



Review of Kelli Miller by Sasha Tochilovsky

PARIS HILTON VS TOM CRUISE'S SMILE

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This is a second installation that Kelli has created this year. I'm glad to see it, because I like installations; they are engaging and physical. In some ways they are also easier to talk about. The many elements warrant attention and can offset the discussion from becoming too centered on one piece. The flip side is that each piece can be called on and has to stand up to the critique. Whether or not it all works in this installation I will reserve for the end of this review. All I will say now is that I like it. Why?

Let's see why. I guess it's best to describe it now. The space of the installation is delineated by two squares of green carpeting. The weave is an odd combination of faux grass and something that you'd see in an office or a movie theater. It reminds me of something people would put on their porch or balcony as a 'bridge' between the outside green yard and the inside carpeting. Atop the carpeting sit two large scale pedestals wrapped in brown fabric, with tan tops. They look like stylized tree stumps or logs. There is a TV on each stump playing two different videos. In between the two pedestals/stumps are suspended two white scrims, which are about a foot apart from each other. The scrims act as screens for a projection coming from behind. The projection is a short animation. Below the screens is a square speaker which has a blue-bird cozy over it. There are two other speakers, one on top of each of the TVs, which also have bird cozies on them. All these elements just reinforce the feel of a set-up. It's all staged with unapologetic intention.

On to the projection and the videos then. The main animation, projected in the center, begins with a title card. The title reads, "Paris Hilton vs. Tom Cruise's

Smile". It also informs us that Paris is the protagonist and that Tom is the antagonist; and that Paris is a "media darling" and that Tom is a "scene stealer". The other character is Tinkerbell, "the trusty sidekick". So far so good. The animation begins with an image of Paris Hilton with only her eyes and lips visible; her outfit being some sort of a hybrid between a superhero jumpsuit and a terrorist mask. It's all black with a pixillated image of a skull and bones emblazoned on her chest. She seems to be located in some sort of video game forest. We can also see the chihuahua, Tinkerbell, wearing a pink dress as if it were a cape. More superhero references. The forest seems to be peppered with huge diamonds. As Paris moves off-screen Tinkerbell somersaults and grabs one of the diamonds. The next scene shows Paris being, well, Paris, as she glides diagonally across the screen, frozen stiff in a pose. The following shot is of Tinkerbell snatching yet another huge diamond. Score! Did I mention that these diamonds are huge. The scene transitions onto a different video game landscape, with green grass, trees and blue sky. Over this landscape floats Tom Cruise's Smile; perfect pearly-white teeth and all. It just happily skips over the pastures until it comes upon Paris. We now understand that there's some sort of conflict between them. The mouth proceeds to chase Paris through the forest. Paris forgets for a moment all her troubles when she stumbles across a giant diamond, but the mouth chases her back into reality. After running away in horror Paris suddenly realizes that she may in fact have super powers, and that her outfit may actually mean something useful. She stops into one of her signature poses and fires off two laser beams out of the skull on her chest. The laser beams hit the lips and they explode into a fireball. Is this victory for Paris

and the end of the annoying scene-stealing smile? Not so, apparently, as the next scene shows that the smile has multiplied and actually afflicted everyone including Paris, Tinkerbell and even the diamonds. Is nothing sacred? Can anyone resist?

The other video on the sides show actors portraying some of the same events which occur in the main central animation. The left video shows Tom's smile walking through the woods, looking and acting, well, like Tom Cruise; smiling and posing for the invisible cameras. The video on the right shows Paris walking through the woods carrying Tinkerbell, and finding huge diamonds. Both video show the chase scene, from the perspective of each of the respective characters.

The whole piece relies on a loose narrative to get its message across. It is almost as if the whole story is being filtered through an ADD-afflicted individual, who has no time for details and is only interested in the most exciting parts; trees, somersaulting dogs, huge diamonds and explosions. The piece has an overall feel of faux-reality, almost mythological. There is obviously a power struggle between the two main characters. But what are they fighting about? What is their goal? Is it for the attention of whoever would be the owner of this very space before us? Is this what most people are subjected to in the media, figuring out who is the better character to obsess over, the faux-person Paris or the equally unreal Tom? Are we really that interested in knowing what the latest hijinks they got into? Or is the real question, why *are* we so interested in knowing. Is Paris the real terrorist, highjacking our attention away from real events? It all seems absurd, but just as absurd as the amount of attention devoted to celebrities. I think it's fun to envision these characters doing battle. Kelli is not a fan of fakery, more resigned to honesty, her operative mode is satire. The smile, in this case Tom Cruise's, is a nice nod at her previous piece. She questions why people would subject themselves to these trivial exploits, by constructing a space and a narrative for herself to occupy. She is her own test subject. It's as if she is asking herself can any good possibly come of it?

I am having a hard time contextualizing this work, perhaps it's late or perhaps I am not too interested in it. Either way I hope that it is not as crucial to the reading of this piece. The only thing I am reminded of is the early NES video game "The Legend of Zelda". I can also think of a South African artist Lisa Brice's work, in which she paints balaclavas over photographs of insurance salesmen.

I think that this installation is successful because of the amount of attention paid to the details, from the carpet to the cozies. I like the way the three projections work together, especially the way the animation is projected and the "live-action" footage is displayed on old television sets. I also like the disjointed narrative and looping video. It all creates a sense of absurdity but also works in a hypnotizing manner, especially paired with the music. The music is great; it's a perfect aural expression of the visuals. It's a mix of James Bond-like theme and a video game score. The installation also gets better after a second or third viewing, or rather the second time it loops. The thing I'm not entirely sold on is the use of double screens. I see the interesting effect that is created, but not sure if it helps the piece or if it takes it away from its objective. The only other thing I will throw out is whether or not it feels too clean and safe. Perhaps it's a false sense of security, nonetheless I am not sure if there doesn't need to be something more sinister about it.

