

Playfully Submersive

Playfully Submersive is an exhibition held in the Mission Gallery in Swansea. This exhibition draws viewers into a world of entertaining and unexpected artwork that allows them to critique themes of hard-hitting topics, the unnatural and nostalgia with art that blurs the lines between playfulness and confrontation. This exhibition features the work of three influential artists that bend the rules of art, Mike Kelley, Erwin Wurm and Mark Leckey. Each artist explores art in their own individual way and the exhibition will guide viewers into each perspective.

Mike Kelley was an influential American artist known for his child-like aesthetics with second-hand children's toys and objects. Kelleys work embodies Playfully Submersive through the way that he captures themes of trauma, violence and repressed memory with child play and innocence. Kelley describes his thoughts shifting about soft toys and how they can be used by saying

‘Beyond thinking of them as mere carriers of ‘love hours’ (or ‘guilt hours’), I became aware that they also had specific forms, and that there must be some connection between these forms and the objects’ use. But at the same time that I became conscious of this fact. I also realised that they were extremely limited in a formal sense.’

(Ngai, 2012, p.204)



On the left-hand wall of the first room of the gallery space is Mike Kelleys *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin* (1987). This large-scale piece features arrangements of stuffed animals and afghans onto a large piece of canvas. This is the first piece that greets the viewers into Mike Kelleys work as it represents Kelleys earlier thoughts about soft toys and objects by describing the condition of the toys from being loved too much or receiving little in return as ‘love hours.’ Kelley also uses ‘guilt hours’ to

describe the amount of time that may have been put into making these toys by loved ones, but do they expect the children to repay the time that they took by loving these toys? (Whitney Museum of American Art) Welchman wrote about Kelley's piece saying,

'Kelley explores the discrepancy between emotional and monetary value by separating 'junk' art from craft production. The former' could be said to have value in spite of its material; while the craft item could be said, like an icon, to have value beyond its material'.

(Welchman, 1999, p.64)



Alongside is another piece of Kelley's work that involves stuffed toys, *Ahh... Youth!* (1991) This assortment includes Kelley himself as an adolescent, and seven thrift shop stuffed toys; each looks as though it's their own mugshot. (Worley Gig, 2022) In this piece, Kelley is comparing his awkward teenage self with acne scarred skin to the creepy, dirty toys to resemble growing up. This piece is displayed directly next to *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* and *The Wages of Sin* as it shows the evolution of Kelley's thought process of how toys can be used to represent themes in his artwork.



Lastly, mounted to the wall, is *Eviscerated Corpse* (1989), part of Kelley's series, *Half a Man* (1987-91). With the usage of stuffed toys and bright colours, Kelley created one of his most chilling pieces with objects that suggest innocence, which creates an emotional experience for viewers.

The work features an old female doll with a body made up of ragged toys sewn together with a womblike form that leads to the floor. Spilling out of the body is a chain of stuffed animals, resembling the entrails. A daisy chain of stuffed snakes and bananas which is led by an oversized snake runs across the floor.

(Rondeau, 1999)



Erwin Wurm is the second artist to feature in the Playfully Submersive exhibition. Wurm is an Australian artist whose work is essential for this exhibition due to his sculptures that challenge space and human form. In the middle of the first room is Wurms sculptures, *Untitled (Chair on Eye)* (2003) and *The Idiot II* (2003). The photographs of these two pieces are hung on the right-hand side wall of the first room. These sculptures are a part of Wurms *One Minute Sculptures*. This is a series of videos, photography, and performances of volunteers carrying out unusual acts such as *The Idiot II* (2003), in this piece a man is wearing a chair on his front with his arms going through the holes of the sides of the arm rests. During the process of these photographs being taken, Wurm delivers instructions which are both written and pictorial, the participant enacts the formation or action for sixty seconds. (Tate, 2016) Author Ed. Peter Weibel wrote about Wurms One Minute Sculptures stating,

‘The power of play should never be underestimated. Funny, witty, bizarre, or downright vulgar, Wurm’s One Minute Sculptures articulate a poetics of humor.’

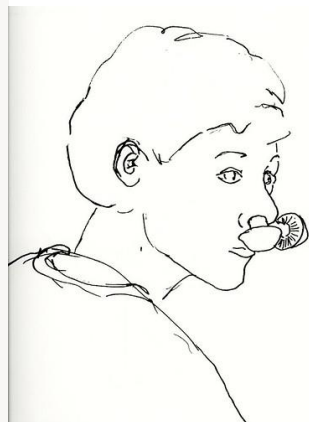
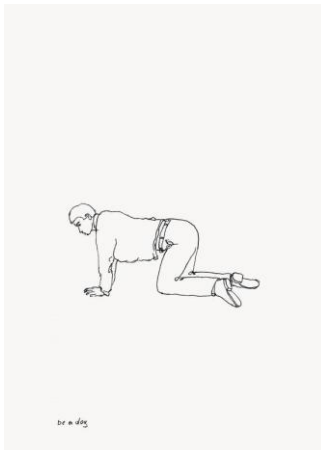
(Weibel, 2002)



Along the rest of the right-hand wall, I have featured Wurm's photography sculptures, *Outdoor Sculpture Taipei* (2000). This compelling series of work challenges the everyday life and the way that humans use objects. In the performative photographs, we see interactions between people and different objects but not in the normal way that we would use those objects. In the book *Erwin Wurm*, the author writes about the unexpected imagery in one of the sculptures from this series saying,

After all, how could you imagine a young woman sitting on a sidewalk in a schoolgirl's uniform, one foot clad in a white sock and Mary Jane shoe, the other bare apart from some French fries lodged between the toes, actually be defined?

(Weibel, 2002)





Lastly, scattered across the right-hand side of the right wall is six drawings by Erwin Wurm, *Instruction Drawing (Head in Box)* (1997), *Instruction Drawing (Be A Dog)* (1998), *Instruction Drawing (Salad Bowl)* (1992), *Instruction Drawing (2 Mushrooms)* (1998), *Instruction Drawing (4 Bananas)* (1998), *Instruction Drawing (2 Felt Marker, 1 Minute)* (1998). I think that these drawings are essential to Wurms section of the exhibition, each drawing is titled as an Instruction Drawing, these give the viewers of the exhibition an insight into Wurm's thought process as these A4 drawings were guidelines for his *One Minute Sculptures*.



In the back room of the gallery is the work of Turner Prize winner, Mark Leckey. Leckey is a British contemporary artist known for his use of video that explore themes of nostalgia, anxiety, and pop culture. Leckey's video, *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (1999), will be displayed along the semi-circle wall of the back room, it's displayed specifically in this room so that viewers are able to walk in and experience the feel and the people in the video dancing around them in the room. *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* is a video collage of found VHS videos that plays with nostalgia.

The video starts with Northern soul in 1973-74 and ends with the hardcore rave scene of 1991-93, with sprinklings of 80s football casuals, 70s jazz funk and soul and more in-between the two.

(Corless, p.24)

Kieran Corless recalls the video saying,

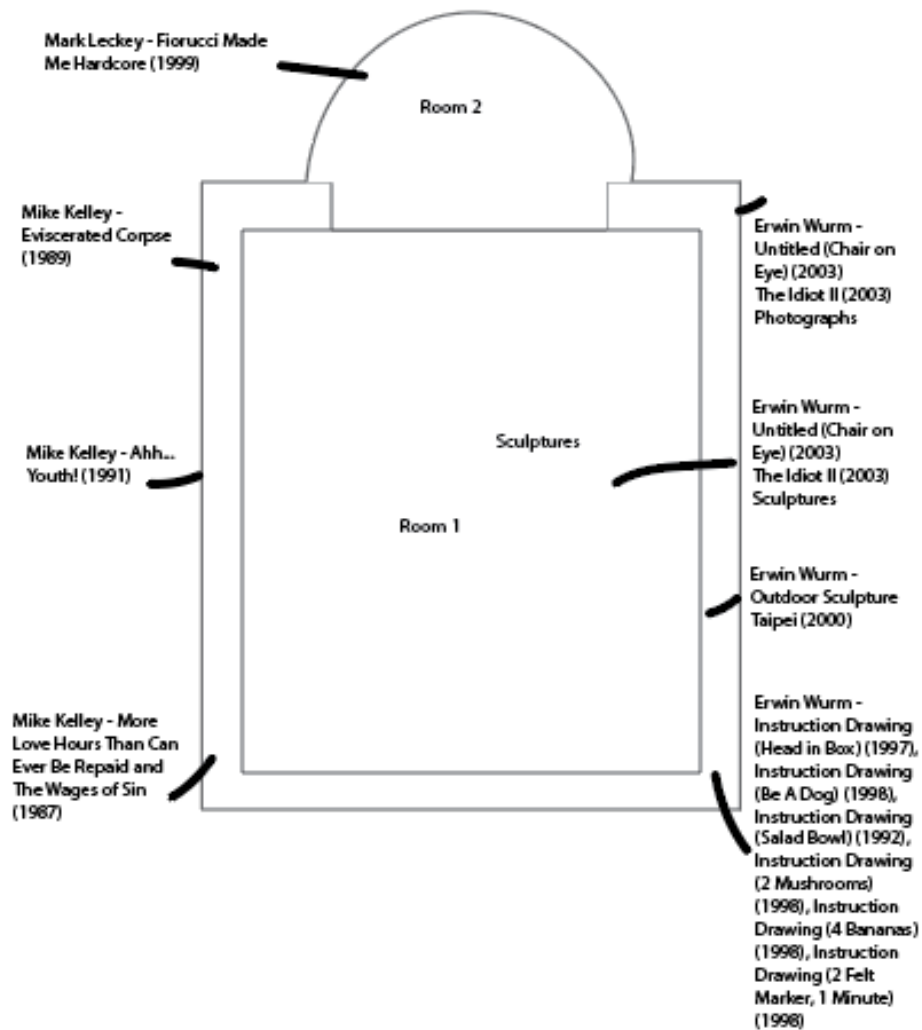
I vividly recall the opening night of the group show where it first exhibited, at the ICA in 1999 — its electrifying effect and gravitational pull as it played repeatedly on a rudimentary screen covering one large wall of a room.

(Corless, p.24)

Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore fits right into Playfully Submersive and finishes the experience of the exhibition for viewers by filling older generations with nostalgia of their past. The piece ends the exhibition with a light-hearted feeling for viewers.

I think that it's important to have an alternative range of work that challenges the viewers emotions. Playfully Submersive will guide viewers through three different emotions with the various works that include the use of playfulness to portray a message. On the left side, viewers will be guided into the work of Mike Kelley, at first glance they may think of innocence and child-play or memories of childhood, but after examining the work closer they will be filled with deep emotion through the deeper meaning of the works. On the right side, viewers step into the bizarre world of Erwin Wurm. Wurms work may confuse them, but it will challenge them to think about the relationship between themselves and objects. Lastly, viewers will walk into a world of nostalgia of the old rave scene, watching people dance around the room.

Layout of Exhibition in the Mission Gallery



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