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Visualizing Historicism: Mary Kelly's Personal Reckoning

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***Mary Kelly: The Practical Past* at Mitchell-Innes and Nash**

October 19 to November 22, 2017

534 West 26th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues

New York City, miandn.com



Installation view: *Mary Kelly: The Practical Past* at Mitchell-Innes and Nash, 2017

For several decades now, a notion has been advanced that history is a subcategory of literature— not the other way around. Like storytelling, history, in this reckoning, is invested in interpreting accounts of events focused to a purpose.

In her deservedly celebrated *Post-partum Document* (1973-79) Mary Kelly put her son's linguistic and cognitive socialization, and her reactions to it, within the

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

frame of a discourse and rendered it the object of a six-year study. For her current exhibition, Kelly herself is the object of self-study, framed loosely as she once understood herself in the world.

“The Practical Past” is a memoir from the artist’s current perspective on her life in the collective spheres she inhabited in the 1960s and ‘70s and their relation to events before and since. Much of this is writing made visual through letters from that time reflecting concerns and worries about how to live the engaged feminist life, These are transposed in digital projections that nonetheless reflect Kelly’s decision to do a kind of cottage-industry piecemeal. In a slightly mismatched gridded array, the overall text of handwritten correspondence renders originals as multiple iterations. What appears to shade and fade into historicism is also stuff.



Mary Kelly, Tucson, 1972, 2017. Compressed lint, 66 x 88-3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes and Nash

In days of yore—i.e. before digital technologies became the lingua franca of art schools—protest literature was much seen on newsprint, in an affinity with posters of the avant-garde and their cheap card stock. In the current show, Kelly’s homage to the journal “7 Days” has the look of such protest technology, although it isn’t print at all (we are told), but rather an assemblage of vinyl templates and lint.

At the other end of craft are framed notes, written on letterpress luxury stock, , authored in a diarist’s voice that allows Kelly to lay down her thoughts about her identity with respect to the engaged life without rehearsing the latter’s ideological endgames. The largest evident arc of the story establishes world historical events through photography—or that it how it initially appears to the

viewer. Specific images, celebrated for capturing cultural eventfulness in modern history, are seen projected large on gallery walls as if to situate personal practice within collective memory. The perennially profound steadfastness of booklovers standing amid ruins of Holland House Library during the London blitz in 1940 is an eloquent argument for literacy and its necessary purposes in reading to understand. Also in universal collective memory is the raising of the French flag on the eve of the general strike in Paris, 1968. These images of European consciousness to be held in universal experience establish the scale of history in the mind of the individual activist, writing letters and essays in ephemera substantial to herself.

The story Kelly tells in visual terms is dispersed. The several modes of discourse each in composite techniques, some not at all apparent, render the elaborate exhibition hermetic within an allegorical postmodern historicism. That almost all images are comprised of screens of lint is a fact of manufacture to be discovered in reading matter of the checklist and press release, and otherwise so understated as to be unsaid. The TV “snow” projected is aptly present and clearly so, a device for placing the archival images of eventful history in the transmission of information. Interesting to debate, then, is how the sequence of observed encounters with Kelly’s images affects the sense and meaning of them. If one starts by identifying larger pictorially realized political events and progresses through her personal letters, a framework of activist initiatives in history unfolds. But if one starts, instead, with the read information of the lint, this changes the terms of engagement: the frame is now women’s work, with the artist subject to the initiatives of others. What is up for debate is whether understated complicated crafts articulate the theory-in-practice more adroitly than brutally overstated, spectacular room-size installations dedicated to the polis and its grievances. After all, in what other modes of praxis can history conjoined to literature be effectively visualized?

One thing is certain: “The Practical Past” is a refreshing study. It is also an antidote to the super-sized party-favors in the art world—meant to divert the adult daycare center and its caretakers who are the enablers of dangerous behaviors.