

MARY KELLY
Postmasters
New York

In a culture of state-sponsored wartime fear, the drive to protect ourselves from attack however irrational – has become second nature. While adversaries may vary from decade to decade, the generations preceding us have been no different: my mother was taught during elementary school that in the event of a Russian missile raid she was to close all the curtains and hide under her desk. Though the offensive never came, her regular ‘practice’ drills didn’t cease; as it does now, living in continual fear for one’s safety appears to be the only safe thing to do.

In her recent show at Postmasters (her first since 2005), Mary Kelly mined the culture of domestic panic and paranoid indoctrination during wartime – or at least its looming possibility. Her two, interrelated bodies of work, *Habitus* (made in collaboration with the artist Ray Barrie, 2010) and *MIMUS* (2012), draw on the experience of, and records from, World War II and the Cold War, respectively. Consistent with Kelly’s visual and conceptual strategies, both bodies of work are immaculately constructed, labour-intensive and employ text as their central component.

Habitus comprises a sculpture that occupied the centre of the small gallery; made of laser-cut acrylic, wood and a mirror, the construction is similar in size, shape and colour to an oversized industrial pipe. Kelly and Barrie’s version, however, is sectioned length-wise, mimicking a waist-high crawl shelter (specifically, the Anderson bomb shelter, which was mass-produced in the UK during World War II). The corrugated, backwards text that runs across the surface is legible only by looking into the reflection of the mirror it sits on. This latter element lends the piece substantial depth; a text-overlaid shelter alone might have risked being too obvious, but the mirror’s effect forcibly

manoeuvres its viewers underground. (*MIMUS* reminded me of two new shows that have recently premiered on American television: *Doomsday Preppers* on the National Geographic Channel and *Doomsday Bunkers* on the Discovery Network – both programmes about those warding off apocalyptic doom by literally going underground.)

Kelly’s more recent body of work in the show, *Mimus*, is a three-piece series. As with *Habitus*, these wall-hanging works critique the nationalistic strategies that are both produced by, and serve to produce, the surrounding conflict. This time, the focus is the Cold War. By attaching vinyl letters to her dryer filter, and subsequently running hundreds of loads of laundry, Kelly created solid rectangular panels of compressed lint (a process she first developed in 1999 for her project *Mea Culpa*). Once the cycles were complete and the lettering removed – creating language in the negative space – Kelly stitched the panels together into an evenly seamed tapestry. The resulting script, at points difficult to decipher, is drawn from the testimonies of the three activists who spoke on behalf of Women Strike for Peace during the public hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee. The record speaks volumes, reminding us that the parallels between Joseph McCarthy’s Cold War fear-trafficking and our contemporary post-9/11 paranoia are none too distant.

Kelly’s use of lint – the residue of private, domestic and feminized chores – is a fitting vehicle through which to consider her three-decade practice. Though Kelly is continually referred to as a feminist artist, perhaps it is more apt to consider her as an artist who uses her gendered experience as an incisive tool to navigate and interpret the relationship between historical and linguistic memory. As opposed to other second-wave feminist artists of her generation, who have foregrounded the female body as the site of contested desire and power, Kelly’s approach is less direct. Her body (and its yield) is indeed her tool, but unless you look closely, you may never know it.

CARMEN WINANT



Mary Kelly
MIMUS: Act I, 2012, compressed lint,
 212x155x5 cm