

# Flight of the Kandors

Mary Clare Stevens keeps it real at the The Mike Kelley Foundation.

BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP PORTRAIT BY MARIO DE LOPEZ

MARY CLARE STEVENS, DIRECTOR OF the Mike Kelley Foundation for the past five years, sits at the late artist's kitchen table, sadness in her voice when she says, "Mike was so incredible. He left so much of his voice here."

By here she means the artist's house where the foundation has been headquartered since his death. The rear entrance is down a narrow alley and behind the youth services outfit Optimist Home for Boys, which also sounds like the title for one of the artist's multi-dimensional, multi-media, and always mind-expanding projects. The Highland Park house is much as he left it. The living room shelves are lined with his CDs, his books, all the evidence of his wide-ranging tastes. "His death was one of the biggest challenges and a loss for everyone," Stevens adds.

The original kitchen cabinets were painted by Kelley in green enamel, a Christmas-y contrast to his 1950s red formica table and chairs with red leatherette seats. Yet, the bedrooms now contain volumes of archives while the dining room is given over to a cardboard model for the most comprehensive exhibition of the *Kandors*, from the beginning of the series to its end, opening October 21 at Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles.

Kelley began the series in 1999 with "Kandor-Con," his riff on Comic-Con, the annual convention for aficionados of Superman, X-Men, and the like. Long fascinated by the role of comic book art and the mythological backgrounds of their seemingly simple narratives, Kelley dug deep into the tale of Superman, who was sent to earth before his own planet Krypton was destroyed. He later discovered that he was able to rescue a miniaturized version of his birthplace, Kandor. However, the city can only survive by being in a sealed glass bell jar with its own air source.

Superman comic books had been produced since 1938 and Kelley noticed that there was no consistency to the way Kandor was illustrated. So he created his own model cities based on those varied depictions and housing them in giant blown glass bottles. Shown at countless galleries and museums since their inception, this show will include lenticular panels, light boxes, animations with sound, and actual sized grottos.

Executive Director Mary Clare Stevens at Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts.



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Stevens, who has worked as Kelley's personal assistant and studio manager since 2003, witnessed the evolution of her boss's Superman fixations firsthand.

"I learned so much working with him. That was the greatest education I could get," says Stevens, an artist herself with an MFA from UCLA's fabled New Genres department. "I'd never seen an artist be so prolific and work so much. I cared about him as a person and an artist."

Soft-spoken, with fair skin and dark hair, Stevens comes across as a sincere advocate for Kelley's legacy in his art but also in the grants awarded by the foundation to artists and non-profit organizations: \$319,000 in 2017 alone. Their focus is on Southern California, organizations that this year include the Vincent Price Art Museum, Redcat, Society for the Activation of Social Space through Art and Sound (SASSAS) and The Industry.

"We cast a really wide net. It's about the project," says Stevens. "We are looking for things that might not be funded because of controversial or challenging content." The grants specify that any non-profit recipient will allot a fee to the artist.

"We see it as a collaboration," she adds. "Then the artists don't have to use their own money to fund their work. It's a small detail but a big one in many ways. It distinguishes this grant from others."

With Mark Lightcap, who also worked with Kelley in his studio and who is now Collections Manager of the Foundation, they maintain a lean operation with three other employees. The

Foundation oversees all the quotidian business of an artist's estate: rights and reproductions, loans of work to exhibitions and maintaining the extensive Kelley archive.

"It was a very steep learning curve," Stevens recalls. "Launching the grant program was extremely gratifying because it's really about great art and making that happen."

"I think Mike was among the greatest artists of the last 50 years, she adds. "It is more prevalent now that artists are in a band, make videos, sculptures and do other stuff. It is easy to forget how radical it was in the mid-80s and how that affected other artists at the time."

In the wake of Kelley's suicide, the Superman subtext of feeling isolated on a hostile and alien planet suggests hints of autobiography. The artist once said that Kandor functions for Superman as 'a perpetual reminder of his inability to escape the past, and his alienated relationship to his present world.' Stevens doesn't shy away from the question. "He was always interested in psychology and played with that and his own biography as an artist-persona."

Before his untimely death, Kelley managed to leave detailed instructions for the creation of a foundation. Stevens feels more will be revealed with the availability of his archives, which were meticulously organized by her former boss.

"His archives are a new source for scholars and curators in terms of looking at this work again," says Stevens. "It's so important for artists now in this climate. What are we making art for? He continues to be an inspiration for me."