23 Questions for Conceptual Artist Mary Kelly

Name: Mary Kelly  
Age: 70  
Occupation: Artist/Professor at UCLA  
City/Neighborhood: Los Angeles

What project are you working on now?

Another spin on the domestic bomb shelter. This one converts the kitchen table into an all purpose bed and bunker. Would make a great "Occupy" camper, too.

Both of your works on view at Postmasters, “Habitus,” a sculpture modeled from a bomb shelter, and “Mimus,” a compressed lint painting that incorporates depositions taken from anti-McCarthyist activists, look back to the Cold War era. Why is it important to revisit this political moment today?

Obviously, the Cold War isn’t over yet. We’re on the brink of a confrontation with Iran, and McCarthy would have loved the Defense Authorization Act.

You have used dryer lint before in other project-based works, such as “Mea Culpa,” “The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi,” and “Vox Manet.” What is it like to work with dryer lint, and what continuously draws you to this medium?

The ephemeral quality of it.
You have said that the bomb shelter work, “Habitus,” harkens back to “the political primal scene.” (In psychoanalysis, the Primal Scene occurs when a child witnesses his or her parents having sex.) What do you mean by this?

Freud says the primal scene is basically a question about origins, and as children, we answer it by filling in the gaps in what our parents say with an imaginary family saga. So the mystery of where we come from is initiated by the sexual scenario, but it ultimately includes the grand narratives of social change that make claims on the present and the future, and I call this “the political primal scene.”

Your famous “Post Partum Document,” which detailed your relationship to your son over a six-year period following his birth, radically exemplified the feminist slogan, “The personal is political.” In your opinion, what are the stakes of feminist art today?

I would say “art informed by feminism” rather than feminist art. It’s not a style or definitive movement, but an interrogation of sexual difference and patriarchal social forms that cuts across all disciplines. But right now, there’s a kind of “been there, done that” mentality that risks losing everything we’ve gained so far, simply through lack of vigilance.

What’s the last show that you saw?

Sanja Ivekovic at MoMA.

What’s the last show that surprised you? Why?

“Under the Big, Black Sun” at MOCA. I was reminded that a lot of real thinking was going on in the ’70s and ’80s, and I was surprised the work still looked so good.

What’s your favorite place to see art?

The Met, not necessarily to see art, but to feel immersed in an overwhelming density of cultural legacies while I’m listening to chamber music in the loggia.

Do you make a living off your art?

Depends what you mean by living. I’m still part of the 99%.

What’s the most indispensable item in your studio?

My kitchen spatula.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

Around the house.

Do you collect anything?

Nope.

What’s the last artwork you purchased?

I trade work with artists I like.

What’s the first artwork you ever sold?

The first significant sale was a section from “Post-Partum Document” that went to the Zurich Museum in 1979, I think.

What’s the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?
In 1969, a grad student from St. Martin’s School of Art was cutting up and bagging a would-have-been beautiful work as a prologue to an event at the London ICA called “Unword.” Afterwards, I introduced myself and asked him why. A few years later, I married him.

What’s your art-world pet peeve?

VADD (visual attention deficit disorder).

What’s your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

Cookshop.

Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

I’m not a routine type.

Know any good jokes?

What do you call a sentence without a period? Menopausal.

What’s the last great book you read?

"Anna Karenina," again. But this time I felt sorry for Vronsky.

What work of art do you wish you owned?

Duchamp’s “Dust Breeding” work from the Green Box.

What would you do to get it?

Umm … get up early?

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

Cairo.

Chloe Wyma