

# Petzel

Sir Norman Rosenthal, "Keith Edmier—The Wonderland of Memory," *Regeneratrix*, exh. cat. (New York: Petzel 2015), 65-67.

## Keith Edmier—The Wonderland of Memory

We know from Einstein and others that time and history can somehow play strange, counterintuitive tricks on us. At least subjectively, for each of us there can be only the present. Certainly there is no describable objective future, and it is only through that elusive thing called memory, which exists fundamentally from the perspective of the individual, however much it is shared with others, that history can be said to exist. And one of the major carriers of history and memory is culture and the art objects to which the culture gives birth. As André Malraux famously said in 1975, "A work of art is an object, but it is also an encounter with time." In the same year, the composer Pierre Boulez would claim that "the strongest civilizations are those without memory—those capable of complete forgetfulness." The beauty of Keith Edmier's work, particularly in this exhibition, is that it demonstrates—both from an American perspective and from a wider engagement with the history of mostly European, classical cultures—the truths of both these contrary statements. In terms of that strange phenomenon called contemporary art, even by the time the thing—the sculpture, for instance—has arrived in the gallery, it is already an object that in some sense encapsulates time past as well as the present of the beholder. Within culture in general—in music, film, drama, or literature—there are indeed different ways of experiencing and compressing time. Where concentration is on the visual, the art object appears largely to exist only in the very moment of contemplation and reflection, with no before or after. And yet it is always a document of both time and place. The Mona Lisa is a haunting portrait of a Florentine woman painted at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and it is as such that her image sits in our collective memory, or as we stare at her imprisoned in her glass box in the Louvre. Through art and memory, the woman has in some way overcome her inevitable mortality. Similarly with public monuments that commemorate—a battle victory, in the case of Trajan's Column in Rome, or the virtues of American freedom, as extolled by the Statue of Liberty. There is the curious case of Cesare Ripa, an amateur scholar, who in the sixteenth century compiled his famous *Iconologia*, for use by and the instruction of artists who needed to give visual—usually human—representation to abstract concepts: virtues, vices, passions, not to mention the various arts and sciences. Artists today in the Western, now globalized, world are usually not that sensitized to such traditional symbols or to the problematics of history, however much they hope for their work to survive the vagaries of time, even if only through the mechanisms of display or art criticism, not to speak of the art market. But maybe that is changing, as this exhibition manifests, as an interest in old symbols reasserts itself.

Keith Edmier in his true subconscious self, as well as through careful strategies in his work, has throughout his career steered an individual and characteristic path through the weird vagaries of the human past as observed by himself. He is a truly subjective historian, the archaeologist of his own experiences and feelings as an individual willing to demonstrate to us, through his art, his own obsessive interests both erotic and in the world around him. These, by chance, even since his beginnings, have brought him from his birthplace in a village on the outskirts of Chicago via

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Hollywood to New York City, and then on to the great museums and sites of ancient culture, most recently Rome but also experienced through reading and Internet exploration. He is a technician turned artist, which has given him particular skills as regards the business of making strange things, especially the casting of plastics, which he began to acquire as a boy when working for a dental technician. He is a stickler for accuracy, and his attitude incorporates that of a set designer working on a big historic representation for film or stage. No expressionistic shortcuts are permissible; the illusion must be perfect from all sides. As a boy he was drawn to making masks like those used in horror films. When he arrived in New York, he first assisted other artists, Jeff Koons and Matthew Barney, before deciding his true vocation was to be his own man—in other words, an artist himself, with visions of his own that he had to realize, come what may. As already indicated, his earliest memories were to be his first inspiration, down to a re-creation of his childhood home, Bremen Towne, not to mention a faithful reconstruction of the set of his favorite childhood TV show, *Ray Rayner and Friends*. Then as one who has always had, and still clearly has, a forthright fascination, not to say obsession, with famous American film actresses and supermodels, Edmier's dream wish was amazingly realized quite early on in his art career when he was able to connect with the infamous actress Farrah Fawcett, who as it happened had trained as an artist herself. For a single (one can assume) ecstatic moment she becomes the Camille Claudel to his Rodin, even as the two make loving images of each other—in the American manner, of course, i.e., not without a large dollop of self-conscious Pop art kitsch.

I was introduced to the world of Keith Edmier by my co-curator Alex Gartenfeld during the preparation of an exhibition about New York as a center of art making today, which was to be called *Empire State*. I had hitherto been unfamiliar with Edmier's very individual, strange approach to making art, but it was exactly his self-conscious and persistently original ability to link history in a subjective and personal way to his own present that convinced. Edmier's is an exposing, almost psychological, self-analysis of obsessions, an opening up to his audience that gives him poetic authenticity as an artist. Of course in the end no artist, however radically or anarchically inclined, can totally eliminate dialogue with a subjective past. But what is special about Edmier is his determined ability to give imaginative, even surrealist form to his personal memories, digging out archaeologies from within himself that are able to reside comfortably in a postmodernist and historicist, more general present.

For *Empire State* in Rome, Edmier imagined a sculpture that succeeded in fusing emblematic ideas of ancient Rome with those of the New Rome of today. That, by common consent, even today is New York, at least culturally. One can still somehow legitimately remember that almost banal statement of John Lennon, "Today America is the Roman Empire and New York is Rome itself." For Edmier, to make an amalgam art monument of both cities in one work became an irresistible temptation. Having already been shown in Rome as well as Paris, now to be able to present *Penn Station Ciborium* (2012–13) in New York, as is being done here in this exhibition, is central to its history as an artwork. It was conceived for old Rome to fit the central high rotunda

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of the very late nineteenth-century neoclassical "wedding cake" edifice, the Palace of Exhibitions (Palazzo delle Esposizioni), which, as Edmier has noted, itself drew inspiration from "the architecture of the ancient Roman basilicas and baths and the Pantheon, as well as the glass-and-iron exhibition halls of the nineteenth century, of which the Crystal Palace in London is perhaps the most famous." But beyond ancient and nineteenth-century Rome, in the sculpture itself Edmier piles endless other references—including the extravagant Baroque of Bernini's famous bronze canopy over the high altar of St. Peter's, known universally as the Baldacchino. Then going forward, Edmier's canopy conflates old Rome, dreamlike, with the two great railway stations of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century New York. The monument that was Penn Station was more or less totally demolished in 1963, in what one presumes would now be an unthinkable act of architectural vandalism. Then come those strange white resin-cast oysters that cling magnetically, as real oysters do to rocks under the seabed, to the cast-iron edifice redolent of not only Penn Station but also the still ever splendidly standing Grand Central and its famous Oyster Bar. (Oysters are, of course, not without their strong and ambiguous sexual innuendo.) Edmier's dizzy spiral of references takes in the precisely reconstructed Gustavino dome but also references the open-to-the-air oculus of the Pantheon in Rome. For those who don't quite remember, Gustavino was a Catalan architect who emigrated to the United States, a contemporary of Gaudí's, who used specially shaped tiles to construct self-supporting arches that can be found in American cast-iron edifices, and not just in New York. As in Rome—where dusty glass-covered reliquaries are to be found in every church—Edmier displays under his own Ciborium excavations both from his studio and, even more extraordinarily, from the New Jersey site where the remains of the old Penn Station were thrown away. The private and the public meet again.

Beyond the monumental spectacle of his Ciborium, Edmier has developed four thematic sections in this presentation of ideas realized through images that once more conflate history with a recent personal past, into dreams that become moments of time-present contemplation for both the artist and his viewers. The first of these he has entitled Hieros gamos, which alludes to the union of the ancient gods with mere mortals—a persistent theme in classical mythology—but also occurs in Christian myth, most spectacularly in the biblical story of the Annunciation and Virgin Birth, to which Edmier has given his own reading, focusing on the lily as its symbolic flower, as it was indeed in the Renaissance. Flowers and plants become central to the other sections of this current exhibition: here the laurel wreath that adorns the goddess Venus, who later chases her legendary human lover Adonis into the underworld. Venus in a further metamorphosis in Edmier's imagination becomes the archetypal American film-star goddess Grace Kelly, who herself was to transform into a European princess. The aluminum lightning rod that was placed atop the great Washington Monument obelisk was completed in 1884 under the direction of one Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Lincoln Casey, and it is reproduced here as a sculptural emblem worthy of Ripa, serving metaphorically as an American-invented conductor of both time and space—here between the ancient world and the New World, which both give birth to their own myths.

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Next comes a section named for Ripa’s personification of sculpture, *Scultura*. Edmier has, of course, progressed from being a technician to a sculptor—or more precisely a practitioner of what, as Ripa declares, at least in the eighteenth-century highly edited English version that Edmier has consulted, is “more ancient than any of the liberal arts as the scriptures makes mention of the idols of Laban”; the self-same heathen Laban both of whose daughters, Leah and Rachel, in turn marry Jacob, son of Abraham. But beyond biblical references, the icon/image shows the famous naked Venus de’ Medici, her hand tastefully hiding her privacy, which in Edmier’s imagination fast-forwards to the land of his own reality and fantasy in the form of the famous Annie Leibovitz Vanity Fair cover photograph of 1991 of the naked, pregnant Demi Moore, and another of Cindy Crawford, similarly pregnant, shot by Michael Thompson in 1999 for *W Magazine*. And it just so happens that Thompson had his studio at the site of the current Petzel Gallery on West Eighteenth Street, where the latter photo was most probably shot. *Scultura* itself is cut from limestone, in Edmier’s mind significant because limestone originally formed via marine organisms, which takes the image back to the sea and the birth of Venus. All things as one long fictitiously historical line backward and forward!

Time lines and things become ever more beautifully confused and aesthetically muddled, nowhere more so than in the fourth section of the exhibition, a paean to Grace Kelly, who is, at least for Edmier, one suspects, the ultimate American goddess (even if Marilyn did marry Arthur Miller and played with Laurence Olivier, and Jackie married a Greek ship owner). Neither, after all, was to marry the Ruritanian, Mediterranean prince Rainier. There was something virginal about Kelly carrying at her wedding a bouquet of lily of the valley, and Edmier knows all about the Kelly Bag, manufactured by the coincidentally named French luxury-brand company of Hermes and made famous by Alfred Hitchcock’s first giving Kelly one to carry as an accessory in *To Catch a Thief*. The founder of the luxury brand really was called Hermes, himself not as such named after the great Greek messenger god, whose job was to connect to mankind. Here we see the bag cast in glass; around the walls of the gallery, wreaths of flowers as described by Ripa, symbolizing subjects such as virtue, emulation, conversation. But then Kelly herself, when no longer able to act, took up the art of floristry and found delight, it seems, in making her own wreaths of flowers—shades, too, of Shakespeare’s Ophelia. Wreaths celebrate death as well as victory, and Hermes is the messenger of both. What brings the two together is the necessity of the arts of memory.

To quote the artist as he e-mails the following:

“All the wreaths will have flowers: the case of emulation—oak leaves referencing Zeus. There will be carnations—pink (which I’ve used) and yellow primrose (which Grace had used). At the center will be an arrangement of periwinkle (*Vinca*). I’m still thinking about it, but probably all the wreaths will have smaller white flowers—a combination of snowdrops (which I’ve used) and Queen Anne’s lace (which Grace had used).

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“Virtue will have some Virgin Mary/Resurrection references—palm fronds and flowers associated with Mary. Rose-petal arrangement at center and lilies (which I have used) and pansies (which Grace had used). I’m also most likely going to use the rose named after Grace Kelly, Grace de Monaco, and the lily that was named after her, Lys Princess Grace (now called simply Monaco).

“And all these flowers to be cast in dental polychromed acrylic.”

For the last section of the exhibition, Edmier returns to the United States and a beautiful fantasy, based on the fact that ever since Mrs. Herbert Hoover in 1929, just before the stock-market crash, was presented with a *Cattleya* orchid named in her honor, every First Lady has had a unique hybrid named after her—and Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama have of course shown themselves seemingly delighted recipients of this honor. Their smiling images seem faraway descendants of a more primitive American world of the Brazilian jungle and the world of nineteenth-century botanist-explorers and the artists who followed them. In this context came Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904), for the most part a run-of-the mill Hudson River landscape painter, but who managed to paint some forty or more paintings of orchids and hummingbirds that have an almost proto-surrealist intensity, with their close-up, highly coloristically charged detail. The orchids have an almost sinister yet sexual sculptural aspect—which Edmier inevitably finds inspirational for his sculpture—while the birds are tiny, elusive in their psychedelic hues, and unique to the Americas; they have never made it in their natural state to the Old World. Together the orchids, the hummingbirds, and the jungle speak of a fantastical, mythic American world that existed before the arrival of European man and his own strange myths and beliefs.

One can only but admire Keith Edmier’s splendid personal discourse with himself and his viewers. He is not alone among prominent American artists of today—his previous masters Barney and Koons come to mind—who, using their own strategies, are bringing to life again the myths of supposedly lost cultures of ancient worlds, so they might fuse into a necessary mythic and dreamlike present. Edmier, too, demonstrates to us this essential truth, without which none of us as individuals or as societies in the last analysis can survive, in his characteristically own considered and beautiful way.

Norman Rosenthal, April 2015