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Filthy Dreams.  
November 14, 2017.

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# filthy dreams

Singled Out: Living As Stereotypes In Mike Kelley’s “Singles’ Mixer”



Mike Kelley, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #8 (Singles' Mixer)*, 2004-2005 Mixed media with video projection and photographs (Art © Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All rights reserved/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

A girl in KISS makeup, a hillbilly, a computer nerd, a couple of witches and four Black women walk into a singles' mixer. Although it reads like the start of a hack joke, Mike Kelley's sculptural and multichannel video installation *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #8 (Singles' Mixer)*, currently on view at Luhring Augustine's Bushwick gallery space, brings together this unlikely cast of characters as an extended riff on broad stereotypes. While this could be considered a mere situation comedy, its absurdity doesn't mean it's without merit. As Jack Halberstam notes in *The Queer Art of Failure*, "the desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production..." (6).

Like Halberstam, Mike Kelley understands the power of not being taken seriously. With his handful of hackneyed characters and their obvious objects of affection in *EAPR #8 (Singles' Mixer)*, Kelley succeeds in articulating the ridiculousness in the carnivalesque parade of identities that boils everyone down to the most tired and even, offensive stereotypes. Even though the work was created over a decade ago—before Twitter became a cultural sensation and bully pulpit for a childish president, Kelley's installation is

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perhaps even more timely now than at the time of its creation as we continue to perform these out-sized caricatures of ourselves, encouraged by social media and the Internet.

Part of his staggeringly expansive *Day Is Done* project, *EAPR #8 (Singles’ Mixer)* takes its inspiration from awkward and incredibly bizarre found yearbook photographs documenting often goofy extracurricular activities. From these nonsensical images, Kelley constructs fictionalized and equally strange narratives, which play out both on-screen and in immersive installations related to the props and scenery employed in the videos. As Kelley explains in the collection *California Video Artists and Histories*, “I choose them because they’re not normative. If I chose a sport, it’s a wacky sport; if I chose an image of a workplace, it’s some ‘off’ day like ‘Jeans Friday.’ They are always photos of carnivalesque activities” (129).



Installation view of Mike Kelley, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #8 (Singles’ Mixer)*, 2004-2005, Mixed media with video projection and photographs (photo by author)

In the case of *EAPR #8 (Singles’ Mixer)*, Kelley started with a photograph of a girl in blonde pigtails holding two giant stuffed banana dolls. Another female student is behind her with a full-face of KISS shock makeup, near a boy sporting aviator sunglasses. In the background, a group of Black girls talk among themselves. This found photograph is juxtaposed in Luhring Augustine with the cast from Kelley’s video, transforming the original black-and-white image into a campy, brightly colored, over-the-top version. Precisely mimicking the original photo, Kelley provides an uncanny confusion between reality and fiction. As Milena Tomic writes in their essay “[Fidelity to Failure: Re-enactment and Identification In The Work of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy](#),” “this confusion about what is real and what is fake returns us thematically to the productive fantasy aspect that opens up rather than forecloses critical possibility” (454).



Installation view of Mike Kelley, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #8 (Singles’ Mixer)*, 2004-2005, Mixed media with video projection and photographs (photo by author)

Further emphasizing the fantastical, Kelley immerses viewers in a sculptural installation built around his central three-channel video, greeting viewers with a cheery, apparently handmade flower-laden sign that welcomes guests to an “Annual Singles Mixer.” Behind the sign, Kelley places photographs of a thoroughly tacky and depressing food spread, containing numerous buckets of KFC, donuts, cheese puffs, cookies and a random shot of dirty feet. With a stack of red Solo cups, Kelley fully transports viewers to a middle



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American high school cafeteria.

Of course, Kelley’s reveling in largely white blue collar Americana in all its ad hoc, shoddy and naïve glory is nothing new. From the beginning of his career with his pathetic tossed-away thrift store dolls, Kelley’s art has reflected a certain type of American folk art aesthetic—one that not only transgresses the boundaries of good and bad taste, but also threatens institutions, transporting white trash into a gallery setting.



Installation view of Mike Kelley, Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #8 (Singles’ Mixer), 2004-2005, Mixed media with video projection and photographs (photo by author)

Likewise, the production of the three-channel video rests somewhere between community theater, vaudeville and in its acerbic wit, a John Waters film. Here, Kelley reimagines the original photograph as a singles’ mixer gone horribly wrong. The video follows this motley cast of characters as they fervently fight in favor of their chosen heartthrobs. Toward the end of the video, the Hillbilly launches into an eerily unexpected monologue about a “Long Gone Race o’Folks” who live in a sludgy cesspool. As her face fills the middle screen, she is flanked by psychedelic images of greenish brown muck, resembling a lava lamp made with swamp water.

Despite its horrifying and ominous imagery, the Hillbilly’s story goes nowhere. As Kelley explains, “Her story is some horrible parable that makes no sense; it’s just dark and apocalyptic and goes on way too long. As a parable, it doesn’t add up to anything” (129). Members of the audience aren’t the only ones who have had enough of the Hillbilly. The KISS fan, who throughout the video antagonizes the Hillbilly (“Sex? Like a barnyard animal you are, like a sow in heat!”), lunges forward at her opponent, and the scene descends into a chaotic brawl.

“A capitalist is a capitalist. A Republican is a Republican. Money grubbers are so unsexy,” spits out a ghoulish makeup-wearing witch, sneering at the Black women who sing the praises of R. Kelly and Kobe Bryant. The choice of R. Kelly and Kobe Bryant wasn’t neutral for Kelley. At the time, both men were embroiled in sex scandals—an eerily timely reference in conjunction with our own current rash of sexual assault and harassment accusations against powerful men in Hollywood, the art world, music industry and politics. As Kelley revealed, “I wanted some controversy, and there were two sex scandals in the news at that moment related to sports star Kobe Bryant and pop singer R. Kelly. I just worked that into the dialogue” (129). With references to these sex scandals, Kelley places the video within a contemporary time frame even though the installation’s aesthetics conform more to 1970s nostalgia.



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Like the Black women’s praise of R. Kelly and Kobe Bryant, each characters’ chosen love object is attached to their distinctive stereotype—the witches love *The Crow*’s doomed star Brandon Lee, the KISS girl adores Gene Simmons and the Hillbilly can’t get enough of Garth Brooks (so much so she renders him with a random breast peeking out from the side of the picture plane as seen in a series of wonky paintings displayed opposite the video). By relying on exhausted tropes and even, offensive and presumptive cliches of who these different women might find attractive (for example, why are the Black ladies the ones who adore the most problematic hunks?), Kelley’s characters fail as fully formed personas. They, instead, are hollow stereotypes.

This failure of nuance is intentional for Kelley, who details his motives in a conversation *On The Beyond: A Conversation Between Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw and John C. Welchman*: “In that scene a diverse group of women argue about their various conceptions of an ideal man. I was trying to create a world made up of different stereotypical interactions, which fail to read stereotypically. I suppose you could say my approach was somewhat Brechtian.” For Kelley, these cliched characterizations may have had more to do with a critique of the restrictive notions of identities in educational and institutional settings than real social interactions. As Tomic writes in “Fidelity To Failure: Re-enactment and Identification in the Work of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy,” “...they seem to stand-in for the forced communalism of an education complex where difference is strictly mediated, only to produce stereotypes” (454).





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And yet, something rings true for how we relate and communicate via our identities in 2017. Kelley's installation predates the rash of racist, transphobic and AIDS-phobic views masked as personal preferences and desires on dating apps like Grindr. Even in its fictionalized over-exaggeration, Kelley's *Singles' Mixer* represents stereotypes that many have to navigate in everyday life.

As Tomic observes, “There are no individuals here, we might say—only identities” (455). How is this singles' mixer different from continual daily online fights. Even the video's final fracas resembles an IRL representation of Twitter and other social media platforms—random people who barely belong in a room with one another, yelling over mundane yet strongly held beliefs. With the increasing clickbait-ification and cooptation of identity politics, have we all, like the characters in Kelley's video, transformed into worn-out stereotypes of our own identities?

And if so, what now? Kelley doesn't necessarily provide an answer. As he says in his interview with *Art 21* on the *Day Is Done* project, “All you can do now is work with this dominant culture, I think, and flay it, rip it apart, reconfigure it.”