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Mary Reid Kelley

Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany

BY ANA TEIXEIRA PINTO

Mired in the tragic absurdity of war, Mary Reid Kelley's show, 'A Marquee Piece of Sod', collects her cycle of four films set during World War I (from *Camel Toe*, 2008, to *You Make Me Iliad*, 2010) together with the artist's drawings and watercolours. In this two-

part presentation, her first in a European institution, Reid Kelley's works are displayed alongside prints and drawings selected by the artist from the Kunsthalle's collection. These serendipitous pairings include (among others) pieces by Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Käthe Kollwitz, Max Slevogt and Adolf Uzarski. Like the scenography used in expressionist films, Reid Kelley's monochromatic sets are painted on canvas, their every angle slightly crooked. Her characters – all played by the artist – wear heavy makeup, highlighting their nostrils, jaws and cheekbones. Their eyes stare out vacantly while they deliver their musings in verse – to tragicomic effect.



Otto Dix, *Verwundetentransport in Honthulster*, 1924, etching. Courtesy: Kunsthalle Bremen; photograph: Karen Blindow © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016

Whereas the historical artists whose works are on view lived through World War I, often drawing upon the horrors they had witnessed first hand as subjects, Reid Kelley's films are staged at a remove from the front lines, often to highlight gender disparities. Barred from military conscription due to their sex – like Kollwitz who, with works such as *Sacrifice* (*Das Opfer*, 1922), is the sole

woman in the selection – Reid Kelley’s characters attempt to overcome their disenfranchisement by taking on whatever roles are available: factory worker, prostitute, nurse.

In *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist* (2009), a factory worker aspires to be a ‘modern girl’ but – swayed by wartime jingoism – falls for a sailor. Her feelings remain sadly unrequited, however, and, adding insult to injury, she contracts gonorrhoea; in her final monologue, the line ‘Britannia rules the waves’ morphs into ‘Britannia waived the rules’. Set in 1918, *You Make Me Iliad*, with its prostitute protagonist, presents a gender dynamic that is similarly skewed. Approached by a German client seeking a ‘tragic heroine’ for his epic novel, the prostitute balks at the suggestion of this rape-as-literary-idealization. Resisting his advances, she douches her vagina, and letters streaming down her legs spell out: ‘You Douche.’ The walls of her home are barren: sun-faded wallpaper denotes where pictures once hung, hinting at a loss not only of home and family, but of a community with female peers.



Mary Reid Kelley, *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist*, 2009, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London © Mary Reid Kelley

Reid Kelley's graphic style draws heavily from animation and camp traditions. Yet, though not naturalistic, the artist's grotesque, face-painted figures offer a convincing depiction of alienation and self-estrangement, while her lyrical language brims with puns and wordplay, fostering an anarchic co-existence of meanings.

The nurse in *The Queen's English* (2008) covers the dying not with blankets but with words. With a knack for churning lyricisms at the sight of spilled innards, her euphemisms dignify the act of dying, subsuming the horrors of war by investing them with the rationale of empire. In the field hospital behind her, beds full of geometrical shapes and contorted alphabet letters herald the collapse of the entire signifying system.



Mary Reid Kelley, *The Queen's English*, 2008, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London © Mary Reid Kelley

Seen today, this collapse could be construed as an allegory for the monstrous political forces of our present times. In her exhibition text, Reid Kelley addresses the bankruptcy of 19th-century notions of 'plasticity', the crumbling of classical tropes that sustained

centuries of aesthetic endeavours, and the estrangement between older and newer art forms that transpired during the war years. Yet while her focus may appear to be on the historical, Reid Kelley's 'A Marquee Piece of Sod' feels significantly more successful at addressing our current turbulent state than many other more contemporary perspectives. Reid Kelley's films seemed to have augured a now-palpable breakdown of social and cultural codes.

Main image: Mary Reid Kelley, You make me Iliad, 2010, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London © Mary Reid Kelley

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