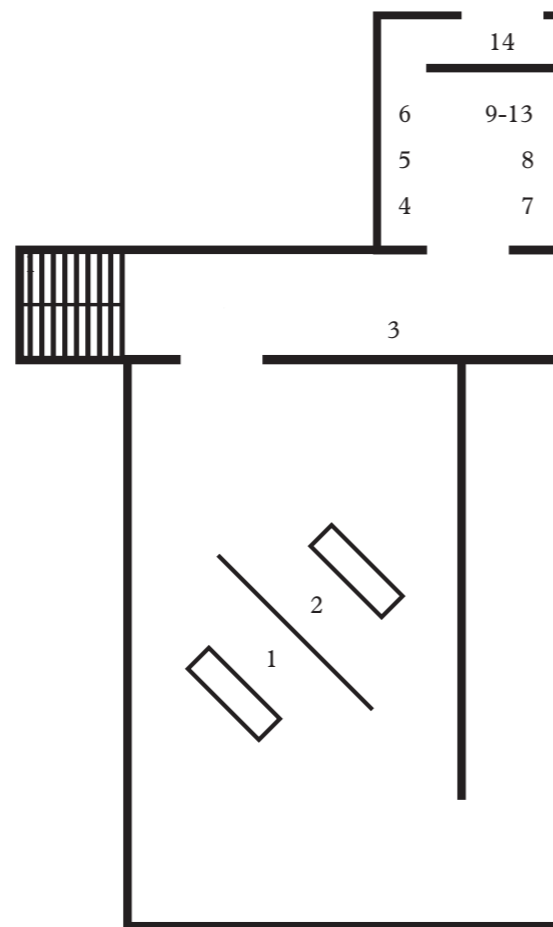


1. **The Syphilis of Sisyphus**, 2011
HD video, 10'34"
2. **The Minotaur Trilogy**, 2013-2015
HD video, 11'46", 13'15" & 15'33"
3. **Mural painting**
Black lacquer paint
4. **Priapus, 2013**
Collaged paper with charcoal, watercolor and gouache
5. **Minotaur with Ariadne**, 2013
Collaged paper with charcoal, watercolor and gouache
6. **Lightning over Miss Barley**, 2013
Collaged paper with charcoal, watercolor and gouache
7. **Daedalus' Sketch 1**, 2014
Ink and gouache on paper
8. **Daedalus' Sketch 2**, 2014
Ink and gouache on paper
9. **Swinburne after Rossetti**, 2014
Pigment ink print
10. **Swinburne with Circles**, 2014
Pigment ink print
11. **Swinburne with Flowers**, 2014
Pigment ink print
12. **Swinburne after Scott**, 2014
Pigment ink print
13. **Swinburne after Pellegrini**, 2014
Pigment ink print
14. **Masks from Priapus Agonistes**, 2013
Painted neoprene, synthetic fibre wig



MARY REID KELLEY

30.09.16 × 08.01.17

The video works of Mary Reid Kelley (°1979, USA) and her partner Patrick Kelley combine drawing, painting, stop-motion animation, performance and poetry. Her films reflect on specific historical events and cultural phenomenon. They become a catalyst for exploring themes such as gender female identity, sexuality and mortality. In Mary Reid Kelley's films, words and images are used in a deliberately artificial manner. In doing so, she creates an exceptional black and white visual identity and artificial parallel world. Artistic autonomy within their collaboration, and the scale and timeframe of the production all play a role in shaping the final work.

Biography

Mary Reid Kelley (1979, USA) lives and works in Olivebridge, New York. She recently exhibited at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2015), Neuer Kunstverein Wien, Vienna (2014) and Boston Institute for Contemporary Art (2013). Earlier this year she won the MacArthur Fellowship 2016 as well as the Baloise Art Prize for her latest film *This is Offal*. Her work is represented by Fredericks & Freiser Gallery in New York, Pilar Corrias in London, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, and Arratia Beer in Berlin.

Running parallel to the exhibition in M Leuven is *A Marquee Piece of Sod. The WWI films of Mary Reid Kelley* at Kunsthalle Bremen (until 19.02.17). The exhibitions compliment one another and together they present Mary Reid Kelley's video oeuvre in its entirety for the first time in Europe.

Publications

Mary Reid Kelley's publications are both available at the M-shop:

- Mary Reid Kelley. *Working Objects and Videos*, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art – State University of New York at New Paltz, University Art Museum, State University of New York at Albany, 2014, € 23.5
- Mary Reid Kelley. *A Marquee Piece of Sod*, Kunsthalle Bremen, 2016, € 7.5

Visual identity

The black and white films by Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley are two-person shows: from the preparatory research, scripts, performing and decors, to the heavy clownish makeup, costumes, filming, digital sets, storyboarding and editing. In the films Mary Reid Kelley plays most of the characters herself. Her own eyes are always covered by abstract representations of eyes, whereby the face becomes a kind of cartoonish mask. The abstracted costumes, props and sets are made using her drawings and paintings. Sharp, black contours used to accentuate forms give the imagery a graphic quality. Her films are thereby also evocative of the hand-made character of early cinema such as the expressive silent films.

"I'm always a little stunned when people talk about the hand-made quality of the work, because it's not an aesthetic that we're choosing among the vast range of available ways of solving problems. I think our films look the way they do because they're essentially two-person shows."

Inspiration

In relation to her exceptional visual language, Mary Reid Kelley draws inspiration from modernist artists such as Fernand Léger (1881-1955) for the grisaille shading and cubist graphical style she employs in her videos, drawings and paintings.

"A lot of the painting I do is 'painting out' or redaction, removing the visual information native to the object and replacing it with a graphic representation."

References to recent art history would include, among others, the work of Cindy Sherman (1954-) by the way in which Reid Kelley puts herself into scenes as both male and female characters. The extensive use of painting and drawing in her videos is also in line with early video works by, for example, Tony Oursler (1957-) or Kara Walker (1969-).

Scripts

Mary Reid Kelley writes the scripts for her videos herself, based on research into (cultural) historical events and phenomenon. Using rhyming verse she aims to create a particular distance with history so as to explore themes such as gender identity, sexuality and mortality. The texts have evolved from poems in her first videos (2008-2011) to complex scripts brimming with wordplay. This play of words unravels the tightly knit pattern of rhyme and recitation of verse by allowing varying layers of meaning to coexist. In doing so, different interpretations of the work come about that are not necessarily directly portrayed in the films.

“There’s a vast difference between the formality of verse and living speech – between the moment-to-moment conversation of a person, and the artifice of poetry. And there’s an analogy between that difference and the difference between a living person and a cartoon image of that same individual. I think those artificial worlds, which are the worlds of videos, are so compelling because even though they’re both so formalized and stylized, they can describe something about being human that realism can’t fully capture, no matter how much detail you have.”

The Syphilis of Sisyphus, 2011

The Syphilis of Sisyphus recounts the story of Sisyphus, a pregnant sex worker in 19th-century France. Here Mary Reid Kelley highlights the position of women in the past, a subject that often remains neglected in our view of history. Through the character Sisyphus, Reid Kelley parodies the pessimistic notions of the French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) who eventually died from syphilis. The political power struggles and upheavals of 19th-century France fuelled Baudelaire’s disappointment in humankind and his rejection of Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s (1712-1778) theory of human nature. Rousseau believed in the ideal of the natural human. The original being, unaffected by civilisation or culture, was capable of positive self-love and empathy. However, according to Baudelaire humans were internally rotten by their own nature – not even art could bring salvation. Creating art could therefore, according to Baudelaire, only be for art’s sake.

Mary Reid Kelley’s film *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* is the earliest work on view in this exhibition. It sets itself apart from the more recent video trilogy through the artist’s loyalty, in terms of décor and costume, towards the historical period in which the film is staged. While by contrast her use and language and humour in the film are contemporary, resulting in an interesting tension.

The Minotaur Trilogy, 2013 – 2015

This video trilogy tells the story of the tragic family history of the Minotaur from three different perspectives: family, sex, and love. According to the ancient legend, the sea god Poseidon placed a curse on Queen Pasiphae to conceive a child with the same bull King Minos had refused to sacrifice. Pasiphae gives birth to the Minotaur, part human and part bull, who is then held captive in a labyrinth and feeds on fifty Athenian men and women each year. The warrior Theseus travels to Minos to slay the beast with the help of Minos’ daughter Ariadne, thereby freeing the people of Athens from slaughter.

“I also really fell in love with Minoan civilization and the Minoan way of painting things, like their pottery and frescoes. It’s quite different from the Greeks or the Egyptians: the swirls and checkerboards, the extremities of scale, a small vase with this huge octopus on it, for example. [...] It’s like they were the R. Crumb [Robert Crumb (1943-), American cartoonist] of the ancient world.”

The Minotaur usually stands as a symbol of tragic brutality and pathos, yet in this version Mary Reid Kelley’s monster is female and in search of familial acceptance. Pasiphae is a cross between the actresses and sex symbols Pamela Anderson and Bo Derek, while during the film Theseus turns into the ancient god of fertility Priapus. The character of Priapus is inspired by poems about the character Sweeney (*Sweeney Agonistes* from 1932) by the British-American poet T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), whereas that Minotaur is inspired by Jorge Luis Borges’ (1899-1986) portrait of the monster in his short story *La casa de Asterión* from 1947.

Mary Reid Kelley’s interest in the ancient story of the Minotaur came about after spending some time residing in Rome. Here she had also been impressed by the eclectic, ancient architecture. She was struck by a connection between the way in which the Romans had found new uses for pieces of architecture from already existing buildings and her own potential to appropriate contemporary pop culture in her films. In this trilogy Mary Reid Kelley plays out the anachronisms between past and present to their fullest: not only in terms of language and humour, but also visually and in the story itself contemporary influences are discernible. For the first time here she places visual references to various periods alongside one another, in a kind of free association. In *Priapus Agonistes*, the goddess Venus sees herself in her mirror as the famous Venus of Italian renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), while we see her directly as a dog-faced pug. Or *The Thong of Dionysus* is filled with allusions to music genres such as rap and R&B, and music idols like Nicki Minaj and Lil’ Kim.

Priapus Agonistes, 2013

The first part, *Priapus Agonistes* (Priapus the Warrior) tells the myth of the Minotaur set in a sports hall belonging to a church in the Southern United States. Hapless volleyball players are held in the cellar as prey for the female monster. While the Minotaur wanders through the labyrinth she holds an imaginary conversation with her sister Ariadne and mother Pasiphae, and has a vision of her own conception and birth. Rather than human flesh, Reid Kelley’s Minotaur craves companionship and affection.

Swinburne’s Pasiphae, 2014

For *Swinburne’s Pasiphae* Mary Reid Kelley adapted an existing text for the first time. In *Pasiphae* the British Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) depicts his poetic portrayal of the Minotaur’s conception. Probably due to its explicit sexual theme Swinburne’s text was never published during his lifetime. Pasiphae gives an account of how the craftsman Daedalus, symbol of the creative powers of the artist, freed her from her agonizing, unfulfilled desires. In a sense the film situates sexual taboos historically by pinpointing how sexual diversity was tolerated in ancient mythology and culture.

The Thong of Dionysus, 2015

In *The Thong of Dionysus*, the final part of the video trilogy, Dionysus and three bacchantes are singing about drunkenness and suggest to Ariadne that she accompany them to the island of Naxos. Meanwhile, Priapus continues to hunt down the Minotaur in the labyrinth but falls in love with the monster’s dead body. The film ends with the marriage between a fainted drunk Dionysos and a desperate Ariadne who no longer has any reason to live.

Mural

In exhibition room 29, the artist has realized a unique mural bringing to mind a life-size set from the films. All graffiti and quotations come from the Minotaur Trilogy. The wall acts as a reference to the walls of the female Minotaur’s labyrinth, where (mostly) lost visitors left behind their ultimate message.

Props

In room 30 Mary Reid Kelley is showing different props from the *Minotaur Trilogy*. These are sometimes readymade objects that she draws or paints on, at other times they are made to measure. In M she shows the three masks of the characters Miss Barley, Miss Millet and Miss Spelt from *Priapus Agonistes*. The envelope and the sketch of the wooden cower objects lying on Daedalus’s working table in *Swinburne’s Pasiphae*.

Collages

Room 30 presents three works on paper showing different characters from *Priapus Agonistes* like Priapus, the Minotaur and Miss Barley. The works are collages: they are constituted by multiple black and white cut-out forms. Mary Reid Kelley makes these paintings after the production of a film. Through the exclusive use of black and white tones, concise stylized lines or the suggestion of erased space, they are an extension of the video works’ very particular visual identity. The works function like filmstills at the entrance of a movie theatre: at the same time they give insight in the production of the videos as they inspire imagination.

“After the film is finished, I make paintings of the characters themselves, which is a chance to explicate the different redactions and contradictions of image that define the characters.”

Photographs

Room 30 also contains five photo prints of several sculpted maquettes of Algernon Charles Swinburne. The film *Swinburne’s Pasiphae* is based on his poem *Pasiphae*. Mary Reid Kelley based every sculpture on a specific portrait: respectively two contemporary photographs of Swinburne (*Swinburne with Flowers* and *Swinburne with Circles*), but also portraits by the British Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), the Scottish painter William Bell Scott (1811-1890) and the British caricaturist Carlo Pellegrini (1839-1889). Rather than giving a picture of Swinburne’s personality, these photographs place him in an (art)historical context. At the same time they integrate Swinburne into Mary Reid Kelley’s artificial black and white visual language.

Performance during Playground

During *Playground* festival Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley present a live work, *This is Offal*, in which a pathologist examines the body of a woman whose own organs demonstrate their confusion and misunderstanding about her suicide. While her liver, heart and brain argue about what exactly took place, there’s certainly no hope of finding a rational, scientific explanation for this most tragic and complex of human actions. *This is Offal* ghoulishly enacts Camus’ philosophy of the absurd as a counter to suicide.

Thursday 17.11.16, 21:00 & 22:30
Friday 18.11.16, 19:30 & 21:30
Saturday 19.11.16, 19:30 & 21:30
Sunday 20.11.16, 18:00

The performance set can be viewed as an installation half an hour before the first performance begins until half an hour after the last performance has finished. On Sunday from 17:00 till 19:00.
Duration: 13 min | Location: STUK Arts Centre Leuven, Studio
Free entrance