Misunderstanding has often enveloped Kelley's work. Viewers can fall victim to perceiving only its formal or abstract qualities without engaging in its painful, subversive subtexts. 'I wanted it to be funny', Kelley said in 1991, 'hard to swallow even if it wasn't very refined'.⁶ This is both the allure and challenge of his work: he was able to use bizarre, embarrassing, ugly forms and imbue them with a seriousness and radicality that reflected the haunted house of his America.



Fig. 4 *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin*, by Mike Kelley. 1987. Found handmade stuffed toy animals and afghans on canvas with dried corn; thermosetting resins, paint and metal, dimensions variable.

(© Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Artists Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; exh. Tate Modern, London).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit* at Tate Modern, London, 2024–25, showing *Monkey Island*, by Mike Kelley. 1983. Installation, dimensions variable. (© Tate; photograph Lucy Green).



Fig. 6 *Kandor 16B*, by Mike Kelley. 2010. Mixed-media, 234.8 by 100.3 cm. (© Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Artists Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; exh. Tate Modern, London).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Mike Kelley* at Bourse de Commerce, Paris, 2023, showing works from the *Kandors* series, by Mike Kelley. 1999–2011. (© ADAGP, Paris; photograph Andrea Rossetti).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit* at Tate Modern, London, 2024–25, showing works from the *Kandors* series, by Mike Kelley. 2007–10. (© Tate; photograph Lucy Green).

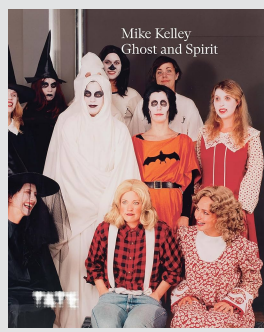
Exhibition details

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Tate Modern, London

3rd October 2024–9th March 2025

About this book



Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit

By Catherine Wood and Fiontán Moran

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Footnotes

- 1** Mike Kelley, quoted from J. Miller: 'Mike Kelley by John Miller', *BOMB* (1992), available at bombmagazine.org/articles/1992/01/01/mike-kelley, accessed 20th January 2025; for the full interview, see 'Mike Kelley interviewed by John Miller in Los Angeles on 21 March 1991', in W.S. Bartman and M. Barosh, eds: *Mike Kelley*, New York (1992), pp.7–51.
- 2** M. Kelley: 'Cross gender/cross genre', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no.1 (2000), pp.1–9, at p.2.
- 3** C. Wood: 'Mike Kelley: "existence problems"', in catalogue: *Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit*. By *idem* and Fiontán Moran. 304 pp. incl. 200 col. + b. & w. ill. (Tate Publishing, London, 2024), £32. ISBN 978-1-84976-857-3.
- 4** Mike Kelley, quoted from *op. cit.* (note 1).
- 5** The exhibition was first shown at Bourse de Commerce, Paris, before travelling to K21, Düsseldorf, and will travel to Moderna Museet, Stockholm (10th May–12th October 2025). In London, a concurrent display of Kelley's work, titled *Vice Anglais*, is on view at Hauser & Wirth until 17th April 2025.
- 6** Mike Kelley, quoted from *op. cit.* (note 1), p.9.

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