



TOYS IN THE ATTIC Mike Kelley turned discards into art in works like, above, from left, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* and *The Wages of Sin* (1987) and *Ahh...Youth!* (1991). Bottom right: The artist in 1999.



CASTING Off

Mike Kelley, a product of Detroit, gets the midcareer retrospective he richly deserves at L.A. MoCA—two years after ending his life. **By DAVID SALLE**

cross between a petty thief and the skinny nerd who got sand kicked in his face—and he used that sorry everyman's mug to brilliant advantage while he expressed a wide range of have-not feeling, from remorse to rage. A lot of the rightness of Kelley's early performance pieces, preserved on video, stems from his brilliant use of hand-made and found props: purpose-made hats and

megaphones, little tables, charts and banners, fool costumes made with tinfoil and yarn. By the late '70s Kelley was already on his way to being a master of post-minimal sculpture. Had he stopped there he could easily have joined the lineage that includes Keith Sonnier, Eva Hesse, and Bruce Nauman. But he had bigger ambitions. I think he wanted to take on the whole modern world. But the intimacy of those early performances, their direct access to haunting feeling, their improvised, amateurish quality, and their fragility remained a touchstone in Kelley's work even as it became bloated with the huge influx of money and influence that came his way at the end of the '90s.

Whatever reservations I might have had toward his relentless insistence on humiliation as subject matter were silenced when Kelley took his own life, in January 2012. Suicide is the real arbiter, and its finality can't be trumped. It makes the survivors seem small, which was, perhaps, the point. Seeing this expansive retrospective (which continues through July 28) substantially deepened and enlarged my estimation of his work. I had followed his gallery shows over the years and had always valued his acidity. But I hadn't really grasped his enormous range and formal inventiveness. Kelley is a difficult artist to get a hold of piecemeal, but seen in the light of his 30-plus-year achievement, he comes through as a major artist. His work is perhaps the saddest that I know. •



IT'S HARD TO LOVE AN ARTIST WHOSE PRIMARY emotional register is shame. But Mike Kelley managed, during his lifetime, to attract a big top of cultish, fervent partisans. He was loved protectively, the way one loves a brilliant but badly socialized child, which suited an artist whose central theme was the emotional brutality and false cheer of American adolescence—childhood as introduction to a larger con. He started making his best-known work in the late 1980s. In pieces like *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* and *The Wages of Sin*, he turned a series of sad and perversely beat-up found objects—stuffed animals, sock monkeys, plush toys, afghans, pieces of yarn, Raggedy Ann dolls, tassels, knitted hats, tea cozies, candles, all sorts of junk you could imagine him finding in his grandmother's house in Detroit—into a collector's dream, offering a way to love kitsch and hate it at the same time. It seemed odd that people could be so drawn to art with a bottomless reservoir of schadenfreude and humiliation, of bad feeling in general. But that's the power of a strong, charismatic artist who taps into a desire for change. Kelley bent the audience to the contours of his own rants and demons.

Now the subject of a major retrospective called "**Mike Kelley**," currently at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, he was born in 1954 and grew up in Detroit, that incubator of harsh feeling. His life's early stages could serve as a checklist for the artist most likely to make a rumpus: working class Catholic boy; noisemaker in a proto-punk band; then, in the late '70s, grad student at the California Institute of the Arts, where he acquired just enough traditional skills to be dangerous. His timing was perfect. Kelley came of age just when "performance" was being added to the artist's toolbox, alongside paintbrush and camera. He discovered a gift for creating a character. There was, first of all, that face. As a young man Kelley looked like a