

HYPERALLERGIC

A Trio of Political Photographs Rendered in Lint

History is never objective and our relationship to the narrative is often deeply personal.

Elena Goukassian

November 20, 2017



Mary Kelly, "Circa 1940." From *Circa Trilogy, 2004–16* (2015), compressed lint and projected light noise

95 ½ by 127 by 1 ½ in. (© Mary Kelly, courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY)

In his 1983 book, *On History*, English philosopher Michael Oakeshott points to two fundamentally opposed ways of viewing history: as an objective “historical past” that outlines the sequence of events without interpretation, and as a subjective “practical past” that we manipulate in order to achieve continuity with the present and a projected future. Taking its cue from the latter, conceptual artist Mary Kelly’s *The Practical Past*, at Mitchell-Innes & Nash until

Thanksgiving, delves into the personal as political, melding the history of the recent past with the life of the artist herself.



Mary Kelly, “Unguided Tour c. 1940” (2016), letterpress prints on blotting paper, ed. 3/10 plus 1 AP 27 by 21 by 1 1/2 in. (© Mary Kelly, courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY)

Walking into the gallery, the first series of works facing the door, aptly titled “Unguided Tour,” sets the stage. Consisting of poetic descriptions of three historical photographs — of men perusing books in the devastated Holland House in London at the beginning of the Blitz in the fall of 1940; Jean-Pierre Rey’s “La Marianne de mai,” taken on the eve of the 1968 general strike in France; and an image of

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Cairo’s Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring of 2011 — the works serve as visual and textual maps to the photographs. Addressed in the second person, the reader/viewer is transported into the scenes. In all three works, Kelly pauses toward the middle of her descriptions: “Behind you, the photographer, / Seconds before the shutter clicks, immuring the moment, / Not long before you are born.” (Kelly herself was born in 1941, a year after the first work in the series.)

These same three photographs reappear in the largest and most impressive works in the show, the “Circa Trilogy,” which recreate each image on an enormous scale out of Kelly’s signature medium, compressed lint. For 12 years, Kelly collected lint from her dryer to make the works, each of which is about ten feet wide. A “light noise” projected on each one appears as a kind of TV static, giving the illusion of movement while providing a nod to the historiographical importance of these three very specific moments in time, made universal by collective memory.



Installation view of *The Practical Past* at Mitchell-Innes & Nash (© Mary Kelly, courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY)

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

The rest of the exhibition consists of more works created from compressed lint—blown-up facsimiles of personal letters Kelly wrote and received in the 1970s and covers of the short-lived radical leftist newspaper, *7 Days*. Like its namesake in philosophy, *The Practical Past* is rooted in the recognition that history can never be truly objective. We will inevitably always use it to explain the present and predict the future. The only question is how.

Mary Kelly: *The Practical Past* *continues at Mitchell-Innes & Nash (534 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 22.*