

The New York Times

# Art Lurks in an Unlikely Place for Mary Kelly: the Dryer

By JORI FINKEL OCT. 21, 2017

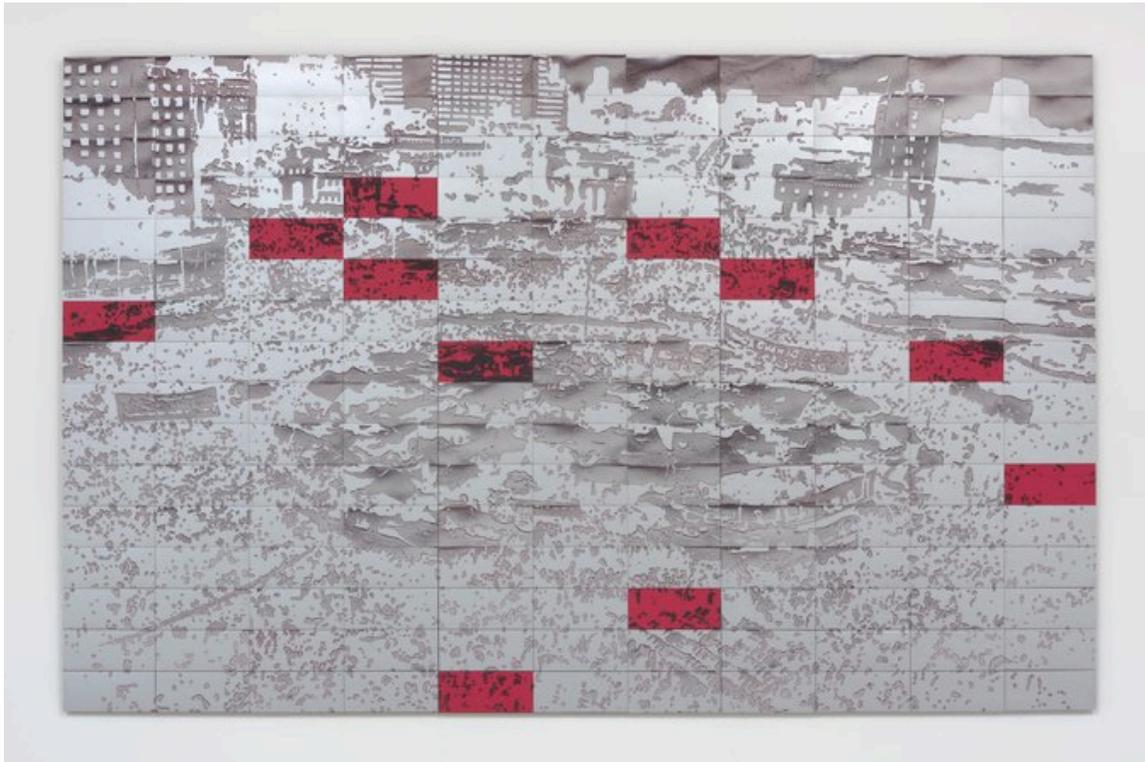


The artist Mary Kelly in her Los Angeles studio. Credit Joyce Kim for The New York Times

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

LOS ANGELES — There is a peculiar, almost shameful, pleasure in visiting Mary Kelly's laundry room. A pioneer of conceptual art, she is a model of precision in many ways. Her thinking is rigorous, her speech is eloquent, and her small home and studio up in the hills are sparsely and beautifully furnished with choice midcentury pieces. Her laundry room, in the corner of a garage overloaded with boxes, seems the opposite: dark, dingy and even a touch ugly, with beige, 30-year-old Maytag appliances and the cheap plastic laundry bins designed to contain a family's daily spills and stains. With a nod to psychoanalytic theorists such as Julia Kristeva, she calls it "the abject room." It's the space unworthy of art in other words, and yet it's the matrix for so much of her artwork. She first began making images out of compressed lint in 1999, carefully culling the material from a standard lint screen covered with a vinyl sheet that has been laser cut, in what amounts to an intaglio printing process, to create desired forms. The lint works as pigment and as an ephemeral reminder of daily life or, more specifically, of the never-ending rhythms of women's domestic labor.

Now, it has become such an integral part of her work that she does thousands of extra loads just to create enough lint, in the right colors, for her artwork: what her husband, Ray Barrie, a sculptor who helped her devise the lint-printing system, calls "fictional washing." Every piece in her new show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, through Nov. 22, was made from compressed lint.



Mary Kelly, "Circa 2011." CreditMary Kelly

Her reputation as a thoughtful and thought-provoking conceptual artist has gained over the last decade, with major biennials, a survey in England at the Whitworth Art Gallery in 2011 and an October Files book on her work in 2016. But this is her first New York gallery show in five years.

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

One highlight is the "Circa Trilogy," three large pieces made over a 12-year period that in the spirit of so-called "history paintings" capture striking moments of conflicts that help to define an era: the 1940 Blitz of London, the 1968 student uprising in Paris and the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Tahrir Square. A flickering light from a film projector trained on the surface of each image makes the lint appear screenlike. First shown together last year at Susanne Vielmetter's gallery in Los Angeles, the trilogy reads as an exploration of the aftershocks of war — how war is mediated by images and internalized by later generations.

The Mitchell-Innes & Nash exhibition, called "The Practical Past," also features her renderings of some letters she received in the early 1970s and her versions of feminist magazine covers of that time. One letter, an aerogramme from Arizona bearing a John F. Kennedy stamp, mentions President Richard Nixon's escalation of the Vietnam War. "I hope this exhibition doesn't seem too eccentric and people see it has some relevance to the current moment," she said, now sitting in her loftlike studio, noting that bogus wars continue and "attempts by women to change their lives and change the laws" are not finished.



Ms. Kelly with the lint screen used to create a section of the piece "Tucson 1972" from her "News From Home" series. Credit: Joyce Kim for The New York Times

The letters are not, however, easy to decipher, with names redacted and a certain fuzziness from the lint, unusual in the age of high-resolution digital files. Or as she explained: "I don't want everything to be so legible, like you can just access the past."

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Her own work has long been shaped by her political and philosophical convictions. Born in 1941, she was raised outside of Minneapolis and went to college in Minnesota, but soon went to Florence, Italy, to study painting for graduate school. That led to a job teaching studio art at what is now called the Lebanese American University. (She has since moved around for other teaching jobs, ultimately settling in Los Angeles in 1996 for a professorship at U.C.L.A. that she held until this year; she now teaches at the University of Southern California.)

In Beirut, Lebanon, she fell into French-educated, leftist intellectual circles and began to read revolutionary philosophy by Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre. She lived there in 1967 during the Six-Day War. “It was formative to live in a country where we heard the bombers going overhead, we had blackouts, we saw people arrested,” she said. “It gave me a much more palpable sense of the precariousness of life.”

Her sense of activism grew in London, where she landed in 1968. There, she found camaraderie by living in a small commune on Alderney Street in Pimlico and taking part in a women’s liberation group with friends like the film theorist Laura Mulvey, the psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell and the historian Sally Alexander, the latter of whom was also in the commune. “Every word I wrote, I ran downstairs to show Sally,” Ms. Kelly recalled.



Mary Kelly, “Post-Partum Document: Documentation V,” detail. Credit Mary Kelly; Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; Pippy Houldsworth, London and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

In this community, she made her first major artworks. First, she collaborated on the documentary “Nightcleaners,” which started as part of a larger campaign to unionize underpaid women who cleaned offices at night because they had children to care for by day. It was “an attempt to think about integrating our political interests and our artwork,” she said. However ironically, she was the only woman in a crew of men.

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Then, after the birth of her son in 1973, she began her breakthrough series “Post-Partum Document,” which analyzed his daily input and output, including feeding charts and new words, with quasi-clinical precision. She included — and framed — her son’s actual scribbles and soiled nappies.

Like many feminists at the time, Ms. Kelly was frustrated that huge chunks of lived experience, mainly construed as women’s experience, had been excised from art history. “There was nothing in art that tried to understand or express this aspect of our lives: our relationships to our children. The earlier generation of women tried to pretend they were men.”

“The main point of my work was not documenting the child but the mother’s feelings and relations to it,” she said, describing the feelings as anything but simple. “They’re totally psychotic if you want to know the truth — she has to make a separation too,” she added, using Freudian or Lacanian lingo.



Ms. Kelly uses her home dryer and multiple lint screens to create her signature compressed lint works. Credit Joyce Kim for The New York Times

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Still, reaction to the series, first shown at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, was fierce, with articles dismissing the dirty diaper liners as rubbish. “They went all out to attack me,” she said.

In time, that groundbreaking series became more celebrated, but misunderstandings of her work persist. She suggests the biggest is “that it’s dry or theoretical. If you don’t see my work, it would be easy to think that just from reproductions or reading about it. But really I’m dealing with the most elusive, imprecise things like feelings and emotions.”

As for the lint, this powerful tool for printmaking also proves elusive in many ways.

Despite its ubiquity in her work, it remains in the background in service to her themes.

The lint itself can be hard to recognize as such. And she doesn’t flaunt or sculpt or endlessly experiment with the material the way another artist might.

“Art is more about what you won’t do,” she said, “than what you will do.”