



View of "Mary Kelly,"
2012. From left:
Mary Kelly and Ray
Barrie, *Habitus Type I*,
2010–12; Mary Kelly,
Mimus, Act III, 2012.

LOS ANGELES

Mary Kelly

ROSAMUND FELSEN GALLERY

In her *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), Mary Kelly closely followed her infant son's acquisition of language, tracing his first written words while simultaneously narrating the conditions under which they appeared. As media studies reminds us, words are a memory-storage technology, and the written word, which organizes its contents into straight lines of historical thought, shapes memory to fit. Whatever does not make the cut is at the crux of Kelly's ongoing aim to propose an alternate history, and so it makes perfect sense to start the account at this preliminary point, as a record of the record-keeping faculty itself.

This "archaeology of the everyday," as the Los Angeles-based artist has termed it, proves no less compelling in its findings than the sort of earthshaking events that read well on the walls of natural-history museums. War is perhaps the epitome of the latter, and while it has also found its way into Kelly's more recent work—Kosovo in *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, 2001; World War II in the series that was on view here—she always approaches it obliquely, by way of its psychological fallout. Typically, in Kelly's work, the experience of the noncombatants—women and children left behind when the men depart to "make history"—is privileged.

Among the works exhibited at Rosamund Felsen Gallery this fall were the freestanding *Habitus Type I* and *Habitus Type II* (both 2010–12). Made in collaboration with Ray Barrie, the artist's partner of many years, the pieces were modeled on domestic bomb shelters mass-produced in Britain during World War II. *Type I* is curvilinear, *Type II* is rectilinear, and between them unfolds an architectural time line that stretches from the organic profusions of Art Nouveau to the severe

geometries of the International Style. Yet Le Corbusier's definition of the functionalist dwelling no longer holds here—"machines for living in" are proposed instead as machines in which one avoids dying, and they are inscribed from end to end with the recollections of a generation born in the shadow of "death from above." Cut clear through the outer shells of both *Habitus* sculptures, these testimonial words are reflected inside by the work's mirrored flooring. Trauma, expressed in language, is thereby (re)enacted on its material substrate, the art object as such, impairing its integrity and opening its interior to invasion by a context always imagined as hostile.

Kelly's clean-drawn lines and flawless construction nod as well to the precedent of Minimalism and to its pursuit of perceptual immanence, which reappears as a shock-response to the terrors of its time. And much the same can be said for Kelly's wall-hung works, which might be likened to monochrome paintings. Made of sheets of compressed lint from domestic dryers affixed to variously colored cardboard, these too bear words. In the three-part series titled "Mimus," 2012 (*Mimus, Act I* and *Mimus, Act III* were exhibited here), language has been sourced from the court transcripts of the red-baiting House Committee on Un-American Activities and centers on the depositions of activists in the 1950s movement Women Strike for Peace. Appropriately, the interrogation of these hostile witnesses by America's representative powers (a new, and steadily escalating, global threat) is presented atop bloodred grounds.

To win the war is to win the war, the right to keep fighting as well as to seize the *spoils*. Kelly's works speak to an art corrupted on contact with force, but not without hope for recovery. Aspirations for autonomy in the (only nominally) postwar years cannot be disassociated from the social struggles that defined them. It's a post-Greenbergian truism, perhaps, but one that still bears repeating—which Kelly does from the margins of the "grand narrative," in voices of those most easily forgotten, to enact a return of the repressed, by way of art, on a collective scale.

—Jan Tumlir