Crenn, Julie, "Martin Kersels 'Olympus' at Galerie Vallois, Paris," Mousse. (April 16, 2014)

MOUSSE

Martin Kersels "Olympus" at Galerie Vallois, Paris

April 16~2014

At the beginning of the 1990s, Martin Kersels experimented with his body. As an active member of the group SHRIMPS (with Pam Casey, Gail Gonzalez, Steven Nagler, Ryan Hill and Weba Garretson), he performed a series of familiar and simple gestures: holding, throwing, falling, kissing, cadencing, rocking; performances that oscillated between radicality and the absurd, both transpiring through the photographs taken during the performance. Simultaneously, he developed a 3-dimensional work guided by movement. Inspired by objects and the body language of daily life, Martin Kersels builds not only staged spaces where body and machine interact, but also animated sculptures producing incongruous actions and sounds. The bizarre dimension of his work is only a facade, his plastic work is in fact underpinned by a conceptual and critical reflexion on our relations to the world and society. The constant discussion between bodies, space, and the object is an integral part of his practice.

Atlas, 2014

For his new exhibition at Galerie Vallois, Martin Kersels questions the myth of the Olympus. Heaven for the gods, protected from men, the Olympus symbolised perfection (both body and spirit), complete happiness, joy of life, the carefree and plentiful. And yet, after reading Homer's Odysseus, the artist observed that gods, just as men, are not exempt from vileness, vices and mediocrity. "They looked like gods, but acted like humans. By western standards of aesthetics and ethics, the exterior did not match interior" (interview with Martin Kersels, January 2014). A space is created between inside and outside, the appearance (what we are supposed to represent) and the essence (what we actually are); a dichotomous vision which the artist applies to objects by questioning the relations between a product and its mode of fabrication, between surface and materiality, between form and function. The exhibition in its formal aspect is also an element of disruption: *Olympus* (2014) sets the exhibition space into motion, now mobile and unpredictable. A synergetic dynamic is at work as a removable structure that transforms and regenerates forms; meanwhile the viewer's circulation participates in upsetting the general balance.

Hercules, 2014

Orpheus, 2014

At the heart of a surprising scenography are bricolage works, the materials of which come from daily life. Altered, accumulated, associated, they tend towards abstraction. Playing on fake pretences, the sculptures underline the notion of passing, from one state to another, from the familiar to the strange. The loss of control, of bearings and the shift (perceptive, spatial, temporal and corporeal) push the viewer to rethink myths, norms, objects which constitute her/his own environment. By exploring the both pathetic and absurd dimension of society, Martin Kersels creates a critical space where disobedience, joy, incoherence and derision open the way for a possible liberation.

Julie Crenn

at Galerie Vallois, Paris

until 26 April 2014

Martin Kersels, *Zeus as Centaur*, 2014

Slash

Martin Kersels

Five songs

The structure *Five Songs* is a choir made of five strange and orange, black and white module-stages, open for any performative or artistic proposition. Five worlds given to appropriation by the first passer-by as long as she/he agrees to play the game, a guitar in hand. Five potential songs that he named in anticipation with the generous casualness that characterises his entire work. He envisaged them loud (*Loud Song_), familial (Family Song_), sung (Sing Song_), composite (_Stuff Song) and even nautical (Ship Song*).

To whomever will grab the microphone and interpret this foretold cacophony as she/he wishes. And indeed, there is enough there to turn these five "singles in progress" into one's own creation.

—Étienne Bernard

Martin Kersels, Vue de l'exposition Five Songs , à la Galerie GP & N Vallois, 2010
Mixed media — 120 1/8 × 49 1/4 × 60 5/8 in.
Collection MAC Lyon; Courtesy of the artist & Galerie G-P & N Vallois, Paris

Rickety's Ghost, 2010

Rickety's Ghost, a video installation, is the ghost of a ballet in which the dancers are only suggested by marks on the floor, an explicit reference to the film *Dogville* by lars Von Trier. The work becomes the base holding these bodies that brush past and look for each other in a dance of mixed attraction and repulsion.

—Albertine de Galbert

Martin Kersels, Rickety's Ghost (with Dark Spirits, Dance, and a Television), 2010
Exhibition view « La distance juste », at Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris — 47 1/4 × 216 1/2 × 165 3/8 in.
Courtesy of the artist & Galerie G-P & N Vallois, Paris / Photo : Aurélien Mole

Fat Iggy

With Fat Iggy (2009), the artist does a pastiche of Iggy Pop, who as thin as a rake, with bulging muscles, represents in the collective imagination the ultimate performer. In borrowing the improbable poses of the leader of the Stooges, Kersels puts himself in an unconfortable position — both literally and figuratively — with the aim of deconstructing the myth of the rock star, leaving the onlooker both amused and somewhat ill at ease in front of this body which is not altogether cut out to reproduce the lascivious swaying of the « Iguana ».

— Antoine Marchand, *Volume*, 2013

Martin Kersels, Fat Iggy n°3, 2009
Black & white photograph — Series of 7 photographs, each: 13 3/4 × 19 5/8 in. — edition of 6
Courtesy of the artist & Galerie G-P & N Vallois, Paris

Rickety, 2006

Rickety is a scene waiting for a singer, dancer or performer to be set in motion, with Kersels completely removing himself to make way for the artists invited to make use of them. Through this installation, he seeks to bring the body back into the gallery. He manages to transcend the relationship to the body as it is usually seen in performance and sculpture, while at the same time subtly probing the notions of author and authenticity.

—Antoine Marchand, *Volume*, 2013

Martin Kersels, Rickety, 2006
Exhibition view « Heavyweight Champion », The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum, Saratoga, U.S.A., 2007 — Performance «Huh?» in collaboration with choreographer Melinda Ring

Sleeper's Dream

This monumental sculpture created especially for the exhibition at the MassMoca was inspired by « Beauport », the eccentric house of a prominent Boston academic from the early 20th Century, H.D. Sleeper. But above all, it is a house inside a boot, a fairytale house inspired by dreams from our childhood.

In this work, we found a common theme that was also present in other works by Martin Kersels such as *Fat Man*: a play on the gap between innocence and a naive interpretation of the world and its reality.

Martin Kersels, Sleeper's Dream, 2003
Mixed media — 196 7/8 × 137 3/4 × 56 in.
Exhibition view « Yankee Remix », MASSMoca, U.S.A. (2003)

Fat Man

Fat Man, an installation displayed at the gallery, has been inspired by the nickname given to the atomic bomb launched on Nagasaki in 1945. A replica of the bomb, flabby and covered up with 18,000 mirrors, is stranded like a huge sparkling whale, right in the middle of the gallery. Visitors turn up and get reflected in a thousand pieces.

A small and empty bag, entitled « Thank you for shopping with us », is sliding and swirling along the walls. A Halloween-costumed teenager-tall ghost is drifting above *Fat Man* who is obviously getting an erection at this sight.

Martin Kersels, Sans titre
Exhibition view « Fat Man » at Galerie GP & N Vallois
Courtesy of the artist & Galerie G-P & N Vallois, Paris

Actions

Subsequently, his activity veered towards actions which sometimes took place in the street in front of passers-by, but only really existed, strictly speaking, in the form of traces represented by films and photographs. More specifically, he could be seen falling down in the street (Tripping, 1995), falling flat on his back (Falling, 1994), getting his friends to hit him (Friends Smacking Me, 1998), throwing those same friends (Tossing a Friend, 1996), and holding them by their feet and spinning them (Whirling, 1996).

Martin Kersels, Falling Photos 7, 1997
Triptych, C-print — 40 × 59 7/8 in.
Courtesy of the artist & Galerie G-P & N Vallois, Paris

Martin Kersels, Tripping Photos #2 (Melrose), 1995
Triptych, C-print — 24 3/4 × 34 1/4 in.

Art in America

Roving Eye: Getting Beyond The Frame

by Dan Cameron

Having thoroughly scoured Miami three months ago and the Armory a year before that, I decided to forego the Big Top this time around, and focused instead on a couple of mini-fairs (Volta, The Independent) and on the galleries in Chelsea. This was not exactly a "smaller is better" expedition; it was an effort to come to terms with New York galleries' efforts to put on some of their best exhibitions at a moment during the year when all the hype seems to be about a what is essentially a trade fair.

INSTALL SHOT COURTESY MITCHELL INNES & NASH

At Mitchell-Innes & Nash, I discovered that I really do like the work of renowned Los Angeles sculptor Martin Kersels. Until this current exhibition (closes Saturday), his first New York solo in a decade, which comprises of more or less portable objects, I'd always been more puzzled than engaged by Kersels' often sprawling installations, unable to discern what distinguished his work from that of better-known, slightly older peers like Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy. In this aptly titled "Stacks, Charms and Flotsam," however, wit and subtlety prevail over what at first seem to be simple combinations of found objects and suburban detritus, but are transformed into elegant chandeliers and delicate drawings through some subtle alchemy.

Art in America

Five From the Whitney Biennial: Martin Kersels

by Aimee Walleston

"This is a funny guy" was the this unsolicited comment offered to me by a visitor to the Whitney Biennial as he contemplated *5 Songs*, the sculpture-cum-performance set by Martin Kersels, installed in the museum's lobby. A miniature stage composed of five orange, black and white movable modules, the piece emanates a sense of hedonist pleasure realized through glam-on-a-budget fantasy. The modules include a Laugh-In worthy dance cage replete with a few hanging beads, and a performance platform with a built in prop room, stocked with all manner of rock accoutrements, including fright wigs and (should the need arise) a lint roller. The overall effect is Minimalist sculpture hijacked by a 1980s heavy metal cover band—artistic paternity in the hands of someone who can take a joke.

Which is not to discount Kersels' objects as mere sight gags: the stage pieces are not just gestures to the mere notions of performance. Kersels has created a performance program, *Live on 5 Songs* (with the help of Renwick Gallery's Leslie Fritz, who assisted Kersels in devising a list of artists, musicians and choreogrpahers), which is an integral aspect of the artwork. Last Friday, *Live on 5 Songs* hosted Melinda Ring, who performed with Kersels in his 2001 video piece *Pink Constellation*. Ring held "auditions for a fully imagined but never to be performed work specifically designed for Martin Kersels's sculpture," as she calls it The next performance, on March 12 at 6:30pm, will feature choreographer Milka Djordevich and composer Chris Peck, who have made the rounds this season with lo-fi, contemplative explorations on the relationship between music and dance. Lo-fi is key here: "I warned [the performers] that it's not a theatrical space," says the artist. "I said, 'you're not going to have a dress rehearsal, lighting designer or a sound engineer. This is all shoestring: you just go out there and do your thing.'" LEFT:

SKETCH FOR 5 SONGS. COURTESY THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART.

The work is mobile, and the pieces re-emerge in distinctly new configurations for each performance. Every time a performer goes on, the sculptures are rearranged (by art handlers) according to the guest artist's whims. "If the next performer wants to switch it around, [the stage components] can go together in a different way," says Kersels. "And then it stays that way until the next performer comes in." In this way, Kersels problematizes the notion that this artwork's precous gestalt that takes on a different life at the hands of the performers who use it.

The piece is about sharing the spotlight, although Kersels is quick to point out that it wasn't created out of sheer beneficence. "I wanted to bring the body back into the gallery. And rather than do some kind of extended performance, I wanted to bring in the prosthetics of performance—a stage or a prop. And I wanted to make those things sculptural and performative, to be activated by live bodies."

Kersels is a Biennial veteran, having previously participant in the 1997 edition. A Los Angeles resident and co-director of the Program of Art at Cal Arts, Kersels' work was exhibited in a 2008 retrospective exhibition, *Heavyweight Champion*, which was shown in the Santa Monica Museum of Art and at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. For the past few decades, the artist has created works that often explored the body and performance, with an agenda that feels both personal and pop-cultural.

In works like *Fat Iggy* (2009), the artist, who possesses a generous frame, photographed himself as the performer Iggy Pop, on a mutually grander (physically) and smaller (fame-wise) scale. The work introduces the idea that, in the culture of performance, one's corporeality is one's reality. *Tossing a Friend* (1996), a series of color photographs featuring the artist hurling his smaller pals toward the sky, explore the ways that humans negotiate their bodies, and the ways in which one's size dictates one's effect on people. With *Live on 5 Songs*, Kersels seems, in part, to transcend the notion of a personal body entirely. By suggesting the idea that a performance can be given by someone else, yet still belong, in part, to an artwork, Kersels has produced a distinctive and timely investigation of ownership and authenticity in performance art.

ARTFORUM

Martin Kersels

SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER

SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART

Standing six and a half feet tall and weighing around 350 pounds, Martin Kersels is a big guy. "I don`t fit in a lot of places, literally and figuratively," he says in an interview published in the catalogue for his first midcareer retrospective, aptly subtitled "Heavyweight Champion." The conspicuousness of his oversize person and the awkwardness of not fitting in are the generative conditions of his practice, as seen in the show`s thirty-three works, spanning 1994 to 2007. (Newer works were concurrently on view at ACME gallery.) Kersels employs a range of media, from sculpture and photography to video and performance, and has produced a body of work at once hefty and nimble, slapstick and subtle, confident and self-effacing.

Beginning his career in the mid-1980s as part of SHRIMPS a Los Angeles-based performance collaborative committed, in part, to showing large men enacting small movements - Kersels has long used art as a forum for wrestling with the limitations and possibilities of the physical self. Existentially resonant, bodies fill and move through his work with melancholy, bluntness, and humor. Installed here in salon-style abundance over two adjacent walls, the artist`s early photographs capture him engaged in energetic and parodie actions: falling and tripping in public, as well as spinning, tossing, and being smacked by friends. The photographs speak of momentarily altered states: letting go, passing out, tripping, being drunk and dizzy. In the tradition of Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari, Bas Jan Ader, and others before him, Kersels deadpans unheroic actions, frequently arresting and romanticizing the moment when the body loses control, succumbs to gravity, fails itself. A pathos-filled physical comedy emerges, starring the artist as lovable, blooper-prone klutz.

Kersels`s sculptures are often kinetic arrangements of objects that conjure his girth, mass, and rotundity. A fat doll-like figure made of painted wood balls lies on top of a large Fender speaker in MacArthur Park, 1996, its swollen limbs moving up and down to the sound of Kersels`s voice singing pop songs of love and loss. A large aluminum pot half full of water is wired to audio

equipment in Sputterer, 1999, the Rabelaisian sound of the artist and his wife growling and blowing raspberries causing its contents to roil. Woven from willow branches, Dionysian Stage, 2004-2005, is an enormous spinning whirlwind of a nest - for a monster baby Kersels? - holding countless knickknacks and household items. The biggest sculpture, Rickety, 2007, which consists of piles of found wooden furniture stacked on top of one another, doubled as a stage for a dance performed twice during the exhibition`s run.

Kersels has developed an expanded notion of the body as an unwieldy burdensome mass of great weight; a compressed volume relating to, and bumping up against, architecture; a wind instrument of voluntary and involuntary emissions; and an unstable object of uncertain balance swaying in resistance to gravity`s downward pull. Pathetic and revelatory, the artist plays out the banal traumas of his large physique with comedic lightness.

- Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

Los Angeles Times

'Martin Kersels: Heavyweight Champion'

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

SEPTEMBER 18, 2008

In the 1980s, Martin Kersels was a performance artist.

In the 1990s, he became a performance sculptor.

Kersels' sculptures don't look like robots, conventionally conceived by Hollywood and less predictably so in the scientific engineering lab. But in the final analysis, the products of this artist's studio often recall eccentric androids, which perform actions that make us wonder how programmed our own social brains might be -- that we're humanoids as much as humans. It's a sobering thought, which Kersels presents with sweetness and disarming wit.

The concise survey of Kersels' work since 1994 at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, "Martin Kersels: Heavyweight Champion," opens with a monumental sculpture of a bird's nest. "Dionysian Stage" is a massive tangle of twigs, nearly 10 feet tall and more than 13 feet in diameter. Enmeshed in its willow branches is a veritable laundry list of household stuff.

A very partial list includes a lamp, a typewriter, curtains, china, an ironing board, a grandmother's clock, a crib, decorative deer antlers, Christmas wrapping, articles of clothing, coat hangers, a captain's chair and assorted toys. This accumulated tonnage of homey material is threaded into the giant nest, lifted off the ground, set atop a tractor tire and motorized. "Dionysian Stage" rotates, an absurd merry-go-round of domestic happiness and horrible drudgery.

Dionysus, patron of the arts and the only Greek god with one mortal parent, had a dual nature. As befits the god of wine, he embodies a merger between ecstasy and rage. Kersels' performing sculpture identifies the ordinary American home as the contemporary locus of ancient, colossally conflicted feelings.

The most recent work, "Rickety," is a more typical performance stage. A sleek wooden platform with a stage set composed of scattered trees is lifted off the ground, built on top of a superstructure of domestic furniture. For the show's opening, the stage was outfitted with a rock 'n' roll drum set, electric guitar amplifiers and microphone stands.

A video nearby shows a past "Rickety" dance performance, sans musical equipment, with dancers

snaking awkwardly through the cramped domestic spaces below, in between the bedroom dressers and underneath the kitchen table. Then they climb up on stage to reenact similarly discomfiting movements as a polished, seemingly abstract, aesthetically pleasing modern dance. The upper stage is a kind of heaven, the underworld-home a nominal hell, and each is yoked to the other.

The exhibition, organized by the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., assembles 14 sculptures and videos and 19 large-format color and black-and-white photographs. The earliest sculpture is "MacArthur Park," an Audio-Animatronic assemblage made from a speaker, amplifier, CD-player and a strange, painted-wood form, all stacked on a living room side table.

The painted-wood form, wedged between the speaker and the amplifier, is a partial sphere from which chains of smaller spheres dangle. As the CD plays wobbly karaoke versions of late-1970s disco hits -- "I will survive!" -- the dangling spheres rise and fall on wires, tethered to a motor hidden beneath the table.

This wondrously weird construction is like a garage tinkerer's version of Robby the Robot, crude but cuddly techno-star of the 1956 science-fiction screen classic "Forbidden Planet" and progenitor of "Star Wars" celebrity R2-D2. ("Star Wars" was released in 1977, coinciding with the disco music playing on the sculpture's karaoke soundtrack.) The outer space story of "Forbidden Planet" is loosely based on Shakespeare's "The Tempest," and the Hollywood merger of Pop art trash and high art treasure is also a staple of Kersels' work.

As, indeed, it was the Bard of Avon's.

This seamless fusion of high and low also informs Kersels' photographs. The pictures of the artist and friends in various states of falling, whirling, stumbling, tossing, rolling and slipping find Buster Keaton looming in their slapstick ancestry. Kersels bridges the chasm again in a diptych commissioned for a 2000 show at the J. Paul Getty Museum, where -- clutching a life-size, carved-foam copy of the Getty kouros -- he launches himself into space, where inevitably he and the kouros will crash to the ground.

The famous kouros, which is either an ancient Greek sculpture of an idealized man or a modern forgery, assumes a provocative relationship with the L.A. sculptor. And in the retrospective, the kouros becomes a most peculiar pivot between Robby the Robot and the Dionysian stage.

Kersels' work is indebted to a number of other performance-minded sculptors, including Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden and Charles Ray, all of whom taught at UCLA. (Kersels received his master's there in 1995.)

In addition, Mike Kelley's influence is seen in a number of colorful felt banners, titled

"Devotionals," whose imagery of an open bird cage or a highway intersection marks significant moments of doubt or passages in life. They derive from the post-Vatican II practice in many Catholic churches of making felt banners to proclaim articles of faith.

Kelley's career-long interest in the domestic horrors of American adolescence also hovers in the distant background of what is perhaps Kersels' masterpiece -- a 20-minute video titled "Pink Constellation" (2001). To make it, he had an entire teenage girl's bedroom built inside a rotating superstructure, with a video camera attached. When the room spins, the attached camera makes the space appear to be stationary. It's the kind of contraption MGM built in 1951 for "Royal Wedding" to create the illusion that Fred Astaire could dance up the walls and onto the ceiling of his room.

In Kersels' pink teenage version, the girl doing the dancing seems to be experiencing youthful fantasies of escape, or else she's indulging in private behaviors that Mom and Dad know nothing about. Later, when Kersels occupies the room, the furniture has been unbolted from the floor and walls. The illusion created by the turning room is that an unseen storm is blowing through the space, with the bed, dresser, desk, chair and everything else sliding around, chasing him up the walls and onto the ceiling, creating a most distressing shambles.

The work is at once funny and emotionally wrenching. As an image of familial stresses and strains -- and ultimate loss -- it's quietly intense.

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Santa Monica Museum of Art, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave. Ends Dec. 13. Closed Sundays and Mondays. (310) 586-6488, .

LA WEEKLY

MARTIN KERSELS

BY JERVEY TERVALON

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2008 | 7 YEARS AGO

Kevin Scanlon

Martin Kersels' art, no matter the medium – whether it's video, dance, performance, sculpture, oils or photography – is an extension of his unrestrained exuberance and the division between his work and how he moves in the world, which he describes as being either thunderous or ephemeral, a thin membrane if it exists at all. His exuberance is informed with a broad, far-ranging erudition – Kersels reads as voraciously as any well-read novelist – as well as an un-self-conscious sense of theatrical absurdity. Even Kersels' massive hugs seem theatrically artful and wildly absurd. And when you're hugged by Kersels, you feel very small because he is a very big man.

But he is a big man who lives in his body as though it has no limitations, like a modern Fatty Arbuckle, that genius of the lithe fat man's pratfall. Take, for instance, his involvement with the Shrimps, a performance group of huge men who you would never suspect to be dancers. And yet, there they were in the '80s and '90s, performing all about town, exploring movement and resetting expectations of what it is to view dance – and, apparently, annoying the art faculty at UCLA, where Kersels studied as an undergrad. When he went back to UCLA for graduate work, the faculty asked him not to continue his performance work with the Shrimps. Though this highhanded interference ended one avenue of artistic expression, it fostered another; Kersels began making objects – objects informed with, as he said in an

interview on the Acme Web site, "a high-level slapstick, on the fallibility of the body."

Of all of Kersels' work, however, I am most fond of his "Falling" series of photos, which depict the artist heroically falling. I mean really falling. Imagine Milton's Lucifer, tripping majestically all the way to Hell.

In dialogue with Skidmore College's Ian Berry, who curated "Heavyweight Champion," a retrospective of Kersels' work that just opened at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the artist offers that there is an aspect of surrender and shame to his "Falling" photos. Once, to commemorate the Christmas season, Kersels invited me to dress in Middle Eastern finery as one of the Three Kings alongside him and another stout fellow. Surely, there was an aspect of surrender and shame as we walked about the faerie-strewn grounds of the Pasadena Waldorf School, which our children attend, following a camel at a wary distance. Camels, we had been told before starting our procession, could leap 10 feet into the air and kick their legs in every direction, striking so hard that serious injury could occur. I don't think Kersels intended our stroll to be viewed as performance art, but to be near him is to participate in his aesthetic, art entwined in how we live and what we ignore – even perilous camels.

Kersels' "Heavyweight Champion" retrospective is on view at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., through Dec. 13. On Sept. 23, Kersels will appear in "Heavyweight Lecture Musicale" at the museum. And new work by Kersels can be seen at Acme gallery, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., Oct. 4 through Nov. 8.

LA WEEKLY

Martin Kersels: Big Frame

The Other Martin K

By Doug Harvey

published: November 13, 2008

Bruce Morr

MacArthur Park (1996) Speaker, amplifier, painted wood, aluminum, found table, motor, rope, cd player, audio cd

In the first art review I ever got paid cash for, I wrote that Martin Kersels' 1993 solo debut at the long-defunct A/B Gallery on Robertson Boulevard delivered "a tragicomic slapstick theatricality worthy of Beckett or Sergio Leone." It's a little disconcerting to realize that 15 years later I'm unlikely to improve on that encapsulation, but thanks to "Heavyweight Champion" — a mid-career survey of Kersels' oeuvre curated by Skidmore College's Ian Berry and currently on view at the Santa Monica Museum of Art — maybe I can expand upon and bolster the argument behind it.

Or maybe not. None of the actual work from that idiosyncratic extravaganza — one of the strongest first showings I've ever seen — is included here. That body of work, created and shown while Kersels was still a UCLA grad student, had a distinctly brownish patina of California assemblage to it, combining that tradition's thrift-store as-is aesthetic with DIY animatronics in a mixture reminiscent of Tim Hawkinson's elaborately repurposed scavengings, complete with obsessive narcissistic bodily references.

One piece, *Monkey Pod* (1993), consists almost entirely of a display of the mechanisms by which it dragged itself across the gallery floor on a wooden tiki tray, monitoring and broadcasting its own progress until it reached the limit of its extension cord, at which point it unplugged itself: truth to materials *and* a bleakly hilarious portrait of the artist as a doomed and oblivious young automaton. Another used the little-known technology of plasma acoustics to cause a propane flame to act as a loudspeaker playing The Eagles' *Hotel California* (on vinyl, at the peak of its obsolescence). Then there was *Twist* (1993) — still one of my favorite Kersels kinetic sculptures — a prosthetic leg with Michael Jackson footwear that, via the continuously winding and unwinding rope of intertwined rubber bands by which it was suspended, was periodically sent into spasms of ecstatic spinning.

The oldest piece that has actually made it into "Heavyweight Champion" is another favorite, though conspicuously devoid of the disarming nostalgia permeating the assemblage-inflected funhouse attractions of that first show. Not that *Microphone Drag* (1994) didn't have its theme-park aspects. Consisting of a one-on-one chauffeured careen around the backroads of Culver City in Kersels' pickup while listening through headphones to the sound of a dangled mike being dragged, bounced and battered along the pavement, the piece was somewhere between a

ridiculously overdetermined new instrument for the creation of improvised Noise music and a monstrously *detournéed* simulator ride.

One of the next oldest works does catch the tail end of Kersels' initial Bric-a-brac Period — the minimally robotic *MacArthur Park* (1996), whose lurching planetary billiard balls and karaoke soundtrack act out an endless bipolar cycle — so you don't have to. But the first body of work presented in detail here actually takes a step back from the uncanny allegorical puppetry in favor of a cooler and more art historically–precise exploration of physicality. In his photodocumentation of various acts of tripping, falling, smacking, tossing and spinning — probably his best-known work — Kersels lays out an incremental, encyclopedic examination of the paradox of performance art's cultural afterlife in the form of reproductions in magazines and books.

It is in this once-removed form that an aspiring performance artist comes to know the lineage of their chosen medium. Kersels' decisive-moment framing of his staged traumas dovetails neatly with Performance's wryly self-reflexive engagement with its own compromised evidence trail, particularly through his UCLA mentor Paul McCarthy's 1968 action *Leap*, a re-creation of *Leap into the Void* (French trickster Yves Klein's notorious 1960 purported self-defenestration whose documentation turned out to be a faked photograph) which, at the time of *his* performance, McCarthy had never even seen.

Added to this house of mirrors, Kersels' cibachrome pratfalls ought to beg the question of authenticity. In truth, their sense of immediacy and spontaneity *is* belied by the lengthy photo sessions and elaborate editing involved — Kersels often selecting a couple of shots from scores taken by his wife, Mary Collins. And I have to admit that when I saw his black-and-white *Falling* photos in 1995 — the ones where you can't see his feet — I suspected there might be some hidden structural support propping him up. But aside from those deliberate formal ambiguities, Kersels' work manages to convey a sense of both high theatricality and militant authenticity.

It all comes down to the body. Gifted as he is in this area, Kersels has created work hinging on physical presence and/or absence since his days with XXXL 80s performance troupe Shrimps. What comes across most clearly in "Heavyweight Champion" is the progression from the doomy, goofy isolation of his early sculptural surrogates — works like *Monkey Pod*, *MacArthur Park* and the artist's punching-bag clown as oceanless *Buoy* (1997–98) — to the more recent social work, like the handmade Foley art instruments for his *Orchestra for Idiots* (2005), which, if not exactly optimistic, leaves the possibility open for some kind of connection.

Nowhere is this shift spelled out more emphatically than in the most recent work in the exhibit, *Rickety* (2007), a fully functional stage supported by an accumulation of castoff furniture. Sporting artificial foliage and penetrated by passageways to its cluttered domestic underworld, the theatrical platform offers up the same portions of darkness and light that delineate Kersels' entire oeuvre but steps back from imposing any sort of narrative. Instead, the maze of cabinetry and the brightly lit performance arena are offered as equally navigable, interdependent realms — still fraught with potential danger but less certain of the outcome.

If the SMMOA show had been combined with Kersels' 1997 Madison (WI) Art Center survey "Commotion" (which included *Twist* and *Flame Speaker*) — plus a few stray works, such as his

early *Tear Drawings* — in a larger venue like oh, say, MOCA or LACMA, the complex ambiguities of the work would have been better served, allowing the artist's ambivalence toward social interaction, humor and entertainment, and the power and fragility of the human body to unfold in a more deeply persuasive manner.

But ultimately, "Heavyweight Champion" serves to ratify my early assessment of Kersels as operating as much in the tradition of experimental modernist theater and populist genre entertainments as those of contemporary sculpture, photography or performance. The sweet brown stain turns out to have been expendable in the interest of an expanded frame – a big-picture kind of thing. Kersels' work has moved from successfully contained explosions of pathos to three-dimensional challenges to art's complicity in the modern world's potentially fatal social retardation. Letting the others in can ruin your perfect little world ... or save it. Physically present or not, Martin Kersels patrols that border.

Martin Kersels: Heavyweight Champion | Santa Monica Museum of Art | Bergamot Station G1 | 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica | through Dec. 13

Berardini, Andrew, "The body artist: the performing sculptures and sculptural performances of Martin Kersels," Mousse, Issue 20. (2008)

MOUSSE

Martin Kersels, *Martin Scrubby*, 2008
Courtesy: ACME, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

THE BODY ARTIST: THE PERFORMING SCULPTURES AND SCULPTURAL PERFORMANCES OF MARTIN KERSELS

by Andrew Berardini

Some odd facts about Martin Kersels that are often overplayed in writing about him, but are perhaps worth mentioning: Kersels started his career as a performer and member of the gleefully subversive performance troupe SHRIMPS. In the mid-'90s he turned toward artmaking with a performative bent after studying under Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy at UCLA. Kersels is roughly 6-foot-6 and over 300 pounds, a physique he endlessly pokes and prods at for effects equally comical and uncomfortable, his recent midcareer survey being bombastically titled "Heavyweight Champion."

Likely because Kersels' body is such a potent site in his own work, one can't write about the Los Angeles-based artist without talking about bodies, and not in the way that '70 theoreticians necessarily wrote about the squishy jumble of organs and desires. They wrote it up as a political site, a means, mode, and platform for expression, a feminist détourné. However inspired or leaping from the politics of the '60s and '70 surrounding bodies, Kersels has trouble fitting into any of these off-hand definitions. He uses his body as a melancholic joke, a potent space of iconography negated, and a not-so-secret agent of ambiguity for when words fail. His body is less like any of the hardcore (and it can and often did get hardcore) performance artists of the '70s, and more like the comedian Buster Keaton or punk icon Iggy Pop. Keaton was a body artist, he moved in ways that are still frighteningly hilarious and as smartly comic as any of the conceptual artists, many in LA, who later used deadpan in their work, from Ruppersberg to Baldessari. Kersels is less like Keaton's famed work in the silent films and more the matinee idol's role in Samuel Beckett's Film. All the expectant, quiet humor of historic Keaton is there, but the comic is mixed with an awkward tragedy in every scene, leaving one in tension between wanting to laugh and feeling pretty weird for doing so. Though it's not quite as elaborately dark as Film, Kersel's works contain in their simplicity, a subtle glance through that shadowy world and include all of Keaton's deadpan humor and echoes Beckett's work on language, though Kersels maintains a gentility in his humor that Beckett might have found supernumerary.

This strange humor forms the basis for much of Kersels' practice, so does his play with a very personal take on pop culture. Keaton's comedy is one kind of iconography to play with but so is Iggy Pop's. A swaggering, writhing, iconic torso, moving with electric physical dynamism under the screeching, epileptic chords of punk, Iggy Pop gives Kersels a new set of gestures to explore, to take apart, to play. Kersels takes on all these gestures and infuses them with pathos in the guise of his alter-ego, Fat Iggy. Fat Iggy, strutting and fretting with the same set of moves as the real Iggy, becomes another kind of awkward humor, this time using the raw power of the ecstatic rock body, which the former Stooges frontman epitomizes. Punk is a musical space that holds a lot of nostalgia for the artist and Kersels takes the language of its performance and deconstructs it with his own Kerselsian brand of gentle slapstick.

In a new body of work Kersels is currently working on in his studio for an upcoming solo exhibition at Galerie Vallois in Paris, Fat Iggy goes through a stream of different albums, the design changing from '90s indie sweet to psychedelic post-punk, all of them literally hand-made and maintaining some of the charm of a generation of albums starting somewhere in the '60s likely

but reaching its zenith in the '80s and '90s with the proletariat mixtape and its shimmering techno step child, the CD-R. The songs are small poems referring not to songs recorded but to the mood and spirit of a moment, things derived from a performance that has never happened. The show goes on, but only in a potent imagination.

But these objects (and arguably Kersels entire oeuvre), all follow their lineage back to Kersels as a performer. Like all records and their packages, this work depend on a performance, real or imagined, to exist. Kersels' photos of actions largely in the'90s, fall somewhere between the deadpan absurdity of '70s California conceptualism as well as all the extreme bodywork coming out at the same time. Though Kersels never rolls in the broken glass like Iggy or yanks a scroll from any of his orifices like Carolee Schneeman, his friends really do smack him, he really does fall, when he trips those face plants aren't fake, each is done with a sense of humor and the simplicity of genius, but spiked with something a little humiliating and a slight bit awkward.


Martin Kersels, *Headache*, 2008
courtesy: Courtesy: ACME, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

But Kersels has hardly abandoned himself or the camera as a means to capture performance, he has since the beginning of his exhibition career been playing with objects, tricking them into doing the performing themselves. Active objects in the gallery space fulfill the purpose of the living, breathing performer. Kersels' objects refuse to stay still. His contraptions, gyrate, dance, and sing, they might kick you if you're not looking or slowly drag themselves across a gallery, as he does with a piano in Piano Drag, 1995, with the slow, heaving crawl that's more Sisyphus than Keaton. But even in that piece, the stone face persists, and there's a good laugh to be had for the few who saw the piano legs get caught in a crack in the gallery floor and hover there, as Kersels pointed out to me once, like "hippopotamus pirouetting," before toppling upside down. These kinds of objects are not without precedent, Rube Goldberg being a standard go to for all manner of handmade machines performing simple actions in elaborately convoluted ways. The more recent example in contemporary art are of course Fischli & Weiss, whose objects have Goldberg's flair for the absurd, but add a layer of pathos to their objects that's a little melancholic, layered, as if there were much to our objects than we might care to admit. In their most famous work, The Way Things Go, 1987, (happily now widely available on video) the series of causes and effects are not only astonishing as a visual series of events, but a performance of only objects allowing the viewer to think about them in a new context as things that can have agency and action embedded in them.

A bastard stepson of Fischli & Weiss, Kersels produces objects that drag, collapse, boom, clank, and steam, but unlike the Swiss duo, Kersels presence never leaves the objects he sets in motion. One of the first works for Kersels that extends his body and its performance to objects (in this case, making objects an explicit stand-in for his body) comes in the form of MacArthur

Park, 1996, an object that is a stand-in for the artist's body which is landscaped out with green and yellow wooden balls. The object is a stack starting with a wooden table, then a speaker, then the assembly of body like green and yellow wooden balls and on top of that an amplifier and CD player. A mechanism under the table pulls the balls for the head, arms, and legs down and part to the rhythm of the song, before releasing them to snap back together. They do this through a song cycle that includes Kersels singing Karaoke-style, MacArthur Park, I Will Survive, and the Carpenters creepily cheerful, On Top of the World, a cycle of pop falling apart and coming back together. This work captures the crux of Kersels' aesthetic, as he himself states in an interview with Ian Berry in the catalogue for his recent retrospective, "my better works have that wink-wink humor mixed with a tragic element."

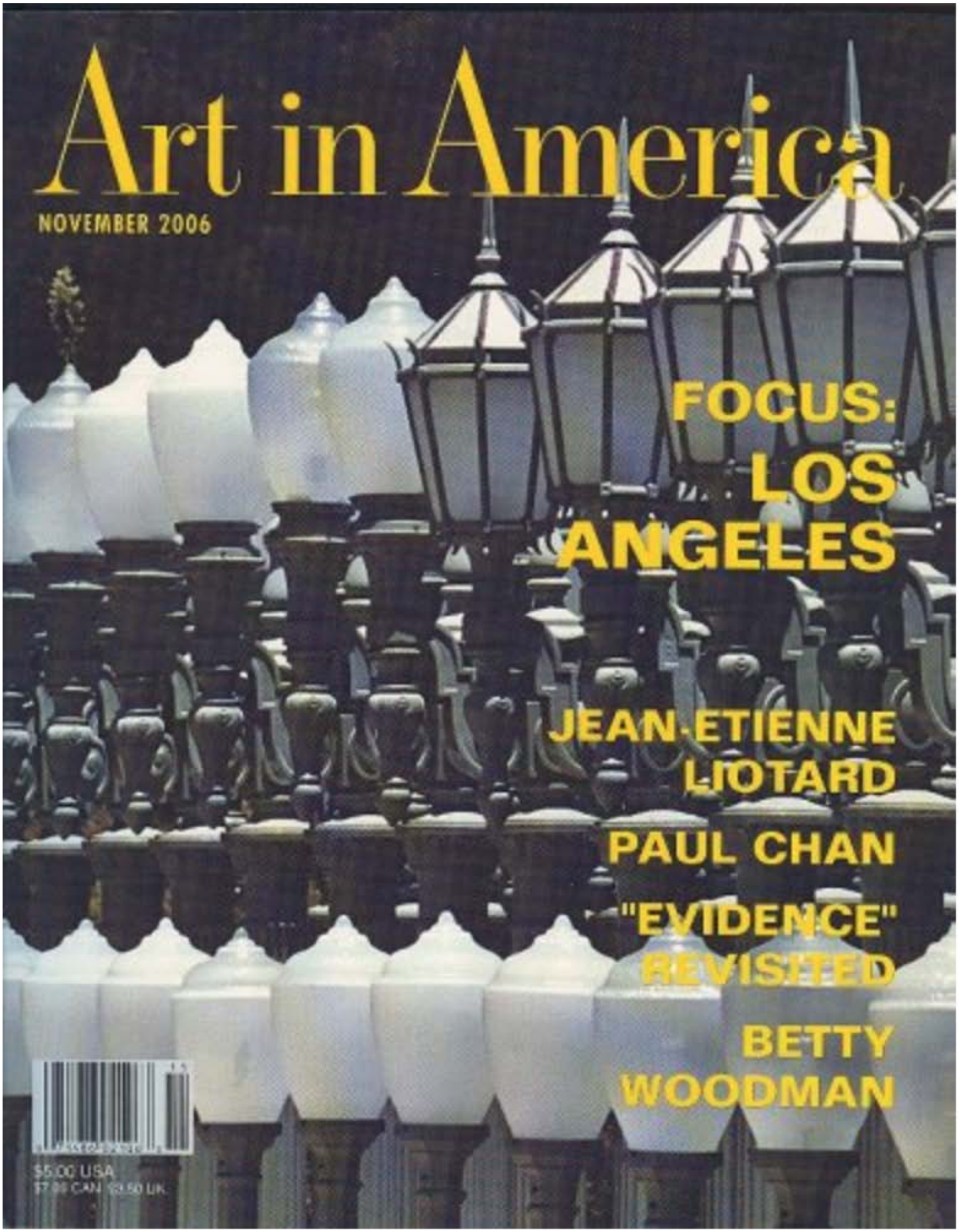
At one solo exhibition at AC ME in Los Angeles, the gallery space had the Spartan mise en scène of a Beckett play, and the items themselves felt storied and invitingly odd. The props to this were composed of a throne built of a patchwork of rocking chairs (large enough to accommodate the artist) and five lamps, a few of which have made their way into the survey, such as Charm (Little, little boy), 2006, made of wire in the shape of one of the first nuclear bombs with which it shares part of its name. The political menace became palpable, as if something sinister could happen at any moment.

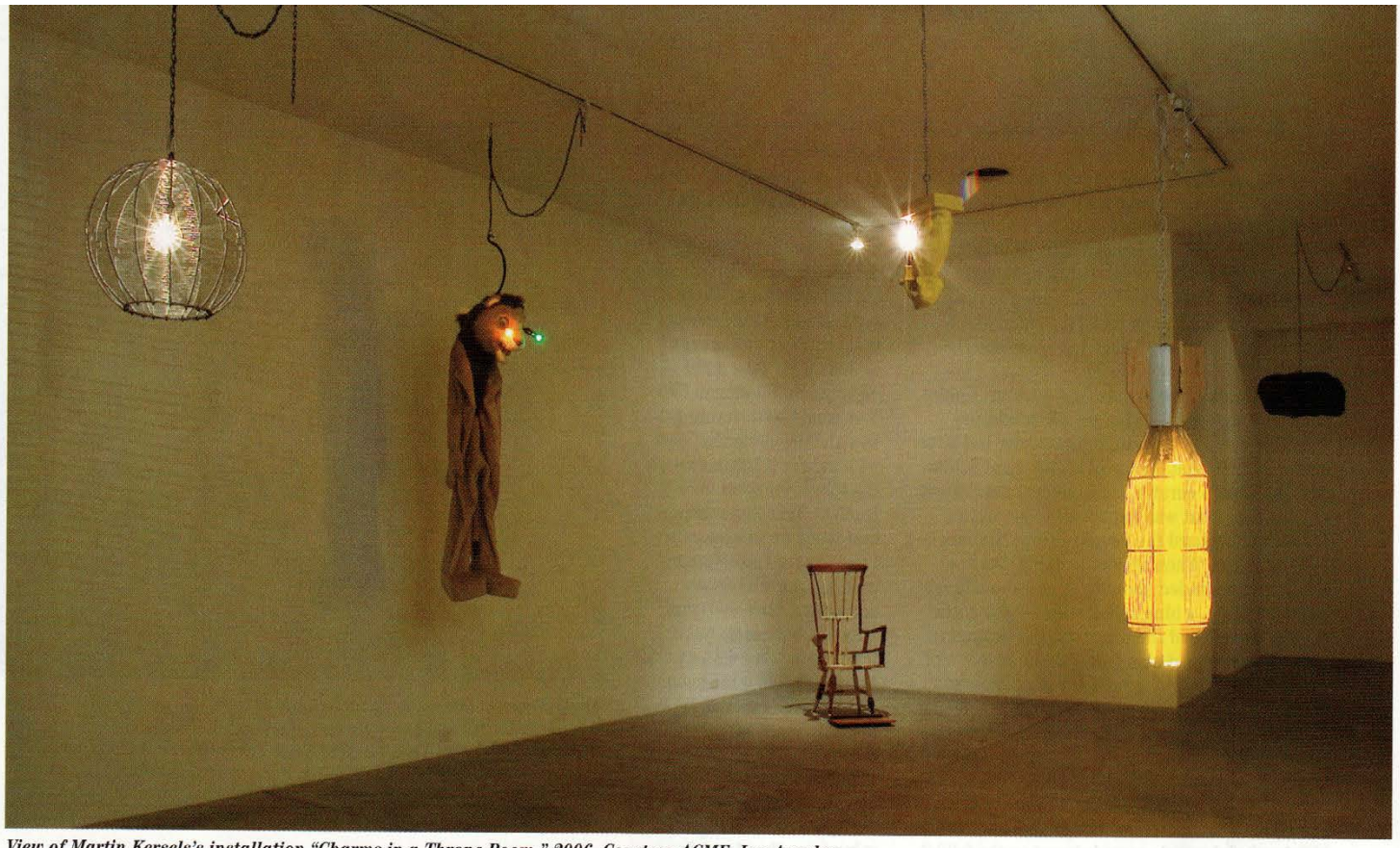
This feeling of a stage set has been readily expanded to actual stage sets, sculptures that have the space of a stage built into their existence and the actions that take place on them adding an extra layer to them. In his recent mid-career survey which traveled from Skidmore College to the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Kersels created a major work that continued his interest in exploring the subtle gestures and trappings of performance. A collection of old and tarnished furniture topped a white Modernist slab with red trim and specked with tiny trees. Rickety, 2007, is not only a sculpture in its own right, but the site of two performances, (an idea continued in a different form at a recent exhibition by the artist at Guido Costa Gallery in Turin) one choreographed by longtime Kersels collaborator Melinda Ring and the other, a Heavyweight Lecture Musicale, delivered by the artist himself, which the copy promised "when words are not enough."

Are words ever enough? Words always fail, so we must as Beckett writes and Kersels often performs, "fail better". It's impossible to talk about Kersels without talking about bodies, not only his as a site for so much work, but also as other bodies and objects as real embodiments of the artist. As Martin Kersels enacts again and again in each jokey gesture and awkward action, each performing sculpture and sculptural performance, however words fail, they can still muster the energy to underline his body of work is, quite literally, a body of work, the body and the work impossible to separate.

Martin Kersels, *Headache*, 2008
Courtesy: ACME, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

Rochette, Anne, and Wade Sanders, "Place Matters: Los Angeles Sculpture Today," Art in America (November, 2006)





View of Martin Kersels's installation "Charms in a Throne Room," 2006. Courtesy ACME, Los Angeles.

bit, and now I just want to be able to keep on doing what I do. I live off my work. Few of my collectors are in L.A. I try not to think about the future, not to feel the pressure of all the newly graduated art students, but the pressure is there.

It can feel like being on a very long rope ladder climbing up toward some helicopter that keeps moving, and you've got these fuckers coming up underneath you. Since I started showing when I was really young, I didn't feel that I came out fully formed. I still don't feel fully formed, but that's always been important to me: an artist should be allowed to grow in public. I've always liked Bruce Nauman's approach to being an artist—there's kind of an independent goofiness to it. The way Larner leaves options open also appeals to me. You should allow yourself license to move around.

Liz Craft

I'm from California; I went to art school in L.A. and I guess there was a buzz then about UCLA. I knew about the teachers indirectly through "Helter Skelter," which did a lot to introduce me to the art here. I went to the UCLA grad program in '95, when it had a lot of really good teachers. Charley Ray made a big impression on me. A couple of years back, there were things I wanted him to see and he was happy to come out and look at them.

I never even thought of moving somewhere else. Right out of school I got a studio and quickly started showing with Richard Telles. I sold a piece, and then the next piece, and the next, and it went like that. Things kept going from there. Nathalie Obadia started showing me in Paris in 2001.

I had some odd jobs, and worked for Charley Ray as an assistant for a while and for Liz Larner for a little bit and taught kids and various things. You learn a lot being an assistant; you get sick of it real fast, but you learn about how to get things done. I tried teaching. It was really bad. I might get better at it; right now I don't care about doing that. If I need money real bad I might do it, but it was like torture.

I have been able to more or less live off my sculpture. I make more stuff out of bronze now. Here it's easy to have space and privacy to make art. It's not a big social scene. That's bad, but it's also good if you want to get work done. I always wonder if I moved somewhere else whether the work would change. I definitely get ideas from the landscape. Some of my sculpture has been really connected to the city, the way it's laid out, involved with fragments of what I see around, mixed with memories and sort of dreamy versions of things.

The city is getting more expensive, for sure, and it's getting more crowded. Not so much where I am, in Highland Park, but the west side and downtown are getting more populated. It's still vast here, and there is always something new to see. At the same time, everyone sort of knows everybody, the scene is still not that big.

I draw a little in sketchbooks. I get an idea of something I want to make and then figure out how to do it. The hairy figures sort of came from having made this piece called *Ballad of a Hippie.* That was a figure with a guitar, but then, in the next piece, it became more abstract—just the hair, with these arms that stick out of it. I'll get one idea and then wait, and it connects to other ideas. Some pieces do start with a drawing. It's different every time.

I think my work is more abstract than narrative, but when I say that people don't believe me, so I don't know. Like now I am doing this sort of couch. That probably does come from this city—in some neighborhoods there are couches on every street corner—but the real idea is just out of my head. It's like a love seat with two cushions; the texture is a floral brocade, raised up. It will be cast in bronze. I bought the couch at a thrift store and sculpted the fabric in high relief, so it's almost like starfish and barnacles crusting over this love seat. I had the notion that the pattern would become like 3-D mapping. Then there are these 3-D birds sitting on the couch. I don't know yet if it will be polychrome, that's always the hardest part.

Maybe each place—L.A. and Europe—serves equally in my career. Showing in New York was the big deal. It helped me with the L.A. collectors. I used to make these mega-dense pieces. It was like I was trying to put everything I knew into one monster work. Finally, when I got older, I was able to separate ideas and make them into separate pieces. That may have made it easier for more people to buy my stuff.

My work is studio time, instead of just getting this idea and executing it. My work is pretty open and impulsive. I don't know if that's good or not. People don't really know what you're doing, but it may not matter, really.

Martin Kersels

I've lived in L.A. all my life. I started my undergraduate studies at UCLA in '78, under the old regime. I applied to go to film school as a junior and did not get accepted, so I went into art history. But I am a horrible writer, so I decided that's not for me and took some art classes. I enjoyed them very much.

Chris Burden was there, Charley Ray had arrived in '81, but I did not take classes with him. I was taking new-genre classes; Mike Kelley was there for a semester or so; it may have been his first teaching job out of Cal Arts. I graduated in '84. I took eight years out of school and went back in '92 to UCLA graduate school. I had started working there in '89 for Paul McCarthy and Chris Burden as their lab assistant, as an employee of the state, which was kind of a great job: I liked the space and the facilities.

I knew a lot of the artists that were in "Helter Skelter." I had no idea that people would pay attention the way they did to that show, but a lot had to do with that choice of a title. Paul Schimmel, the show's curator, is a genius at generating excitement. What was important to me in the show was how hard the people I respected worked to do their art. When they're working, they're really single-minded about it. It's maybe a lunchbox work ethic, a blue collar ethic—"You gotta get this done." And the production of works was not necessarily just about that singular vision of the artist in the studio; rather it happened in a community way.

When I went back in '92 the faculty accepted me, but they said I couldn't do the performance work I had been doing with this group called the Shrimps, so that's when I started making objects. My performance work was movement-based, very few words, a high level of slapstick, comedy based on the fallibility of the body. I knew of the Kipper Kids; we shared an evening of performance once: where they went more scatological, we kept it more on the pathetic.

A lot of the people we were looking at in the '80s were in dance, like the Judson Church, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti and Rudy Perez, who's in L.A. I saw a lot of Mike Kelley's performances; they were amazing, more about poetry, not so much about activity. Our performances were like this mishmash of Manzoni—well, I never saw Manzoni—but it's this idea of Manzoni or Yves Klein mixed with Buster Keaton. We were working through this weird kind of filtration—of compiled, layered bits and pieces.

Doing the rounds in the schools here over the past decade and talking about my work in lectures, I talked a lot about performance and the performative object within my practice, but I had not done performance in a long time. So when I did a show at Galerie Vallois in Paris in 2005, "Orchestra for Idiots," on the opening night I conducted the orchestra, whose instruments were these objects I'd constructed, based on research about how sound effects for radio programs were made.

For my new show at Acme in L.A. [Mar. 18-Apr. 15, 2006], I began by building a throne, cannibalizing all this furniture and starting from a beat-up white chair, turning it into this really weird fucked-up throne, taller than the body. I was thinking about delusions, and ideas of power—how one tries to keep it, how one fantasizes about using it, how it has been enforced. So I am starting with this swag lamp, 2 feet wide, like a death star made of wire, then I'm making a Little Boy swag lamp, like the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima. I am working with these five or six icons: the atomic bomb is historical, and the death star is fantasy, but all that research about Reagan's Star Wars program is still going on. The throne will sit in the room with these delusions floating above it. The methodology is part tramp art, part delusion, part home fixture. I have no idea how it's going to go.

It seems that sculpture out here is more free-wheeling than back east. There is not just one single school of thought. But there are art schools. That's the difference: your affiliation in New York would be with your gallery and the circle that goes with it; here it has to do with the school you went to or teach at. Teaching is important to me for two reasons: I like to have a structure in my life, to have a certain anchor and place and commitment, but not for more than two or three days a week. And I really enjoy the energy the students have, and seeing some of their harebrained schemes come to fruition.

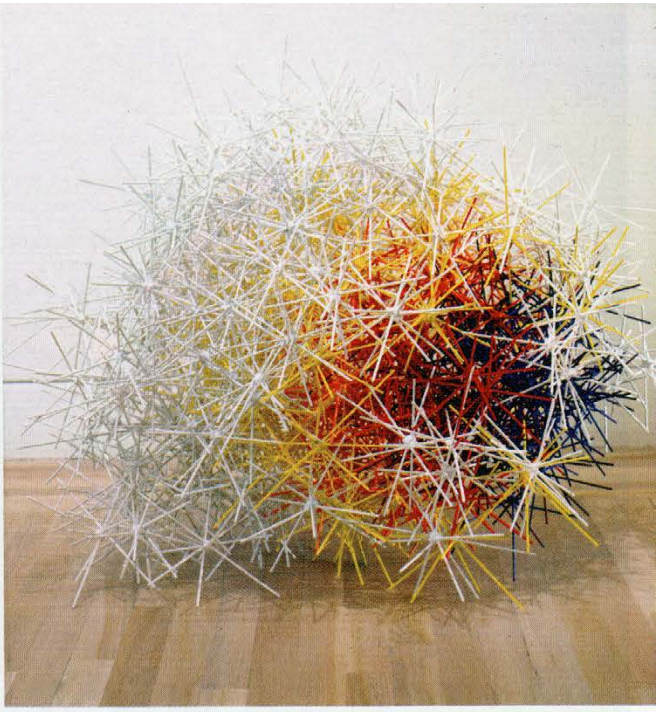
I don't know if this sums up L.A. sculpture, but the attitude is like, "I am just going to go ahead and do this, even though I know it won't get me anything but joy for myself and maybe some people thinking it's cool." People just go for it—they try these things, and the schools have workshops and tools, and you learn some tricks. And you can go to Paramount studios, the one that produced *The Godfather*, you can hire their props department, they'll fabricate things for you. You can go right to the heart of the fantasy factory to get something made, and that's kind of freaky, isn't it? There's a thin line between entertainment and art. The artist might have different motives, but his work is made in the same places as the work of people who may have more greedy, corporate motives.

Like any metropolis, L.A. offers its sculptors this wealth of resources. Artists who move here from other places don't understand L.A. for a year or so; they don't understand the car flow, but when they get the hang of that, it turns out to be a good place. Studios are fairly cheap. You can be in Eagle Rock, or Silver Lake or in the Valley, and once you say, "Well the car is now my new home and I can go and meet those people," I think it works.

L.A. sculpture may come from the performance and time-based activities of the '70s and '80s. Paul Schimmel's show "Out of Actions" [1998] captured a lot of what's shaping L.A. sculpture now. It's about rethinking the gallery space, which in the '70s was like a mausoleum. How you could bring it back to life was with those actions, remnants of actions, potentials for action, as in Charley Ray's pieces where he inserts himself into the sculptures. He photographed the pieces, but he also created these rooms with two doors, one for the audience and one for him. He had a guide that would bring you in and you'd see Charley with his arm hanging out of something, and you'd go out and wait in front of the next room and he'd go out of the back door and go into the next room and have the thing on his head. It happened in a warehouse on the west side that Charley rented in '82 or '83; it was his own thing.

Performance is definitely still part of my work, and in fact this last December, we reunited and revived the Shrimps; we did a concert for three nights. We built furniture that we'd wear, have holes cut out for our bodies. It's very physical work. We're all in our 40s at least; we don't bounce back as much as before.

I want people to laugh at what I do, but then to also cry. I want it all. Comedy is a hook in order to put viewers slightly off kilter, so then they can maybe question other aspects of the piece, or of the world, for that matter. The work also may be cruel-funny. Humor is enlivening, even if you're not sure you should be laughing—it raises an emotional bubble. I had this kind of emblematic success with a series of photos called "Tossing Friends." People really liked these photos. I thought, "Well, would I like to keep it up and make more of these, tossing this and tossing that?" Because of my size, I could just toss the world! It may not have been a smart decision business-wise, but I said, "Hell no. I did this once, but I want to do something else now."



Mindy Shapero:* Almost the exact feeling one has when staring at the blinded by the light for too long just after everything begins to happen, similar to the images that you see when you open your eyes after closing your eyes and pressing into your eyeballs (whiteness), *2004, wood and acrylic, approx. 36 by 40 by 38 inches. Courtesy Anna Helwing Gallery, Los Angeles.

Mindy Shapero

I came here from New York City in 1999. I had just finished undergraduate school at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and I was trying to find a studio. I came out to L.A. just to visit a friend, and the energy seemed real. I just saw an apartment and took it.

I found a huge studio, and I paid next to nothing for it. For the first two-and-a-half years I lived here, it was hard to meet people. You'd go to openings and everyone knew everybody from school; they'd

contemporary

ISSUE 57

PROFILE: GRAVITY AND GRACE

Leslie Dick champions LA heavyweight Martin Kersels

It's curious how almost every article written about Martin Kersels gives, or attempts to give, his measurements. And that they are all different. He is variously described as being six foot five inches, six foot six inches, six foot seven inches, almost six foot eight inches tall, and as weighing over 300 pounds, over 350 pounds, and even 26 stone (which my calculator tells me is 364 pounds). I wonder how they know? These wild guesstimates at girth and heft expose the undeniable burden placed on the writer, which is to give a sense of the scale, the mass, the gravity and balance of this work – and to connect that sense of scale to the body and psyche of the artist.

Martin Kersels is a man-mountain. I am not petite – in fact I'm a large, tall woman – but he makes me feel diminutive. He is like the Rock of Gibraltar, you feel you can lean on him, that he would shelter you. He is as big as a barn door, he is like a Mack truck, he is as big as a house. His photographs show him tripping and falling in the street – a minor catastrophe – or leaning to the point of falling, mountainous, out in an empty landscape. They show him throwing his (delighted) friends up in the air, or spinning them by the ankles (as you might swing a two year old, turning in circles). As a kid, he was so much bigger than his friends, he could become a funfair ride for them. As a young man, once, he picked up his father in the kitchen, and cradled him in his arms. He's big.

Beginning in performance, as a member of the group SHRIMPS from 1984–93, Kersels went on to make a series of what he called 'performative objects', machines or sculptural devices which move and/or generate sounds, taking over the gallery, and functioning as awkward stand-ins for the artist himself. In Twist (1993) a found prosthetic leg (complete with sock and shoe) hangs from a thick skein of rubber bands that is turned, slowly and relentlessly, by a simple motor. At a certain point, the twisted rubber bands cause the leg to thrash around pointlessly, hurling itself into the wall. In Piano Drag (1995) an electric winch pulls a baby grand piano across the gallery floor, its halting movements registered by microphones buried in the innards of the piano. Eventually the dragged piano pulls its own electric cord out of the opposite wall, and everything stops, silent. These pieces are both funny and painful, proposing a circuit of reaction in the viewer, which comes full circle, from laughter to tears.

More recently, Kersels built Tumble Room (2001), inspired by the scene in Stanley Donen's film Royal Wedding (1951) in which Fred Astaire dances up walls and across a ceiling. This project required the construction and realisation of Kersels' most enormous 'performative object', a room which could turn (full circle), with a video camera attached. Because the camera turns as the room turns, the illusion is created that the people (and in one happy moment, the dog) are actually lying, standing and dancing on the ceiling. Kersels chose to construct the room as an adolescent Southern Californian girl's bedroom, complete with pink décor, single four-poster bed, and popstar posters on the walls. His friend, the dancer and choreographer Melinda Ring, who happens to be tiny, performs in the video: lounging around, her languorous movements recall the repressed (sexual) intensity of teenage ennui, all those endless hours of doing nothing at all, alone in your room. It's dreamy, watching her moves from bed to wall to ceiling, as if the power of lassitude itself, the power of reverie, could extend the limits of what is possible, defying gravity. The dream dimension moves into a more disturbing mode, a darker fairy tale, as she's replaced by Kersels, a giant in zebra-print pants, altogether much too much for the pink bedroom to hold. Enclosed within this young girl's world, they're both unexpectedly sexy, in different ways. As her world turns upside down, differentiation blurs, certainties melt, and the orientations (north/south, up/down, masculine/feminine) wherein we locate ourselves come apart, like a machine,

some kind of inner mechanism, shuddering to a halt. It's hilarious, and horrifying, and true, as the location of fantasy (who's imagining this, the tiny girl, or the fat man?) becomes mobile and fluid. At the end of the tape, the furniture, unbolted at last, crashes around the room, chasing Kersels into corners, piling up in heaps, smashing itself to bits. He collapses under the bed frame, defeated by the logic of his own construction.

There's humour and compassion in this work, and there's violence and loss as well. The artist's identifications are all over the shop: the fluid dance moves of the extra-small woman, the nuanced jiggling and falls of the extra-large man, and the whole structure, the tumble room itself, are all stand-ins for Kersels. They inhabit him, and it's as if he finds ways to bring them out and set them going. What's striking is the way in which Kersels succeeds in connecting his bulky physical present with his childish past, big and little, as if there's an innocence that's being invoked, even as its impossibility is marked and acknowledged. That innocence is about being a kid, it's about playing, and the sexuality and violence and fantasy of play, but it may also have something to do with being American, something to do with L.A.

Recently Kersels has made non-kinetic sculpture which retains a connection to the ideas of scale (mass, weight) and pathos (automatism, failure) that run through his other work. Fat Man (2002) is a life-sized model of the atomic bomb, nicknamed 'Fat Man', which was dropped by the American military on Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. The bomb looks like a cartoon drawing, it's elliptical, with a silver tail in the form of a curved cube. Most particularly, it sags where it rests against the floor, as if it were made of too too flaccid flesh, as if it were really tired, weary, after all these years. It's tuckered out. The bomb is entirely covered by mirror mosaic, not unlike a classic 1970s disco ball, and these mirrors explode the light, and the viewer's reflection, breaking you up into uncountable fragments. It's tired, this bomb, and the explosion is only metaphorical, the only thing it can destroy is the coherence of your reflection. Maybe that's everything, I can't say.

Yet Fat Man was actually a more powerful bomb than Little Boy – the bomb that devastated Hiroshima three days earlier – and therefore it stands alone in history as the most powerful technological device ever actually put to use. Geography amplified the effects of Little Boy: the winds generated by the bomb flattened everything within a one and a half mile radius, then the winds met the mountains surrounding Hiroshima and bounced back, hitting the city a second time. The power of Fat Man, by contrast, was dispersed, spreading outward unchecked by natural barriers, until it reached its point of entropy and the energy stopped. As a result, paradoxically, the larger bomb killed approximately half the number of people killed at Hiroshima.

What can you do with this information? What does it mean to be American, when this kind of destruction, that is, destruction on an immeasurable scale, is the outcome of such technological triumph? The mirror fragments propose the question, how do you put yourself together in this context? Is America both the 'fat man', too big, too strong, out of control, and the 'little boy', who cannot be held responsible, beyond the reach of right and wrong? The physicists who worked at Los Alamos day and night for months and months all through the war, to build the atomic bomb, never called it a bomb. Following J. Robert Oppenheimer's suggestion, they referred to it throughout as the 'gadget'.

In 2003, Kersels made Sleeper's Dream for the Yankee Remix show at MASS MoCA. A number of artists were asked to make work in response to the large and varied collections belonging to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Kersels was inspired by a house in Gloucester, Massachusetts, called Beauport, created by interior designer Henry Davis Sleeper from 1907 onwards. Beauport has 56 rooms, with turrets and towers, five dining rooms in different styles, and Sleeper's own idiosyncratic collections, including rooms devoted to George Washington and Horatio Nelson memorabilia, as well as collections of lowly objects like hooked rugs and amber glass (130 pieces, bottles, vases, candlesticks). In material terms, through his devotion to Beauport, Sleeper proposed a whole new area of investigation and research: Americana, high and low. The quirky, eccentric, and excessive aspects of Beauport are crucial, as is the extraordinary preservation work he did, transposing doors, panels, floorboards and whole interiors from derelict and soon to be demolished early New England houses. Sleeper's (more or less inaccurate) ideas about Colonial paint colours (sage green, robin's egg blue, pumpkin, gold brown) persist, to be encountered today in the pages of Martha Stewart's magazine. Meanwhile, Beauport, situated by the sea, is slowly falling apart, as the conservators of SPNEA struggle to stem the tide of damp destruction.

Kersels' construction uses shingles, wallpaper, wooden roof tiles, a weathervane, to build a giant boot, 14 feet high, something like the one we all remember from the old woman who lived in a shoe. Its toe is glass, and inside we see earth, a busted up grandfather clock, half-buried, coffin-like, and bits of broken furniture and crockery. Through the glass springs a cherry tree, covered in pink blossom, as out of death comes life, like the perpetual, repeated return to innocence America so proudly parades. But the cherry tree is artificial, it's silk, and due to be chopped down, according to national myth. (George Washington as a child declared, when confronted, 'I cannot tell a lie. It was I who chopped down the cherry tree.')

In the heel of the giant boot, there is a beautiful arched window, and inside a wallpapered interior, where a crystal chandelier illuminates a little secret garden of pot plants (also silk). A small porcelain boot sits on a mirror in the centre of this orderly garden, as if arbitrarily preserved, temporarily rescued from the cycle of destruction. On the outside of the boot, a felt banner hangs, announcing 'We Appeal to Nature'. This statement remains enigmatic: we appeal to Nature to do what – save us? To retrieve, to preserve something from the inevitable undoing of collections, categories and hierarchies? It's fairytale stuff, the giant boot and the mysterious tree. Like dream-work, Kersels has put together elements taken from everyday life, from Sleeper's dream house, to make something else, a building that resonates with meaning without ever quite settling down to being one thing or the other.

Kersels' work is articulated around his own 'being in the world' – so big, so flawed, so vulnerable, so ridiculous, so strong. Lately he's been examining a further dimension of that reality, the dimension that acknowledges nationality, America, where strength can mean potential for violence, where vulnerability requires retaliation. If his work has explored the sometimes fraught, always absurd relations between bodies and things, specifically bodies and machines, then part of what interests me is the automatism, the aspect of being human that's outside our control. It's the id, having a ball, compulsive, unstoppable, going on and on until it pulls its own plug out of the wall.

Martin Kersels' work is profoundly anti-authoritarian, proposing the artist as bricoleur, as autodidact, pursuing idiosyncratic, individual research to find out what he needs for his specific purposes. The Wright Brothers, knocking together an aeroplane in the barn out of bits of bicycles, are the model here. Mastery requires knowing a great deal about one thing; Kersels knows just enough about all sorts of things to work his way through the next project. His felt banners derive in part from participating in projects at his son's Waldorf school – this year they're making a yurt, from scratch. But they swing both ways, like all his work, they're moving in both directions, towards art discourse (Joseph Beuys, Robert Morris) and at the same time, towards everyday life. The work is wide open: the welcome mat is out to any and all interpretations. Hierarchies of knowledge come apart, as Kersels' home-made versions of science, architecture and weapons of mass destruction expose their built-in flaws, their secrets. There's dope in the heel of the boot, the atom bomb's sagging, and no one knows the final, authoritative answer to anything.

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Martin Kersels

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Gaston Bachelard wrote that 'a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability'. The unease attending such fragile assurances of domestic equilibrium underlies much of Californian artist Martin Kersels' recent rambunctious installation. An alumnus of UCLA known for his waggish twist on body art, Kersels built Tumble Room (2000) as a full-scale replica of a typical American teenage girl's bedroom, flipped it on its side and suspended it above the floor of the gallery within a cylindrical steel armature which rotated briskly at a steady four r.p.m. Tumbling like a giant Lotto machine for the show's duration, the cheerfully pink-wallpapered room gradually churned and ground its everyday contents: furniture, draperies, stuffed animals, boy-band posters and cutesy decorations; the perpetual drag of begrudging furnishings producing a cacophonous din. Over the course of the installation, a sort of sped-up process of entropy reduced the room's genteel fixtures to a fine mulch, the kind of substance you might use to fertilize your lawn, or insulate the hollow walls of your prefab home.

As a Southern Californian, Kersels draws from a rich collection of associations: suburban teen culture, earthquakes, natural disasters and the omnipresent movie industry. Indeed, an accompanying video of the artist and a young girl taking turns inside the gyrating room, Pink Constellation (2001), pays low-budget homage to the tumbling house in movies, from Buster Keaton's 1921 classic, The Boat, to Judy Garland's tornado-twirled farmhouse in The Wizard of Oz (1939) and Fred Astaire's 360° tap-dancing promenade around a hotel room in Royal Wedding (1951). In one sequence, the girl, who could be the room's inhabitant, negotiates the jerky, stomach-turning rotations with an eager frankness and childlike grace that would do Dorothy and Astaire proud. She jumps, sways and cavorts along the walls and ceiling, blithely ignoring the potential dangers, which suggests that despite the insecurity of weightlessness, such physical and psychological destabilization can also offer a passage from the dully familiar to the beguilingly alien. This scene is contrasted by the next, in which the portly artist is tossed around the room like a disoriented gerbil on an exercise wheel, groping and stumbling with the awkward comedic despair of a silent movie fall guy. Besides incidentally illustrating some basic physical laws of gravity and motion, the subjects' differing responses to the same given circumstances reinforce the impression that some sort of rough and tumble behavioural experiment is underway.

The hysterical nervousness of physical comedy, and the latent aggression implicit in our voyeuristic glee at witnessing the misfortunes of others, is much on display in Kersels' buffoonish performance. Like Keaton, Kersels recognizes that the cruel repetitions of slapstick, perfected on the back lots and soundstages of Hollywood, are never far from a certain real-life sensation of hopelessness, alienation and terror. Keaton's stone-faced innocence and stubbornness in the face of overwhelming adversity, and his obstinacy born of misplaced hope, is the ghost haunting this installation: Sisyphus with a straw hat.

Kersels' Southern California provides a suitable laboratory for observing various tectonic slippages and disruptions, whether cinematic simulations, geological realities, or the fruits of human unpredictability. Set against a social context in which a bubble gum teen world can in a moment be turned upside-down into a collegiate killing ground with authentic bullets and blood, Kersels' topsy-turvy child's room hardly seems like a merely gratuitous exercise in the expanding art funhouse genre.

Certainly, there is nothing new under the Californian sun, least of all the theme of innocence lost. Kersels' debt to Paul McCarthy (his teacher at UCLA) and his grandiose high-jinks notwithstanding, the artist's vaudevillian demonstration of the paper-thin fictions we construct around ourselves is a challenge well met. Having begun its existence as an enclosure as generic as any child's hasty crayon rendition of a house, by the show's close Kersels' poor little bedchamber was left distinctly traumatized and transformed. A lot can happen under even the humblest of roofs, which goes to show that an object defined by intersecting walls and floors is ultimately nothing more than an intimate repository for our most misguided actions, illusory expectations and imaginative desires. It clings closely to us, to paraphrase Bachelard, just as we cling to it.

James Trainor