

## Mary Kelly

### The Whitworth Art Gallery

At some point you probably will have experienced the feeling that you are never the 'right' age: too youthful or too wrinkly, there is always something else you should be – a concept which is manifested in the generation of ageless women who inhabit the celebrity world today. Age, specifically in relation to female experience, preoccupied me whilst I wandered around Mary Kelly's exhibition of four decades' worth of projects at The Whitworth Art Gallery. The issue underlies much of her work, such as 'Corpus' (1984–5), a series of images coupled with text, in which short stories and poems exist simultaneously (the latter inside the former, highlighted in red), retelling the concept of 'attitudes passionnelles', a number of characteristics identified by a 19th-century study of female hysteria. Kelly chose to use 30 panels as this age forms a collective marker point of the beginning of the end of youth, and her protagonists feel stuck in a vortex between past and present: 'One day she woke up and looked down at her breasts and realized they had lost their independence.' Taken from a series of journals Kelly wrote whilst listening to the woes of middle-aged women, the stories are intimate and funny, offering a view into the female psyche, that at times contains cliché that is all too painfully true.

Her seminal series 'Post-Partum Document' (1973–9), which traces the experience of being a mother in the early stages of her son's life, was displayed here in full. When it was first exhibited, at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1976, the work was met with outrage from some quarters, as it contained soiled nappy liners. In some ways the series recalls Mel Bochner's ongoing use of measurement, as Kelly creates conceptual 'rules' that measure aspects of her son's development and their relationship (such as the foods he eats and the formulation of language and communication), conveying a deep-rooted sense of anxiety. Each section ends with a question, such as: 'What have I done wrong?' One thing that struck me whilst reading was the sense of guilt Kelly felt as a working mother – 'K's aggression has resurfaced and made me feel anxious about going to work.'

## About this review

Published on 01/06/11

By *Kathy Noble*



[Back to the main site](#)

She then writes: ‘If R spends as much time with K as I do, then why doesn’t he feel guilty about the time he spends away.’ Although this work provoked controversy in the ’70s, I felt an ambivalent response: treating motherhood in stark conceptual terms, by deconstructing and categorizing it – in a way that is part scientific, part anthropological – didn’t allow for the emotional complexities and contradictions that parenthood inevitably creates.

However emotive it is, Kelly’s work sometimes feels a little too literal: ‘One night when I was walking across a campus with a friend, we saw a huge snow sculpture of a woman with a stick in her crotch. My friend began to cry, then told me she’d been raped.’ This text is cut out of glass on the outside of *Love Story: Multi-Story House* (2007, a collaborative work with Ray Barrie), which comprises a small house, glowing with white fluorescent lights embedded in the floor inside. In her 1987 book *Intercourse*, Andrea Dworkin argues that the dominant expression of penetration in heterosexual sex in art and culture is one that reinforces a wider sense of female subordination. *Love Story: Multi-Story House* seriously explores this form of conditioned female subordination, whilst revealing its underlying absurdity, by including statements such as: ‘I didn’t know I was a girl until I studied architecture and a professor said my work was “cute”.’

While I strongly believe in the impulse behind Kelly’s ideas, their realization as art works is not always convincing, as the heightened sense of anxiety present in much of the work only serves to reinforce gender stereotypes.

**Kathy Noble**

---

**Frieze**

3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270