Mike Kelley, More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid, 1987, found handmade stuffed animals and afghans on canvas with dried corn, 8 ft. x 10 ft. 7 in. x 5 in. (243.8 x 322.6 x 12.7 cm), and The Wages of Sin, 1987, wax candles on wood and metal base, 52 x 23 x 23 in. (132.1 x 58.4 x 58.4 cm), installation view, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, 1987 (artworks © Mike Kelley; photograph by Douglas M. Parker)
Mike Kelley’s 1987 assemblage More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid is a tapestry of tattered toys, handmade rag dolls, puppets, knit potholders, and stuffed animals sewn onto a matrix of afghan blankets mounted on canvas. The chaotic conglomeration of smiling faces and snuggly bodies offers a perverse surfeit of sappiness, a discomforting sense of hominess gone haywire. The work highlights the economics of gift-giving, in which pieces of thread and fabric are invested with deep emotional content—affection, adoration, sympathy, appreciation—to be passed on to friends, family members, and acquaintances, who are then indebted to return the favor. Offering too much sentimentality for one person to take, certainly more than can ever be repaid, Kelley’s heap of discarded craft-items underscores the ubiquity of that system and the underlying social dynamics that sustain it.

With its allover composition, swirling shapes, and mural size—and hung, as it is, in the Whitney Museum of American Art—this assemblage also brings to mind a very different order of handiwork: Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings. In More Love Hours, however, expressive “gestures” are formed not by paint, but via the interwoven skeins of yarn, patterned cloth, and cushiony lumps of stuffed-animal flesh. Its coordinated colors and designs are nevertheless painterly, an approach not unfamiliar to Kelley, whose early art education was, as he has put it, in the “Hans Hoffmann tradition . . . sort of half-push-pull theory and half-automatist.” A conflation of canonical modernism and homespun knickknack, the work is a blatant violation not only of the distinctions between high art and kitsch, but of the gender codes affixed to such classifications. This compendium of patently “feminine” materials and techniques—macramé, crochet, knitting, sewing, needlepoint—appears incompatible not only with Kelley’s own sex, but with the machismo of Abstract Expressionism in general, and of Pollock in particular.

Indeed, Pollock has long been mythologized as a paint-slinging cowboy-artist, his sweeping swirls understood in distinctly masculine terms, from heroic individualism and violent aggression to territorial urination and “manly ejaculatory splat.” More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid plays off this mythology, forcing a clash of “womanly” sensitivity and supposedly virile expressiveness.

Yet, as June Wayne argued in the early 1970s, Western culture has long conceived of “the male artist as a stereotypical female,” innately emotional, instinctual, irrational, and strange, possessed by mysterious forces of creation. Whereas women have been subjugated by such a characterization, men have benefited from its miraculous overtones while camouflaging their “quasi-female” identities in overt masculinity. This trope is again epitomized by Pollock, purveyor of both raw emotion and rough-and-tumble machismo. If Pollock represents a safe co-optation of the feminine, Kelley offers an awkward mixture of genders—funny, discomforting, grotesque. By blatantly appropriating actual “women’s work” rather than just absorbing its mythologized qualities, he effaces the macho Abstract Expressionist facade, exposing the ordinarily sublimated “femininity” of the manly artist.

Kelley’s work is also in dialogue with feminism itself, and particularly with women artists of the 1970s who employed traditionally feminine materials and techniques to celebrate female experiences and to resist patriarchal standards.

1. Kelley’s transference of the conjoined afghans from their usual horizontal position to a vertical one also evokes Pollock’s shift of his canvases from floor to wall.
3. The art historian Michael Leja notes, for example, that Abstract Expressionism “has been recognized, from its first accounts, as a male domain, ruled by a familiar social construction of ‘masculine’ as tough, aggressive, sweeping, bold.” Leja, Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 256.
Because Kelley is a man, More Love Hours poses a direct challenge to that strategy. However, the work is not simply an inversion of gender norms, though it has been treated that way by certain critics who have taken issue with his practice. In a 1994 essay, for example, Mira Schor referred to More Love Hours as “casual sexism,” denouncing Kelley for “ripping off feminist art and artists.” A year later, Faith Wilding characterized his craft works as “a mere reversal of gender signifiers” that does more to reaffirm his masculinity and his mastery of “the feminine” than to disrupt gender stereotypes. These criticisms overlook the exaggerated, grotesque nature of Kelley’s manipulations, the fact that his work caricatures the male artist who ordinarily co-opts femininity with impunity. More Love Hours is directed less at feminism per se than at high-art ideals and the myths of masculine genius that both enable and are enabled by them.

As such, Kelley’s tapestry can be positioned against the resurgence of machismo in 1980s art, most notably in conjunction with the rise of Neoexpressionism. Artists such as Julian Schnabel envisioned themselves as the “new Pollocks,” and their revival of large-scale gestural painting triggered a return to the manly rhetoric and heroic personae of postwar American art. Credited with a revival of authentic and sincere emotion, sensitivity, and expressiveness, these artists genuinely recuperated the myth of the male artist as feminine stereotype. Kelley, by contrast, publicly emasculates himself, fashioning a new Pollock of a very different kind—wholly insincere and inauthentic.

The range of contradictory forces that collide in Kelley’s work highlights the profound uncertainty that characterized American gender politics of the 1980s, when the “second-wave” feminism of the 1960s and 1970s came under heavy fire from both advocates of women’s rights and their detractors. The former called for more dialectical approaches to fighting patriarchy, arguing that previous tactics relied too heavily on essentialist notions of gender and therefore risked reinscribing the very stereotypes they resisted. The latter blamed the women’s movement for disrupting the “natural” structure of the family unit, calling for a return to prefeminist roles and standards—part of the more general neoconservative repudiation of “60s” liberalism. Such an attitude fueled the rollbacks and rallying cries of the Reagan Right, for whom the Gipper was a tough, two-fisted paragon of masculinity. Striking numerous targets at once, Kelley’s work reflects the complexity of this moment, not only acknowledging its paradoxical gender politics but embracing such paradox as the centerpiece of an alternative approach when others seemed to have stalled. It also reflects the artist’s own complicated status as an American man negotiating a cultural atmosphere of increasing gender confusion.

The contention that masculinity is an appropriate subject of progressive thought remains debated. Such efforts can be seen as a shrouded form of anti-feminism, an attempt to evade the more pressing and detrimental problem of female subjugation. In the 1960s and 1970s, male feminism was largely seen as a contradiction in terms, since all men benefit from patriarchal culture and institutions, whether consciously or not. In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, this dismissal was increasingly contested, as evidenced by a surge of writings on the question of men “doing” feminism, as well as on masculinity itself. Such reassessments stand in marked contrast to the hesitancy of earlier commentators to approach the subject critically. The larger problem, which came to a head at this
12. This reactionary agenda was also reflected in American popular culture of the time. As Linda S. Kauffman points out, films such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Ghost* (1990), *Pacific Heights* (1990), *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), *Unlawful Entry* (1992), *Regarding Henry* (1991), and *Wo/f* (1994) signal a longing for a time when male and female roles were uncomplicated. They imply “that ‘real men’ have lost their roots,” and that “only by rediscovering these roots will they reclaim their manhood.” Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 118-19.


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time, was that in the wake of 1970s feminism, men were confronted with a dearth of clear-cut role models. While some attempted to solve the dilemma by demonizing “women’s lib” and returning to prefeminist paradigms, others advanced a new and improved male, emancipated from what they saw as reverse sexism perpetrated by an oppressive women’s movement. This latter line of thought inspired the mythopoetic “men’s movement,” which blossomed in America in the mid-1980s and flowered in the early 1990s. Self-help books, men’s-rights groups, and male-bonding retreats encouraged men to redefine their own potentials, just as women did during the previous two decades. At their best, such entities sought to help an unsure population negotiate the new roles expected of it by a more egalitarian society. More commonly, however, they cast men as the victims of feminist oppression and reasserted traditional values as a way to resist feminist “conspiracies.”

For those legitimately enlightened by feminism, the situation was more complex. Such men were faced with the predicament of resisting a system from which they themselves unavoidably profited. In his 1998 essay “Male Feminism as Oxymoron,” David J. Kahane recognizes the “anguished consciousness” of antiseexist men, acknowledging that they are delusional if they think that they can fully comprehend feminism, let alone avoid being part of the problem. Men must, he argues, accept the contradictory nature of their own positions—the fact that “fighting patriarchy . . . means fighting themselves.” Kahane denounces a range of profeminist male “types,” including those who advance a critique of masculinity without conceding that the social restrictions placed on women will always be more damaging than those placed on men. He calls for an openly self-critical approach, one that operates with an awareness of its oxymoronic status, of the shortcomings of its own endeavor.

Kahane’s argument resonates in Kelley’s work, which confronts restrictive standards of masculinity, but does not characterize those restrictions as equal to those of femininity. Kelley’s focus on masculinity serves as a way into the debate, a way to address gender while avoiding the pitfalls of previous approaches, progressive and reactionary. Acknowledging his own contradictory position, the artist makes no attempt to resolve the issues he raises, but rather aims to heighten their very irresolvability, to accentuate the intractability of patriarchal power even as he undermines it. Through incongruous forms—hermaphrodized, pumped up, or neutered—Kelley critiques an oppressive patriarchal society sustained by men’s expectations both of themselves and of women. Arguably, his work is about the impossibility of “male feminism” as much as it is a refusal to accept that men can contribute nothing to the cause.

More Love Hours initiated a series of late-1980s and early-1990s assemblages, in which Kelley makes explicit use of gendered forms, materials, and techniques. Saturated in a shrewdly dumb brand of humor, these works represent a grotesque type of gender bending, deliberately made to fall flat and thus provoking continuous slippage between masculinity and femininity. In his 1989 Manly Craft series, this tactic becomes more flagrant (and shameless). Here, pairs of yarn octopi—simple dolls made from yarn wrapped around a Styrofoam ball—are bound into obviously phallic forms. These hand-woven dildos, with their braided cocks and perpetually smiling balls, are supremely perverse, oscillating between homemade cuddly playthings and castrated penises nailed to a wall.
Mike Kelley, *Manly Craft #3*, 1989, yarn animals, tied, 25 x 10 x 5 in. (63.5 x 25.4 x 12.7 cm) (artwork © Mike Kelley)

Mike Kelley, *Untitled (Yarn)*, 1990, cotton blanket, yarn, 1¼ in. x 7 ft. 1½ in. x 7 ft. 5¼ in. (4.4 x 217.8 x 228 cm), installation view, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, 1990 (artwork © Mike Kelley; photograph by Douglas M. Parker)

.. discord between the flaccidity of the yarn and the erect postures of the organs enhances their incongruity. Again, Kelley triggers a clash of the “feminine” and the “masculine,” a conflict compounded by the artist’s own maleness. As he explains, these works are “about playing with gender expectations. It seems odd for a man to play with crafts, sewing and stuffed animals.” Yet they do not just buck gender norms. They are phallic. To counter the emasculation that inevitably comes with his choice of materials, Kelley asserts his own masculinity in the crassest way possible—but to no avail, for the connotations of those materials are too powerful. Ruder and dumber than *More Love Hours*, the *Manly Crafts* series strips the issue to its bare essence, producing objects that simply cannot be contained by conventional gender categories. His penises are not only wimpy and impotent, but improbably—impossibly—feminine.

Kelley’s early 1990s afghan-and-doll floor works similarly twist gender codes. With its swirls of black yarn on a white blanket, *Untitled (Yarn)* (1990) is another riff on Pollock. More often, though, these works recall Minimalism, a movement with its own conventional gender connotations. Situated on the floor and in direct confrontation with the space of the spectator who circulates around them, Kelley’s sculptures mimic the gridlike, pedestal-less arrangements of artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd. Like them, he places his floor pieces in rectangular formations, with close attention to qualities of color, material, and composition. In *Arena #1 (Blue and Red)* (1990) and *Arena #9 (Blue Bunny)* (1990), colors are deliberately coordinated to emphasize the abstract qualities of the forms, and in *Mooner* (1990), geometric composition is likewise carefully calibrated. In Kelley’s hands, however, Minimalism’s hard, industrial aesthetic and clean, shiny surfaces become soft, handmade, ratty, and worn. Like *More Love Hours*,

Mike Kelley, *Arena #1 (Blue and Red)*, 1990, mixed media on blankets with rope, with stanchions and rope, 39 in. x 13 ft. 6 in. x 7 ft. 11 in. (99.1 x 406.4 x 241.3 cm) (artwork © Mike Kelley; photograph by Douglas M. Parker)

Mike Kelley, *Arena #9 (Blue Bunny)*, 1990, found stuffed animal and blanket, 7 in. x 6 ft. 2 in. x 60 in. (17.8 x 188 x 152.4 cm) (artwork © Mike Kelley)

Mike Kelley, *Mooner*, 1990, afghan, pillow, double cat food dish, four cat toys, 4½ x 36 x 39½ in. (11.4 x 91.4 x 100.6 cm) (artwork © Mike Kelley)
these works obscure distinctions between “high” art and arts-and-crafts keepsake—and between the gender associations such distinctions facilitate. As with Abstract Expressionism, the “masculinity” of Minimalism has been repeatedly asserted, both in the criticism of the time and in more recent histories. Resembling Minimalist sculpture but violating nearly every presumption of what such work should be, Kelley’s assemblages oscillate among multiple, traditionally oppositional readings. As the artist puts it in a 1992 interview, “The placement on the floor makes you think of certain historic formal discussions. Yet the materials themselves deny that discussion because the materials relate to hearth and home. . . . Of all my works, they are the most about categories, about confusion of category. You strive to categorize them.”16 The softness of Kelley’s knit materials augments the domestic (read: “feminine”) connotations to which he refers. In a 1989 essay, he recognizes a similar effect in the “softened” imagery of male artists such as Salvador Dalí, Claes Oldenburg, and Peter Saul, praising all three for performing “a kind of artistic gender bending.”17

Kelley’s own gender bending relates to its specific Southern California context. Prior to his move to Los Angeles in the mid-1970s, the city had been a hotbed of radical feminist art, mainly centered around Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro’s Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, where Kelley studied soon after. (The program ran from 1970 to 1975; Kelley enrolled at CalArts in 1976.) Along with taking up traditional “women’s work”—sewing, cleaning, cooking—FAP artists used role-playing and dress-up to examine restrictions placed upon women.18 In the wake of such activity, several male Southern California artists put masculinity in play alongside femininity.19 Richard Newton, for example, tested out sex roles and identity through a series of cross-dressing performances, and by the end of the 1970s he began to focus on explicitly “masculine” subjects, such as baseball and car culture. For Paul Best’s 1978 Octavia series, the artist walked the streets of San Diego alternately dressed in “masculine” and “feminine” clothing, gauging the effects of gender stereotypes on both men and women. That same year, John Duncan performed Every Woman, for which he hitchhiked a section of Santa Monica boulevard known for male prostitution, attempting to experience the typically female fear of male sexual aggression.20

Alongside these examples, fellow Los Angeles–based artist Paul McCarthy provides a particularly important precedent to Kelley’s gender bending. In a number of mid-1970s videos and performances set in “feminine” spaces—bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens—McCarthy produced awkward amalgamations of masculinity and femininity, using cross-dressing to dislocate the social codes by which gender identity is communicated. In his 1975 video Sailor’s Meat, the artist wears caked-on makeup and blond wig, slips into lacy black lingerie, squeezes his pectorals in an attempt to make cleavage, and applies red makeup to his crotch to simulate menstruation. The viewer is privy to the dressing of a drag queen, yet this is a type of drag in which the protagonist’s maleness remains obvious—barely, and clumsily, veiled. Over and over again, McCarthy accentuates the fakeness of his feminine guise by continuously drawing attention either to the insufficiency of his getup or to his actual penis. His approach, evidenced in most of his work from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, is not just one of inversion or exchange of types—penis for vagina, masculine for feminine—but of an obfuscation of gender, achieved through mixing, slippage, doubling, and confu-

16. Kelley interview with Miller, 44.
20. Ibid., 413–16.


26. Ibid., 123.

As Ralph Rugoff has put it, “The ‘characters’ McCarthy portrayed in his performances often eluded sexual categorization, at times crossing from one gender to another . . . yet most of the time it would be more accurate to say his characters seemed between genders, as if occupying some third, transient sex.”

Though Kelley does not dress like a woman, he acts like one. Or more precisely he, like McCarthy, portrays a sloppy, discordant “drag” that accentuates the spuriousness of gender categories.

Around the time of Kelley’s craft works, Judith Butler was theorizing the subversive potential of drag, positing it as a viable alternative to feminist practices that rely too heavily on such categories. For Butler, gender bending is resistant to both patriarchy and essentialism. She advocates a performed disruption of gender classification that forces the “natural” to rub up against the “unnatural,” resulting in a dramatization of the synthetic basis of identity—the fact that all gender is, in truth, a prescribed performance, wholly independent of sex. Gender thus “becomes a free-floating artifice.” By portraying it as something that can be deliberately performed, Butler explains, “drag imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing gender as itself an imitation.”

It must be acknowledged, however, that 1980s American popular culture contained an abundance of drag performance that hardly threatened, and often reinforced, conventional gender categories. The 1982 blockbuster film *Tootsie*, for instance, was often credited with increasing consciousness and fostering a deeper understanding between the sexes. However, as several critics have pointed out, the movie actually retains stereotypical characterizations of masculinity and femininity—the former connoting strength, confidence, and self-respect, the latter sensitivity and emotionalism. Ultimately, it promotes
masculine power under the guise of feminist liberation, suggesting that the best kind of woman is a man.\(^7\) Including a host of other distinctly "hetero" cross-dressing films, plays, rock-and-roll acts, and television shows from this period, the "Tootsie syndrome" can be understood as a characteristically male response to the feminist disruption of gender norms.\(^8\) In such cases, patriarchy reasserts its dominance by inhabiting the feminine. As Tania Modleski explains, "Male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it."\(^9\) Thus the aforementioned co-optation of "the feminine" by macho male artists, and thus the longstanding tradition of drag in American popular culture, from "Uncle Miltie" on down.\(^10\)

Indeed, gender bending has long served as a way of colonizing the feminine. The feminized masculinity of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century French painting, for example, coincided with a rollback of rights acquired by women during the revolutionary period. According to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, the threat of female power at this time was assuaged by "a cultural fantasy in which the feminine can be conjured away altogether ... only to be reinscribed and recuperated within a masculine representation."\(^11\) The abundance of gender bending in the 1980s, Solomon-Godeau argues, similarly mitigated gender anxieties in the wake of feminism's ascent. Hence the schizophrenic nature of 1980s popular culture, in which this feminized masculinity harmoniously coexisted with a resurgent über-masculinity. Alongside the prevalence of men acting as women came a surfeit of high-testosterone entertainment—action movies, cop shows, professional wrestling—a seemingly improbable convergence that signals, in Solomon-Godeau's words, a "destabilization of the notion of masculinity."\(^12\) Tootsie both embodied this crisis and attempted to assuage it by celebrating a new and improved man—one based, again, on conventional conceptions of gender.

Kelley's "drag," by contrast, is intentionally unstable, evoking conflicting gender associations in order to explode them from within. As with McCarthy's performances, its power depends on its in-between status, on its ridiculous layering of denaturalized and delegitimized gender codes, which precludes the work from functioning as just another example of co-opted femininity shrouded in masculinity. In fact, his disjointed, self-conscious gender bending can be seen as a critique of that very co-optation. In a 1999 essay titled "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre," Kelley acknowledges the power of this approach in the work of several early-1970s performers—"anti-hippie" rock bands such as the Mothers of Invention and the Alice Cooper band, and especially the Cockettes, an outlandish San Francisco-based transvestite performance troupe that billed itself as "The Theatre of Sexual Role Confusion": "The Cockettes ... produced a kind of campy and parodistic transvestite theater that, unlike traditional transvestite shows, revealed the exhibition of the incomplete pose. Though they wore extravagant costumes that mimicked 1930s Hollywood notions of glamour, their feminine masquerade was deliberately provisional and half-accomplished. The 'queens' often had beards—a definite no-no in transvestite acts where 'passing' as a woman is the sign of quality." Kelley also cites the late-1960s and early-1970s films of John Waters, which, he explains, feature "a similar play with gender slippage in the figure of the grotesque 'drag queen' Divine, who could never be mistaken for a woman."\(^13\) Judith Butler likewise praises Waters's films for sug-

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30. Uncle Miltie was the nickname given to Milton Berle, television host of Texaco Star Theatre (1948-56). Cross-dressing was a central technique in Berle's comedy. Examples of cross-dressing in American popular culture at the time of Tootsie include the films Cloud 9 (1979), The World According to Garp (1982), and La Cage aux Folles (1983); the heavy-metal bands Motley Crüe and Poison; and the television show Bosom Buddies.
32. Ibid., 70. Thus, Solomon-Godeau identifies the coexistence of the rugged Marlboro Man on the one hand and an abundance of advertisements featuring seductive, passive young men on the other (e.g., the "languorous Versace boy" in advertisements for the couture fashion designer). Her comparison could have also included the coexistence of ultra-macho action heroes, such as Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo, with the popular daddy-fills-in-for-absent-mommy characters featured in movies such as Mr. Mom and sitcoms such as Diff'rent Strokes. Indeed, as James Combs points out, the Rambo character reflected the conservative context of America in the 1980s: "Rambo was a thoughtless, sexless, and vengeful killing machine, an image of a muscle-bound superpower whose spirit had been held captive by the betrayals of both our government and our enemies. Once unleashed, he destroys both Vietnamese and Soviet foes with impunity." Combs, 54.
suggesting that "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real." As Kelley points out, however, it is not just drag, but incomplete drag that allows for this effect: it is only by presenting gender as an artifice distinct from sex that one reveals, in Butler's terms, gender's inherently performative status.

For the latter to be successful, the transformation must remain explicitly deficient, and attention must be directed to that deficiency. Kelley too performs a kind of parodistic "half-accomplished" drag that not only reveals the artificiality of both masculinity and femininity, but exposes the traditionally seamless and covert appropriation of "the feminine" by male artists.

Kelley hammers his point home in a 1992 series of woodworking sculptures produced for Documenta 9—a series that brought to a conclusion his direct and sustained engagement with gender. Kneading Board is a giant slab of wood shaped like a breadboard, adorned with real breadboards and similarly shaped spanking...
paddles. Scaled to the human body, the device seems to have been designed for initiation beatings common in frat-house hazing, yet its title and its Pennsylvania-Dutch decorative motif make clear reference to the “feminine” domestic sphere. Who or what is supposed to be “kneaded” here, dough or dude?

In most of the works from this series, Kelley eschews “womanly” references entirely. Employing a strategy of exaggeration rather than hybridization, these works exclusively engage “masculine” materials, techniques, and connotations. Here, at last, are manly crafts worthy of the name. As Kelley explains, “For Documenta 9 I decided that I would shift and adopt the role of the ‘male’ artist and do some woodshop work. Like dad in the basement working with his tablesaw. I did a group of sculptures in wood, which is often perceived as a manly material. Each sculpture represents a different fictive man’s ideology or perversion.”

Kelley’s assumption of a hyper-“manly” persona, rather than a “womanly” one, again relates to the mid-1970s work of McCarthy. The 1976 video Rocky, for example, is a mordant parody of the Sylvester Stallone movie of the same name and year. Naked except for boxing gloves and a full-head rubber bandit mask, McCarthy alternates between shadow-boxing, jerking off, and beating himself with stiff upper-cuts, body-blows, and jabs to the face. The melee continues for over twenty minutes, and the artist becomes increasingly exhausted, his self-pummeling ever more excruciating to behold. Here, McCarthy employs an inflated and autodestructive masculinity to mock the manliness of the Hollywood hunk. He also combines this exaggeration with the suggestion of inadequacy: his hero sports a flaccid penis, and though he repeatedly tries to masturbate, he just can’t seem to get it up.

Kelley’s do-it-yourself apparatuses have all the trappings of masculine prowess, but are of dubious functionality. Colema Bench is a seven-foot-high colon-cleansing machine, consisting of a wood bench with a hole leading to a pail underneath. Overhead hangs a plastic bucket, presumably to be filled with water, which would then flow through a tube and into the rectum of the person sitting above the hole. The question of why someone would ever craft his own colon cleanser is compounded by the fact that, as Jan Avgikos has pointed out, the mechanism’s “absorbent, unfinished plywood . . . would become easily soiled with runny brown fecal juice and nasty after one usage.” Similarly impractical, Primaling Cabinet is a human-size box made from wood, metal, and acoustic foam. Intended as a private space for the release of pent-up emotions, it specifically recalls the “primal” rituals advocated at this time by the men’s movement. But because of its two cloth-covered holes, Kelley’s hideaway functions as a speaker rather than a soundproof chamber. Like the Colema Bench, the device is utterly counterproductive.

Other works present the private male as degenerate. Tinkering away in their basements, these handymen seem to have allowed their depraved desires to get the better of them. Private Address System is a modified port-a-potty, with a pair of bullhorn-speakers mounted on the roof. Inside the booth, two microphones, one in the toilet bowl and the other next to it, are connected to these external speakers. The work evokes a common adolescent male custom, in which boys proudly publicize the magnitude of their bowel movements and the gratification brought by them, to the riotous amusement of their buddies. Torture Table moves into darker realms. It consists of a plywood table equipped with a pillow and a hole.

following pages:

Mike Kelley, *Colema Bench*, 1992, wood, buckets, tubing, 7 ft. x 67 in. x 17 in. (213.4 x 170.2 x 43.2 cm) (artwork © Mike Kelley; photograph by Fredrik Nilsen)

Mike Kelley, *Private Address System*, 1992, speakers, microphones, electronics, portable toilet, 8 ft. 4 in. x 46 in. x 47½ in. (254 x 116.8 x 120.7 cm) (artwork © Mike Kelley; photograph by Fredrik Nilsen)
Mike Kelley, Torture Table, 1992. wood, buckets, knife, plastic pillow, 36\(\frac{1}{2}\) in. x 8 ft. x 48 in. (92.7 x 243.8 x 121.9 cm) (artwork © Mike Kelley; photograph by Fredrik Nilsen)

positioned at the point of the genitals, with a metal tray underneath. Attached to the table’s side is a knife, ready to be unsheathed for who-knows-what act of surgical cruelty. Here, daddy-in-the-basement is a psychopath constructing torture devices in the privacy of his suburban workshop.

Unlike Kelley’s yarn works, these sculptures are the results of gender overkill. As he points out, they represent a diverse range of iconic male types, manly but ham-fisted. The apparent creators of Kelley’s contraptions try to be macho, but are mired by inadequacy. Again the artist dislocates gender by portraying it as a reenactment of a socially prescribed role—as itself a form of “drag.” What he presents in all of his craft works is not really gender bending but rather a sort of gender nullification, triggered by the grotesque misrepresentation or misperformance of its components—both the “feminine” and the “masculine.”

While lampooning the resurgence of machismo in contemporary art and society, Kelley exposes the limitations of certain feminist practices, as well as the paradox of being a male artist enlightened by just such practices. Indeed, his embrace of dysfunction, incongruity, and contradiction can be understood as a reflection of his own uncertain position—his own underlying sense of inadequacy. Kelley’s gender works are essentially caricatures of men trying to make art in the wake of feminism. His tactics are unsatisfactory, and intentionally so. The objective is not to rescue regressive gender identities in jeopardy, but rather to offer a broad deconstruction of the bankrupt categories upon which such identities are founded. Without recourse to a prescribed political agenda, Kelley denaturalizes these constitutive categories, re-presenting them as restrictive cultural constructs.

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