

John Kelly

Alexander Gray Associates, New York, USA

Since emerging on the East Village club scene in the early 1980s, John Kelly has built a considerable career as a performer. He has fused dance, experimental theatre and cabaret, and it's testimony to his oddball intelligence that while he has often donned drag, he has also tackled the fall of the Berlin Wall and German Expressionist film. Many of these performances were seeded in the process of creating self-portraits, yet – despite Kelly's sparkling facility with pen and brush – they aren't well known, so it's a pleasure to see some 90 of those pictures hung salon-style in this rare show.

Although dating from throughout his career, the pictures pin Kelly – in an appealing way – to the early '80s: postmodernism has descended, art history is being rifled for styles and Kelly is plonking his face onto other people's portraits. There's Kelly as the Mona Lisa, as Joni Mitchell, as Pierrot and – one of Kelly's own inventions – as Dagmar Onassis, fictional love-child of Aristotle Onassis and Maria Callas.

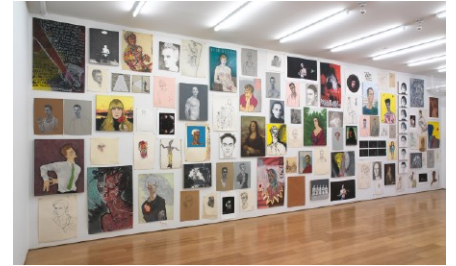


The most surprising of these personae is Egon Schiele, though perhaps the choice isn't so odd, given the mass-cult popularity of Viennese Modernism in the '80s. For Kelly, Schiele became an obsession, and his presence is threaded throughout the works at Alexander Gray Associates. You glance about the show and wonder: is that picture there a reference to Robert Longo's 'Men in the Cities' (1981)? No,

About this review

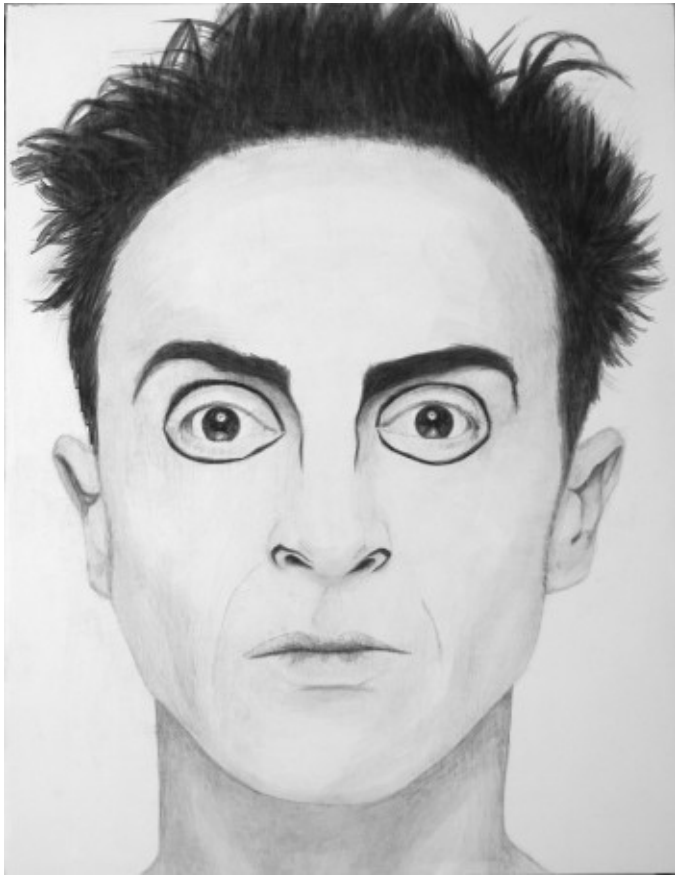
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By *Morgan Falconer*



John Kelly, exhibition view (2009)
Courtesy Alexander Gray
Associates, New York

it's Schiele. And is that Max Headroom?! No, Egon again.



Egon (from 'Panel Series', 2005), ink on paper. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates

Today, the patience of many has worn thin with Schiele: we're impatient with the pose of martyred genius and see instead an insufferably misogynist jerk. But what is, or was, Kelly's attitude? In the 1986 performance he devised based on Schiele's life, *Pass the Blutwurst, Bitte* (here remembered in a German Expressionist-styled poster-cum-portrait), Kelly has him almost resembling Charlie Chaplin: Schiele's anguished poses re-styled into slapstick or mime. Whereas in the self-portraits – and thus, crucially, alone before the mirror – Kelly seems less willing to poke fun. It's just one facet of the multi-form ambivalence that makes this such a wonderful show.

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Frieze

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