

Work in progress

NSCAD grad and art star Kelly Mark returns to Halifax for a retrospective

by Laura Kenins

Long a local favourite, Toronto-based artist Kelly Mark is given a retrospective of 12 years of work in *Stupid Heaven*. Mark, who studied at NSCAD, had her first curated exhibit at MSVU Gallery in 1995, and she has since had her work widely exhibited nationally and internationally, as well as in many local exhibits. Mark's multidisciplinary art, primarily performance, sculpture and video, looks at the banal with a sense of irony and humour. Her subject matter includes television, jobs and repetitive actions, heavily influenced by minimalism and conceptualism.



Salt-n-pepa. This culinary battleground is part of Kelly Mark's *Stupid Heaven*.

The tedium of working is a recurrent theme. Since 1997, Mark has punched in on a time card when reporting for work in her studio, in the piece "In and Out." Mark has pledged to continue until she reaches retirement age, so that the private collector who owns the piece effectively owns her time, turning Mark into another wage labourer. For *Stupid Heaven*, she made an agreement with gallery director Ingrid Jenkner to forego CARFAC fees (the standard Canadian fees paid by galleries to exhibiting artists), to instead be paid at Nova Scotia's minimum wage for the gallery hours over the duration of the show. Ironically, or perhaps depressingly, she earned an extra \$500. Her performance piece "Staff," in which Mark walks around public spaces and buildings wearing a black STAFF jacket and baseball cap, plays with the concept of work as well.

The video "Hiccup" shows Mark sitting on steps outside a public building, repeating the same actions at the same time for a prescribed period of time daily for 30 days. Mark originally did this performance on the steps of a Toronto high school, where she sat sipping coffee and staring into space. Passersby don't tend to notice Mark's presence; there's no reason to think that something's up just because the same thing happens every morning, and that's the point. Videos like "Private Conversations with Public Statuary," a silent documentation of Mark's friends talking at public sculptures, and "Hiccup" show Mark's trademark wry humour, found in the ordinariness of these actions.

"REM," a 2007 video installation, occupies the centre of the gallery. The same video plays on four TVs set in front of couches in four cubicles, each with a stopped clock. The video is a two-and-a-half hour convoluted pastiche of scenes from movies and TV shows. The program description reads as straightforwardly as a kindergartener telling a story. Mark references dreams and insomnia, the monotony of 3am channel-surfing, pasting together scenes of sleep and confusion. Scenes segue awkwardly into each other from car chase to hotel room to street, from Keanu Reeves to Boris Karloff. After awhile it's hard to tell if Mark created a masterful collage or simply kept the VCR running while flipping channels on any night; ever-changing cable-channel logos in the corners of the screen are a nice touch.

Unfortunately, it feels like newer, weaker works take the forefront in this show, while better known, stronger pieces are relegated to the back corner or a busy display case: works like "I Really Should," an audio piece in which Mark lists 1,000 to-do list items like, "I really should update my resume" and "I really should redirect my anger." "Object Carried for One Year," an aluminum bar carried in Mark's back pocket for a year, and her series of pattern drawings made from Letraset letters are conspicuously absent.

One of Mark's most interesting projects is her ongoing "Glow House" series: an empty house is filled with TVs tuned to the same channel, causing an eerie, pulsing glow to light up the house at night. The hypnotic effect of a television in the dark is multiplied, exemplifying Mark's thoughts on the medium. But this receives limited treatment in *Stupid Heaven*, represented only by a poster and short description. More documentation of the series would have been great to see, or an attempt to mount a Halifax Glow House---we hardly lack for creepy abandoned buildings here. a

Kelly Mark: Stupid Heaven, until Sunday, June 1 at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 166 Bedford Highway.