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Mary Reid Kelley

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Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *Priapus Agonistes*, 2013, HD video, sound.

Mary Reid Kelley works primarily with film, creating narrative videos that pun on historical and myth-based spiels in a sharp black-and-white aesthetic. Her latest exhibition, at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, presents four films, created between 2008 and 2013, that all deal with moments of historical change for women—in one a Parisian prostitute quips on the French Revolution and cosmetics before being sent

to an asylum; in another, Kelley takes up a Greek Minotaur myth, casting a fertility god as a volleyball player. The exhibition is on view through October 27, 2013.

I HOPE FOR MY FILMS to be experienced not on an individual level but on a group level, as this dynamic affects the meaning of the work. People often don't trust themselves to recognize what they see or what they hear. We're constantly on the lookout for each other's opinions to guide our own, especially in the realm of language. This is most obvious in wordplay: People may not have the confidence to believe that a certain phrase is actually a joke, but when one person starts giggling, then other people do as well, and it starts to clue even more people into what is happening.

Installation is then crucial—here I've put these films together to facilitate a collective experience. My hope is that people will be not just listening to my script but also listening to each other; sharing the experience with a wider audience makes the work vastly richer. It's just like history—a group undertaking that, like language, we author together, under each other's watchful eyes. This is why I am drawn over and over again to an aesthetic that is two-dimensional, cartoonlike, a cardboard cutout—both visually and politically. This departure from naturalism allows a greater number of people to identify with it. In my work, I am always looking for collective elements of recognition, so people can see themselves in the characters I create. I think that's a primary impulse that people have when encountering anything new—relating it first and foremost back to themselves. There are always worn-out grooves between the individual and the group; these are what I look for when creating my own work, which is why I aim to create characters that are not individuals but archetypes or even clichés.

The other day I was listening to one of my favorite rap artists, Lil' Kim—I think she's a genius—and I was really admiring how she rhymes complex brand names with other words. If you make a really complex rhyme on Louis Vuitton or Gucci—a double or triple rhyme—you're drawing that status to yourself. You're owning it. So, not only is she listing things that she owns, or that she wears, by rhyming it, but she's intimately linking it to her own self. This is similar to the rhetoric of *Beowulf* and the *Iliad*—two works I have drawn on in my own practice. In these texts, characters give their origin myth, their origin speech, talk about where they're from, the specific neighborhood, and then—in these two cases—kills someone else and takes his high-status goods, like gold or armor. We still create and depend on origin myths. Every time someone runs for public office, they make their debut by at least one or two biographies that establish a heroic origin myth—Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, for instance. This happens not only in the case of individuals but also nations, which is one of the reasons I am continually drawn to war and conflict, which formulate origin mythology like few other events do. Chris Hedges says that war is a force that gives us meaning, and I come back to this a lot, though it's an extremely troubling thought.

— As told to Allese Thomson

