

Holland Cotter, "Personal History: Captured in Plastic," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2008, E33-34.

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ART REVIEW

Personal History, Captured in Plastic



Chris Kendall

From left, "Beverly Edmier, 1967" (1998), "Sunflower" (1996), and "A Dozen Roses" (1998) are part of the exhibition at Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies. [More Photos >](#)

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)

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Flip through your "Janson's History of Art" and there they are: sex, death and religion, art's old standbys, its holy trinity, on almost every page. Visit "Keith Edmier 1991-2007," and you'll find them still: alive, and weird, and living — or something like it — two hours north of New York City, at Bard College.

With a title like an epitaph, sculptures like wax museum effigies, and a full-scale 1970s ranch-house interior, as quiet as a chapel, at its center, this career retrospective of work by Mr. Edmier, an artist who has been exhibiting in New York since 1993 and who was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, is one of the more bizarre solo shows to come along in a while. In it, exacting craftsmanship has the chill of the mortician's art. Period kitsch and personal recollection are inseparable. Memory is both a truth serum and embalming medium.

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Mr. Edmier was born in Chicago in 1967 and grew up nearby in suburban Tinley Park, specifically in a new subdivision called Bremen Towne Estates, a community with its own shopping plaza, movie theater, office complex and Roman Catholic church. The 1970s may have been an unfortunate American style moment, but Mr. Edmier thrived in the pop-cultural environment of "Charlie's Angels," "Space Invaders," family rooms, Brian De Palma's "Carrie," Kiss and unisex everything. He was busy. He was a formidable sculptor when he was barely into his teens, cooking up clay models for masks and prosthetic devices inspired by horror films. Instead of hanging out with friends after school, he spent his time in a dental lab learning to mold vampire fangs from acrylic resin. During high school he made contact with Dick Smith, the special-effects makeup artist responsible for Linda Blair's spinning head in "The Exorcist," and through him with Rick Baker, once Mr. Smith's student, in Hollywood.

In 1985 Mr. Edmier moved to Los Angeles to work on films, among them David Cronenberg's remake of "The Fly." He also enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts, where he had a formative immersion in the neo-Conceptualist and appropriation art being grouped under the label of postmodernism. His stay there was short — a year — but it directed his career goals from popular film to art and prompted a relocation to New York City in 1990.

There he was a studio assistant to Matthew Barney, who was soon to have his breakthrough solo debut, and who encouraged him to take the subjects that mattered to him most as the material for his art. He did so, and those subjects — eroticism, mortality and autobiography — are the substance of the 16-year survey organized by Tom Eccles, executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard.

The dates covered by the survey, 1991 to 2007, are part of a stark exhibition title that could be construed as a funerary inscription for a Keith Edmier who died at age 16. Most of the references in the art here have sources in his life before that age.

The earliest piece, "I Met a Girl Who Sang the Blues" (1991) is an oil painting of a smiling Janis Joplin posing with a toddler in a tiger costume. The Joplin portrait is based on a photograph taken in 1970, the year she died of a drug overdose. The child in the picture is the artist himself, age 3, in a 1970 family snapshot. The title of the piece is from Don McLean's 1971 song "American Pie," which refers to Joplin and

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Keith Edmier's "Bremen Towne," a full-scale reproduction of the interior of his childhood home in Chicago. Photo: Chris Kendall

was, Mr. Edmier says in an exhibition catalog with special effects of its own, including a skin-pink rubber dust jacket, his childhood introduction to the idea of death and loss.

The startling sculpture called "Beverly Edmier, 1967," done in 1998, is another Madonna and Child image, one that takes Mr. Edmier even further back into his past. It's a life-size figure, cast in translucent pink plastic, of his own pregnant mother carrying him as a fetus curled up in her transparent womb. Like much of Mr. Edmier's art, it has many referential layers that connect it with larger histories.

Beverly's seated pose echoes that of Abraham Lincoln, another Illinois resident, in the Lincoln Memorial. And she is dressed in a facsimile of the pink Chanel suit that Jacqueline Kennedy was wearing the day her husband was assassinated. (Note the presidential seals embossed on the suit's buttons; Mr. Edmier is a fanatic for such subliminal touches.) A dozen red roses like the ones Mrs. Kennedy carried in Dallas that day, but molded from dental acrylic, lie on a pedestal nearby like an offering at a shrine.

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Much of Mr. Edmier's art has a devotional cast. This is true of pieces related to childhood heroes like Evel Knievel and John Lennon, whose death in 1980 is evoked through a taped interview — you hear it as you enter the show — with Frank Veteran, the doctor on duty the night he was shot. The Lennon piece, which includes a reconstruction of Dr. Veteran's blood-spattered sneakers, now immaculate white, generates a voyeuristic erotic vibe of a kind associated with hard-core fandom. Eroticism pervades Mr. Edmier's art. Interestingly, it is most overt in botanical imagery, the repeated sculptures of various monstrous flowering plants, which in nature are both male and female or conspicuously one or the other. These plants aren't "Little Shop of Horrors" inventions. They actually exist, which makes them seem all the more freakish.

In human figures the eroticism is subtler, and comes with an aura of sanctification. "Jill Peters" (1997) is a full-length portrait of Mr. Edmier's grade-school sweetheart as a virginal ghost of true loves past. Cast in snow-white polyvinyl, wearing white clothes and a luxuriant pale platinum wig, and smiling as she casts her eyes upward, she is a prepubescent idol with a Farrah Fawcett 'do, St. Jill of Perpetual Uplift. Humbert Humbert would have knelt at her Earth Shoes-clad feet.

She stands like a guardian spirit near the front door of "Bremen Towne," the full-scale reproduction of the interior of Mr. Edmier's childhood home commissioned by Bard for the show. It looks like a tour de force of eBay nostalgia shopping. But the artist, using family photographs and memories as cues, made or revamped almost everything in it, from kitchen appliances, to curtains, to a carved wood figure of a hooded monk that stands like a memento mori in the middle of the living room. Characteristically for this artist's intensely biographical art in its reconstructed version, the monk is also a portrait of his father.

And after you pass through this laboriously assembled time capsule of domestic kitsch, you come to another type of memorial in a sculptural group called "Keith Edmier and Farrah Fawcett, 2000." In 1976 a pinup poster of Ms. Fawcett in a bathing suit was a national best seller; the pre-adolescent Mr. Edmier had one on his bedroom wall. In 1998 he introduced himself to his childhood muse.

Before she had had any thoughts of acting, Ms. Fawcett had been an art student,

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specializing in sculpture, at the [University of Texas](#) in Austin. (Janis Joplin had studied art there two years earlier.) Mr. Edmier invited her to return to her initial avocation and collaborate with him on a project. She accepted and, working together in a California studio, they made nude portraits of each other.

Mr. Edmier portrays Ms. Fawcett as a coyly self-covering nymph, tousle-haired, ear to the ground as if listening, with a vacant stare, to something. By contrast, Ms. Fawcett's bronze portrait of Mr. Edmier is a full-frontal affair, its blandly handsome subject leaning back against what could be a rock, eyes shut. He's like a sunbather, or space-traveling Adam, or a St. Sebastian unconscious of arrows to come.

This drowsing figure makes an aptly contradictory symbol for an art that approaches the past as both a wishful ideal and as a time-haunted, mortality-ridden fiction. Mainstream modernism spent the better part of a century trying to control that fiction, to scrape it clean, make it abstract, elevate it, bury it. But like the vengeful ghost of Carrie White, who may be Mr. Edmier's real muse, it keeps popping back up, demanding acknowledgment, pulling us back down into the earth.

Postmodernism can be defined by the tension of that two-way pull. So can the spoiled sensuality of Mr. Edmier's abject devotional art.

"Keith Edmier 1991-2007" remains at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N. Y., (845) 758-7598, through Feb. 3.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/11/arts/design/11edmi.html>