

Madeleine Kelly

CAN U DIG IT?

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AN INTIMIDATING INTELLECT, MADELEINE KELLY FLIRTS WITH POVERTY OF MEANS, INVESTIGATES THE MIRACULOUS COMPLEXITY OF BACK-TO-BASICS COLOUR AND LIGHT THEORY, AND EXAMINES 'THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL METAPHOR AS AN IMAGE-LADEN AND MUTABLE TERRAIN.'



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Art is a fascinating thing. What is it? Is it man explaining to others what he sees, how he feels, his truth, his place in the cosmos? It can be. *Can U Dig It?* immediately popped into my head when I was looking at Madeleine Kelly's densely populated and challenging oeuvre. It's a track by Pop Will Eat Itself – an independent British genre-ambiguous band, mixing industrial, dance, hip hop, techno and hard rock styles; a sampler of cool pop culture, a swirling archeology of references. To a student of the visual arts, Kelly's work is a veritable feast. There's a palpable intellectual rigor at work here, which isn't surprising given she's an academic with a PhD currently lecturing in painting at The University of Sydney.

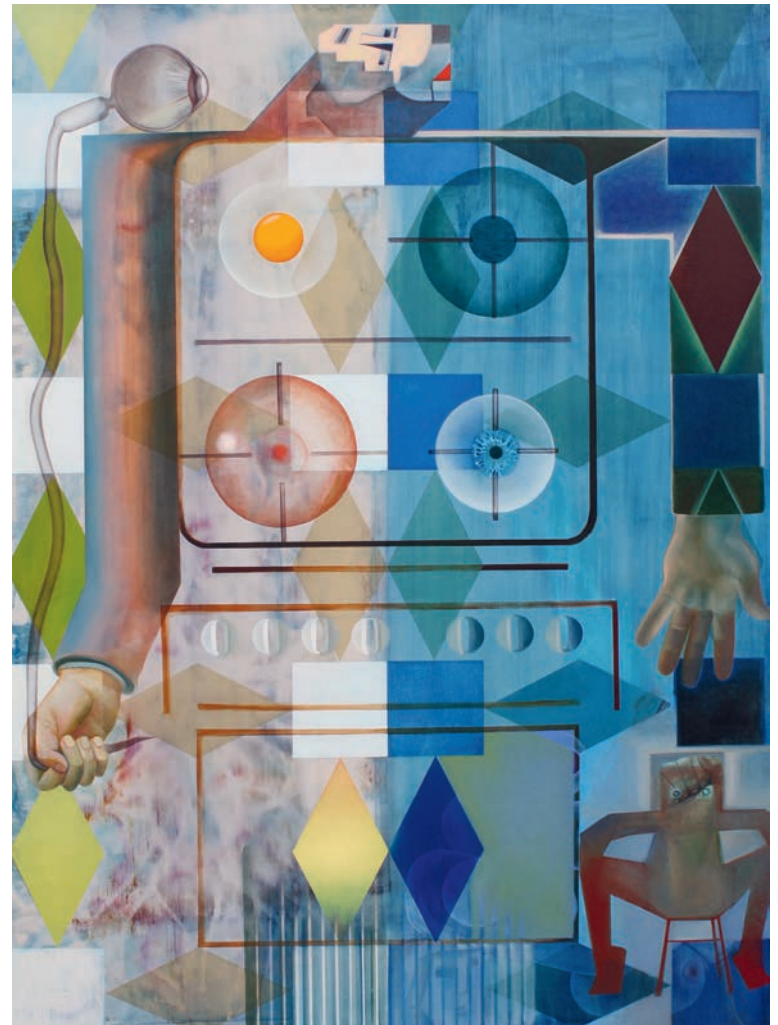
Kelly's left wing Catholic academic parents met while studying at Harvard University Boston, Massachusetts. She was born in Freising, Bavaria, while her Australian-born plant biochemist father and Peruvian-born, Spanish/English interpreter mother



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were living and working there. Kelly arrived in Australia in 1980 and studied Fine Art at the Queensland College of Art in 1999, where she gained a practice-led PhD in 2013.

Her work embodies a cornucopia of diverse references, which is as engaging as it is thrilling to unearth. Prominent among these are the Mexican muralists who share a political and social message referencing their heritage; the indigenous tribal arts of Central America. Early twentieth century modernism also looms large in her output, including Orphism or Orphic Cubism, an art movement founded in France (the most notable artist proponents of Orphism were husband and wife Sonia and Robert Delaunay, and the painter František Kupka). A further examination of colour theory comes from the Bauhaus in Germany – especially the work of Josef Albers, whose wife Anni Albers elevated the traditional craft of rug making to the status of a fine art, inspired in part by Andean rug design. The use of non-traditional art materials championed by the Arte Povera movement and Dadaists is also at play in Kelly's work, which engages with the formal, environmental and social concerns present in many of these movements.



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The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Kelly's biochemist father specialised in plant photosynthesis. Carbon dioxide, water and light are all needed for photosynthesis to take place. In her own teaching Kelly has extracted pigments from plant petals in an exercise with students. Light and pigmentation are major obsessions in her practice; how it affects the ways we see colour. She cannily weaves experiments into her teaching program that holistically inform her personal practice.

From the exhibition 'SPIN OUT, SPUN IN' at Brisbane's Milani Gallery in 2019, the kinetic work *Mama Ocllo* (2019) takes us back to the basics of art education. Kelly subverted an amusing medley of sophisticated colour theory-dense fine art with the mundane by co-opting the colour wheel and applying this instructional diagram from her teaching work. She animated circular elements of segmented colour into an unnerving grid

01 *Me and my rhythm box*, 2019, oil and acrylic on polyester, 111.5 x 152 cm

02 *The Passengers*, 2019, oil on canvas and wool textile from Peru, 168 x 160 cm (overall)

03 *Axis of dream*, 2019, oil on polyester, 152 x 111.5 cm

04 *Allowable forms and unconscious facts*, 2018, acrylic and oil on polyester, 137 x 101 cm



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*“ The harmonic vibration and wailing sound suggests
humanity’s low blow on natural systems ”*

of spinning discs transmuted into a hypnotic programmed stop/start mechanism of individual mixer discs whirring in a programmed hue cycle of cosmic effects; a heavily disoriented academic phantasmagoria of generative hi-fi pigment and light. Kelly points out that, 'Mama Oclo, a fertility goddess, taught women the art of spinning thread. Her magical pre-modern origin reflects the generative revolutions of the structure. In this work, light is a metaphoric thread of vibrant transitions reflected from spinning different parts of the coloured spectrum, yet the harmonic vibration and wailing sound suggests humanity's low blow on natural systems. This work also finds precedents in recent projects with similar rotating disks by Tobias Rehberger and Olafur Eliasson, and references Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926) and *Rotoreliefs* (1935), and Sonia and Robert Delaunay's vibrant Orphic compositions.'

Kelly shakes down the past to inform the current zeitgeist, excavating, adapting and adopting discoveries, moving them forward incrementally. She samples and mixes her own cultural history with formal and academic concerns to produce images that are new yet somehow familiar.

In her ongoing *Bird Projects* (2014–19), the artist takes a generic object as an armature and a geographic location: the humble milk carton. She then applies encaustic colour and samples forms from endemic bird species in a cut-up Cubist rap, breakdancing across the floor of the gallery space. Kelly explains, 'I have subjected the birds' bodies to expressionist distortions – they are squeezed or trapped into the rectilinear architecture of milk cartons. They become artefactual hybrids – half animal, half cultural object, severed into the language of minimal colour abstraction.'

We are all passengers in life; an idea that's been mined in all of the arts. Kelly's assemblage *The Passengers* (2019) – from the exhibition 'What the Centre Cannot Hold' at Ipswich Art Gallery – is constructed from a painting on canvas oddly combined with a Peruvian rug. The stretched canvas depicts a cut-away view of an aircraft fuselage, and seated within it are abstracted pictogram airline passengers – calling to mind the didactic instructional cards stowed in the seat pockets of passenger planes. Are the passengers in the brace-position or asleep? Is the plane about to crash? Either way, it's ominous. The viewer is trapped in the claustrophobic nightmare of a long-haul flight. The grid of characters arranged in orderly rows juxtaposes the naturally pigmented Peruvian rug, whose motifs traditionally serve a similar instructional purpose. About *The Passengers*, Kelly comments, 'I'm intrigued by the logic of textiles – or myth – the way that inversions, oppositions and reversals of the same symbols often create a kind of syntax. I am inspired by the way abstract symbols create meaning and compositional logic, through their interconnecting patterns and sometimes typological imagery ... I often feel a sense of not always being in



control of humanity's fate, and being up high in an airplane is a vulnerable place to be; one where we must relinquish control.'

Maybe art is a personal archeological dig. A rabbit-hole down into the deepest depths of the self and the art world, picking apart and re-evaluating past discoveries and personal history – an enquiry into art's very materiality, the stuff of its construction – in order to reveal or understand something else. ■

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EXHIBITION

'Madeleine Kelly: Open Studio'

30 May to 5 October 2020

Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane

05-06 *Mama Oclo*, 2019, acrylic on polyester, aluminium composite, board, stepper motors, 179.4 x 184 cm, 2 parts, technical advisor: John Tonkin

Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane