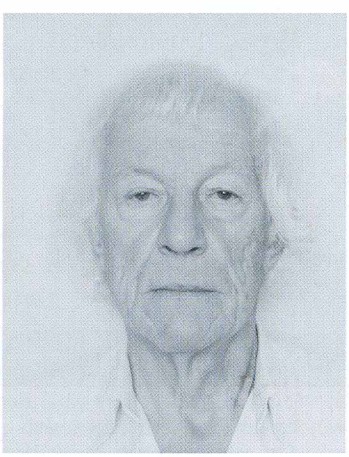
backed by his own unfinished canvases and wearing a nondescript white-collared shirt. His hair, moving through a range of greys and whites, falls to the sides of a progressively weathered face punctuated by patient dark eyes. Seriality is interwoven with the observation of changing physiognomy. What if – these images seem to ask – we could bring ourselves to disregard agreed systems for gauging time, in favour of a constant reflective attention paid to the unremitting deterioration of bodies?

Opalka's project has emerged slowly, and it is likewise slowly absorbed. This suspicion of fast action foiled my own attempts to rapidly vivisect the work into so many notes and references. The shrewd husbandry of time and information necessitated by injunctions to behave productively in a contemporary world often seems incongruous with the careful attention required to experience works of art. This is an old-fashioned thing to say, of course, but it is in the rift between anachronism and a contemporary context swamped by torrents of 'innovation' that the value of Opalka's consummate slowness becomes apparent.

Metaphorical languages have the capacity to speak of human situations in a way that belies life's underlying complexity. As a visual transcript of life's passing, 'OPALKA 1965 / 1 – ∞' does not see the problematic details of life recorded so much as transcended through an ascetic process. Having begun with the scrawling of white numerals on dark grounds, Opalka's project will ostensibly end with the production of white-on-white monochromes. This painterly progression, described by the artist as an 'exultation [...] that goes, every day, towards the white', seems to follow a mythological narrative, wherein life begins as a speck in infinite blackness, only to become lost in the sublime white light of death. The expulsion of his family from France to Poland in 1940 has obviously had an effect on his work. At work in his studio in southwest France, he resolutely involves himself in a constant, forward tumbling of documentation, poetry and myth.

Mitch Speed



Roman Opalka
Détail – photographie 4571283
From the series
'OPALKA 1965 / 1 – ∞'
1965–ongoing
Black and white photograph
31×25 cm

Mary Reid Kelley

Mary Reid Kelley
You Make Me Iliad
2010
DVD still

Pilar Corrias, London, UK

'Remember Belgium' was the slogan that encouraged thousands of Britons to fight in 1914. The phrase referred to Germany's campaign of terror against civilians at the beginning of hostilities, an appeal to conscience plastered on sensational posters depicting the bloodthirsty Hun. Four years later and no exhortation was necessary: the tiny country had become a massive graveyard, and the phrase itself must have sounded more like an elegy than a battle cry. Set towards the end of World War I, amid the devastation of German-occupied Belgium, Mary Reid Kelley's new video *You Make Me Iliad* (2010) explores such shifts in language and perception. Delivered in iambic pentameter, the dialogue in Reid Kelley's film invokes that most ambitious of poetic forms, the epic. But these rhyming couplets have an ironic snap, imitating the mock-heroic satire of Alexander Pope. This is Homer recited by bug-eyed protagonists, their features outlined in thick black paint – Max Beckmann meets the muppets. With its startling juxtapositions of live-action performance and stop-motion animation, as well as its remarkable range of visual and literary references, Reid Kelley's practice works from the structures of myth. *You Make Me Iliad*, a film and a series of drawings made during its production, comprised her first exhibition in the UK. A volatile mix of nihilism and comedy, the work presents a disarming response to the question of whether art can be meaningful in an age degraded by tragedy.

Our guide to this 'chartless territory' is a young German soldier (portrayed, like all of Reid Kelley's characters, by the artist herself). Hoping to swap bloodshed for poetry, his lofty rhetoric echoes strangely in this cartoon wasteland utterly drained of colour, its bone-strewn battlefields lifted from the nightmares of Otto Dix. Notebook in hand the soldier sets off in search of material to complete his classic in the making. The only thing it lacks, he observes, is sex. The darkly comic encounter that follows, between the soldier and a Belgian prostitute, encapsulates the gripping struggle for meaning that lies at the heart of Reid Kelley's work. While the soldier seeks to immortalize her as the authentic tragic female, the 'whore of metaphor' explains that such interpretation is merely a different kind of rape. Their exchange is so laden and convoluted it seems to test the ability of words to properly convey notions of suffering and self. In exasperation, the prostitute gives herself an internal cleanse, attempting to flush out the soldier's romantic idealism from her violated person. As the droplets of saline solution run down her legs they turn into letters, forming the words 'YOU DOUCHE'. With disconcerting wit, Reid Kelley's technique celebrates the materiality of expression – in Roland Barthes' phrase, bringing language itself to a kind of crisis.

With its literary allusions, stylistic references to absurdist theatre, word play and visual punning, Reid Kelley's work is a dazzling appropriation of our cultural past. Yet we are supposed to do more than just admire and be entertained by this self-reflexive sibyl: these constant reminders of Europe's civilized heritage have an ultimately alienating effect, in the Brechtian sense of the term. That is to say that the more we appreciate the artfulness of *You Make Me Iliad*, the more uncomfortably aware we become of our own dislocation from the violent reality being translated on screen. In the final scene, the soldier is apprehended by a 'reeking editor' (poison gas). As he suffocates, still struggling towards posterity ('Sing, Muse! Your scribe has quill in hand!'), his valiant clichés evaporate into the air. The point Reid Kelley invites us to consider is that our cherished aesthetic structures and expressions are themselves sustained and even inspired by the workings of brutal military power. As the film ends the patriarchs of European thought are seen to prevail. Their hand-drawn portraits were even resurrected on the gallery walls, their influence seemingly undiminished while the war goes on.

Kate Forde