

ARTFORUM

New York

Mary Kelly

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH | CHELSEA
534 West 26th Street
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View of “Mary Kelly: The Practical Past,” 2017.

Mary Kelly’s landmark installation *Post-Partum Document*, 1973–79, tracing out the early years of the artist’s life with her son, from his first consumption of solids to his acquisition of language, has been so consistently present in intellectual discourse that it is hard to imagine the history of feminist art without it. So crystalline was Kelly’s articulation of psychoanalytic principles that it is also easy to forget how prosaic the work really is. The soiled diapers give evidence that she did a good job weaning her baby. The record of his every utterance expresses the abundantly common frustration of a child totally ignoring his parent’s command.

This exhibition, titled “The Practical Past,” is a reminder that Kelly’s work is fundamentally useful and that *Post-Partum Document* proposed new motherhood and early childhood as firsts in a long series of traumas, extending to the world of political upheavals, to the promise and failure of revolutions past and present.

A trio of diminutive letterpress prints from 2016 outlines Kelly’s concern for three historical moments, which she describes in poetic texts. In *Unguided Tour c. 1940*, three men are reading in a London library during the Blitz. In *Unguided Tour c. 1968*, a woman hoists a flag in Paris on the eve of a general strike. And

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in *Unguided Tour c. 2011*, protestors gather in Tahrir Square in Cairo, only days before the reign of President Hosni Mubarak crumbled. The pieces function as guides for larger-scale pictures made solely of compressed lint (yes, yes, the stuff you scoop out of your dryer filter). Kelly's show riffs on these surreal irruptions of hope while reeling from old anxieties about the stubborn disjunction between good (leftist) politics and bad (or often insufficiently feminist) behavior.

-Kaelen Wilson-Goldie