

Mike Kelley

Ghost and Spirit

10 May–12 October 2025

American artist Mike Kelley's work is best described as "dark pop art" – a provocative and sometimes disturbing oeuvre in which he explores the depths of late-twentieth-century popular culture and how it shapes our self-image. The touring exhibition comes from Tate Modern in London to Moderna Museet in Stockholm and spans his entire groundbreaking career, from the 1970s to the 2000s.

Mike Kelley (1954–2012) has inspired generations of artists and made key contributions to the recent history of contemporary art. The exhibition "Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit" is the first comprehensive presentation of the artist's work in Scandinavia and invites the audience into his expansive universe.

Truth and fiction, norms and taboos

Throughout his artistic career, Mike Kelley explored the relationship between identity and memory, truth and fiction, norms and taboos, desire and control.

Hendrik Folkerts, curator of Moderna Museet's iteration of "Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit" explains:

– Mike Kelley was interested in how American society is held up by ideological systems and institutional structures. His work explores how our sense of self is shaped by the conventions and rules of these systems, as well as by the influence of popular culture. Much of his work foresaw what is happening in America today.

The full scope of Mike Kelley's work

In the exhibition, visitors encounter the full scope of Mike Kelley's work. In the first room they are introduced to Mike Kelley's seminal performance pieces of the late 1970s. The presentation continues with drawings, text-based works, collages and video works that he created in the 1980s, followed by sculptures he made out of stuffed animals and discarded toys in the early 1990s. The finale of the exhibition features his large sculptural and multimedia installations created in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Dislocation, pop culture and underground music

Mike Kelley was born in 1954 and grew up in a working-class suburb of Detroit, Michigan. He has described his sense of dislocation, growing up without feeling connected to his family, country or even reality. He perceived the world as a media facade, constantly mediated by images from American pop culture.

Mike Kelley was an art student at the University of Michigan in the mid '70s. There, he co-founded the Detroit proto-punk band Destroy All Monsters (DAM). He remained engaged in experimental and punk music, often intertwining it with performance art, and was a close collaborator of the band Sonic Youth.

The best-known image of Mike Kelley's art is in fact the little orange crocheted figure that is part of "Ahh...Youth!" (1991), which was featured on the cover for Sonic Youth's album "Dirty", released in 1992, along with the other pictures from the work on the back.

Los Angeles and his breakthrough

Mike Kelley enrolled in the interdisciplinary school CalArts in California in 1976, at which time he was introduced to the groundbreaking performance and feminist art scene of Los Angeles. He remained on the American West Coast for the rest of his life.

His major breakthrough came in 1992 with the exhibition "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s", at MOCA Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles – a group exhibition of sixteen Southern California artists, aimed to destroy the old stereotypes of LA art and artists and to challenge New York's hegemony.

Mike Kelley's work has been presented at renowned art institutions, galleries and museums throughout the US and Europe, as well as in Japan and Australia.

The exhibition design and catalogue

The architecture for Moderna Museet's iteration of the exhibition is designed by the Milan-based architecture and design studio Formafantasma. The design is inspired by Mike Kelley's drawing, or score, for the performance "My Space" (1978).

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue, available in Swedish and English (303 pp). The publication is edited by Catherine Wood and Fiontán Moran, and includes contributions from Mark Beasley, Marie de Brugerolle, Robert Cozzolino, Hendrik Folkerts, Jean-Marie Gallais, Jack Halberstam, Suzanne Lacy, Mark Leckey, Laura López Panigua, Fiontán Moran, Grace Ndiritu, Glenn Phillips, Cauleen Smith and John Welchman.

Collaboration and tour

"Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit" is organised by Tate Modern in collaboration with Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Bourse de Commerce, Paris and K21, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, with support by Mike Kelley Foundation For The Arts. The exhibition is curated by Catherine Wood and Fiontán Moran. The presentation at Moderna Museet is curated by Hendrik Folkerts.

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