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Catherine Taft on Mike Kelley at Gagosian Beverly Hills

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Left: Trulee Hall and Mike Kelley. Right: A view of Mike Kelley's installation at Gagosian. (All photos: David Crotty/Patrick McMullan)

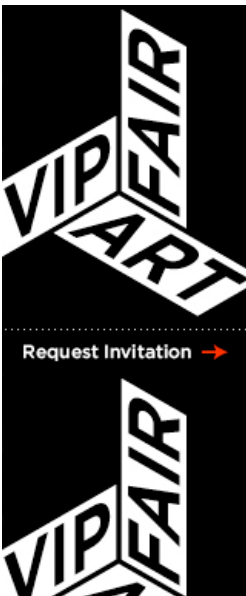
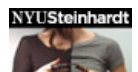
"THERE IS A STRANGE DISQUIET," wrote Dennis Cooper in Mike Kelley's 1993 catalogue *Catholic Tastes*, "in looking too long and hard at the face of a druggie. The same goes for the artist, the criminal, the genius." After Kelley's opening last week at Gagosian Beverly Hills, I am inclined to add to Cooper's list the wholesome harem girl, the dour gnome, and Colonel Sanders. There was little that could disquiet the enthusiastic horde that turned out for the event, however, as the faces of Kelley's latest archetypes, which populate the installations *Kandor 10/Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #34* and *Kandor 12/Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #35*, embodied Cooper's conceit: "They no more convey their subjects' complicated ideas than the stained-glass windows in a chapel tell parishioners what god is supposedly intending."

Kelley's intentions, on the other hand, may have been clearer: to seamlessly conflate the complexities of two longtime bodies of work, the "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction" series (the basis of his celebrated *Day Is Done*) and the "Kandor" series (a boundless picturing and repicturing of Superman's hometown). The show is as irresistible as it is tricky. "Is that vacuum part of the work?" asked one attendee, and then, "Is that a Kaari Upson grotto?" The hulking mass of faux rock housed a tiny cityscape trapped in a bottle (surrounded by what looked like piles of dirty undies) and played off the bubble-gum colors of an adjacent *Laugh-In*-like stage flat.

Slipping from the grooviness of the main gallery into the witchiness of Gogo's "Main Gallery South," I spotted a rakish set of archetypes lurking in the shadows: the Pope of Trash (John Waters), the anti-It Girl (Chloë Sevigny), and more than one Hollywood heiress (China Chow; Liz Goldwyn) smirked and sulked among icy little bergs glowing atop pedestals. Perhaps the nearby art was making them thirsty as well; *Mexican Blind Cave Worm*—a soft sculpture wound around twenty-four packs of Corona—offered the only libations in sight.

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Left: John Waters and Chloë Sevigny. Right: Lea Remba, Luis Remba, and Larry Gagosian.

Eventually someone whispered to me, “We’re going to the roof.” I followed artist Davida Nemeroff—whose plucky East LA Night Gallery may well be the antithesis of the Gagosian enterprise—past a bouncer, down a corridor, and into an elevator. And if proof was needed we were headed the right direction, it was provided by the company of one Mr. Waters; shoulder to shoulder with the luminary (and stopping on nearly every floor), I had ample time to proffer some chatty questions, which Waters craftily turned toward his latest book, *Role Models*.

Then—ding!—we arrived at the rooftop. Avoiding the voracious crowds below, Kelley celebrated topside with a close-knit group of friends, curators, collectors, assistants, and collaborators such as Scott Benzel (who coproduced Kelley’s videos), Gagosian’s Allyson Spellacy, artist Julian Hoeber, and photographer Fredrik Nilsen, most of whom fled the deck as a light LA rain crept over Beverly Hills.

I too set off—for the West Hollywood restaurant Jar, which had been turned over to Gagosian for Kelley and 160 of his nearest and dearest including artists Marnie Weber and Jim Shaw, Paul and Karen McCarthy (with whom I shared a table and a fittingly oversize saucer of creamed corn), Ed Ruscha, and Trulee Hall; museum directors Ann Goldstein and Michael Govan; West of Rome’s Emi Fontana; and collectors Eugenio López and Eli Broad. As the meal commenced, Kelley stood to offer a long list of acknowledgments, not least of which was Mr. Gagosian, who later remarked to the gathering of locals, “I can’t believe people in LA are still up. What is it, like 9:30?”

With the hour edging close to bedtime (shortly after the second of five courses), the restaurant thinned out, leaving the real in-crowd behind for cookies and mini-banana cream pies. As I made my own way toward the exit, the elated artist swung around and planted a big wet kiss on my cheek. Yes, I blushed . . . with only my own Catholic tastes to blame.

— Catherine Taft

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