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## Mary Reid Kelley, In Plain Frenghish

brian boucher 11/11/11

While installing a show that opens today at New York's Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, artist Mary Reid Kelley and her collaborator/husband Patrick Kelley offered *A.I.A.* a preview. The show includes a new video starring the artist and several works on paper that, animated into 3D, were used in the video as sets.

The 32-year-old artist, who earned an MFA from Yale in 2009, was until recently a resident of Saratoga Springs but had just flown in from Italy, where she is residing after winning the Rome Prize.



In her 2009 [exhibition at this gallery](#), Reid Kelley showed two short black-and-white videos in which she played a World War I sailor and soldier, and a nurse on the Western front. Before hand-drawn backdrops, with faces painted white and eyes obscured by what seem like halved ping-pong balls, her characters deliver

original rhyming dialogue, laden with puns and based on WWI-era patriotic doggerel. In *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist* (2009), a sailor assures Sadie that "Britannia rules the waves," and later justifies misbehavior with a switcheroo: "Britannia waived the rules."

*The Syphilis of Sisyphus*, the 11-minute video in the upcoming show, is in much the same style but reaches farther back in time. The main character, Sisyphus, played by Reid Kelley, is a mid-19th-century Parisian prostitute. "Making the sets from Mary's drawings," said Patrick, an art professor who most recently taught at Skidmore, "we used a lot more 3D animation than in the previous works. That was my contribution. But we didn't want it to be in the foreground—literally or figuratively." Reid Kelley added, "We put the character in an artificial environment, because in her monologue, she's promoting beauty and artifice and denigrating the natural world."

As the video opens, Sisyphus puts on makeup at her vanity, saying, "Nature sold me a lie, / and I've kept the deceit / On my face to remind me: / Her falsehoods repeat / Like the seasons renew." She emerges into the streets of Paris, where a troupe of street performers mock worthies including "Twinkletoe, Twinkletoe, Denis P. Diderot," "Jellytart, Jellytart, General Bonaparte" and the "Mathema-Titian-Haired" Marie-Antoinette. When Sisyphus joins in a battle, wielding loaves of bread ("Don't you know your own mother?" says one performer, "'Twas I who baguette you!"), she is remanded to a hospital by the morals police.

Sisyphus's climactic address to the physicians is packed with double entendres. "My tongue's S'il-vous-plated!" she proclaims, inviting them to study at her university: "So please, enroll now! For you well can afford / The tuition that flows through Unbillable Cords / To a cloister that's moister, a womb of one's own, / My Sorbonne in the oven is nationally known."

Throughout, the lines are similarly packed with rapid-fire bilingual wordplay; a booklet will allow visitors to read along. "The meter is different from the verse in *Sadie*, which was written in iambic meter," Reid Kelley explained. "*Syphilis* is in a dactylic meter, which makes it more crammed and relentless."

The artist became interested in verse only in recent years. "I only started doing poetry when I got into the First World War as a subject, and realized what an important medium it was for responding to the war." Her own writing of verse also has inspirations closer to home. "My

grandparents often wrote comic verses. In earlier times it was something normal people did. I don't necessarily think of myself as writing capital-P poetry. I think of it as versifying."

The video takes place in 1852, which was the year of a coup by Napoleon III that ousted the republic. For Reid Kelley, this backdrop of political upheaval, and the way the resulting disillusionment drove artists away from political involvement, holds parallels with modern times. "After that you don't get any more works like Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*," she says. "There was no longer the belief that art had something to contribute—and that politics was worthy of that contribution. So in making this piece I was thinking about being an artist and being interested in politics, and how disappointing it can be." Compared to the 19th century, syphilis may be largely under control today. Political disappointment is another story altogether.

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