

Passing time, wasting time, marking time

In addition to her other accomplishments, Toronto artist Kelly Mark shows us how to kick back, Sarah Milroy writes

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From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

September 26, 2007 at 1:56 AM EDT

The red neon sign on the wall reads, "I called shotgun infinity when I was 12." It's a work from 2006 by Toronto artist Kelly Mark and, like so much of the art she makes – art that is currently gathered in two linked exhibitions at the University of Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and Blackwood Gallery – it is about time.

Admittedly, it's the rare child who plans for eternity before the onset of menses, but Mark has always had a heightened awareness of these things. Passing the time, time wasting, marking time, keeping time – these are all themes that play themselves out in her pieces. Behind it all is a defence of the sometimes-not-so-obvious utility of making art. Is this a worthy expenditure of time? What is it for? Is it a job? If so, what are the requirements?

Mark, who turns 40 this year, is a self-described working-class hero who insists on the value of labour many might call worthless: seeing the beauty in a crumpled Kleenex, or the complexity of her pet cat's videotaped investigations of the world; scavenging through hundreds of hours of near-obsolete film and television footage; or observing and cataloguing the ramblings of her own wandering mind.

For skeptics out to bust artists for self-indulgent narcissism, the show might seem to offer a field day. For more sympathetic souls – those of us who appreciate that slowing down and indulging in a little everyday reverie might be a worthwhile act of rebellion against the commercialization and standardization of our minds and souls – it's like a dream come true. In addition to her other accomplishments – revivifying the legacy of conceptual art, say, or waging a wry critique of consumerism – Mark shows us how to kick back.

Take *Placed* (1999), one of the show's most piquant works, on view at the Blackwood Gallery. It's a series of photographic vignettes from urban life, documenting litter that has been not just tossed away but carefully insinuated by passersby into the urban fabric. A tissue is pushed into the cracks of a red picnic table. A pink phone-message slip is folded upon itself and inserted neatly into a white metal door hinge. A bright orange bottle cap sits primly in the undercarriage of a door handle. Torn between their desire to discard and their socially conditioned abhorrence of littering, or perhaps just seized by an aesthetic impulse requiring release, these free-range anonymous sculptors have engineered mini-interventions in the city. Mark notes these gestures and matches them with her own, crafting little still-life studies that brim with pathos and humour.

Another piece, titled *Broken Meters*, at the Barnicke Gallery, observes the way in which we city dwellers bargain with authority, documenting an array of handmade notes left on broken parking meters around town. "Out of Order," scrawls one harried writer, while another works harder to absolve herself: "Jammed w/ \$1 inside. 2:10 p.m." (Perhaps there is a God, and he/she will deliver golden rays of mercy onto this street corner. And maybe pigs will fly.) Then there's the plaintive new Canadian: "She broke no more work." Mark observes our intimate negotiations with the big-city machine, delivering a sense of tender humanity under siege.

The television has always been a muse for Mark, and a companion in her fructifying indolence. A number of her video works record reflected TV light spilling onto the wall. One such work, at the Blackwood, is a pile of TV sets throbbing with pale pastel light. It turns out they are screening the reflected light thrown by TV porn onto white walls. (Hence the throbbing, pace variable.) A smaller companion piece, at the Barnicke, improvises on this theme. Titled *The Kiss* (after Brancusi's canonical modernist sculpture of a couple embracing), the piece consists of two small televisions sitting screen to screen on a plinth, their two gently curved glass convexities touching as they exchange rhythmic pulses of light.

The most sustained homage to television, though, is Mark's new installation, titled *REM*, a two-hour mash-up of film and television clips that operates as a digest of narrative motifs, excerpted from more than 170 sources. (The artist provides sofas for extended viewing.) The work opens with a sequence of studio logos (the winged white horse, the Arctic mountain range jutting with crystals, the roaring lion, the toga-clad goddess with her flaming lantern aloft), followed by a sampling of opening credits, both vintage and contemporary, and proceeds onward from there.

As the piece unfolds, we are immersed in a deftly edited compilation of scenes that are grouped by type – the car chase, the explosion, the interrogation scene, the stair-running getaway, the melancholy moment of self-encounter, the terrified flight through the dark forest – the seams between them joined to produce a fluid quasi-narrative that bristles with irony, humour and insight.

The result is weirdly absorbing; you find yourself immersed in the medium itself, and marvelling, too, at the encyclopedic memory of the artist equipped to command this plethora of detail.

This is "time wasting" elevated to a near-heroic scale, and that's precisely the point. Sometimes in Mark's art, that pose can lead to a kind of conceptual flabbiness; some of the works that curator Barbara Fischer has left out of this show collapse under the weight of their own slacker attitude. The best, though, as we see here, are dry and tart refutations of conventional diligence. In this regard, like the conceptual artists that are her precursors, Mark's is an art of resistance.

In *Demonstration*, a performance event staged in response to the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery's annual glam fundraiser, the Power Ball, in 2003, her laughing accomplices intercept incoming limos holding empty placards aloft, chanting slogans like "Hell no, we don't know!" or "What do we want? Nothing!" Clearly, it's the protesters who are having all the fun. (The performance was captured on video and is being exhibited at both shows' locations.) By wanting nothing, Mark seems to refuse the whole thrust of capitalist striving and materialistic reward.

She resists, too, the inner voices that drive us from mindful immersion in our present moment into anxious worrying and future planning. "I really should ..." is a phrase that Mark has turned into neon, printed onto shopping bags and incorporated into an ongoing audio piece, an exhaustive (and exhausting) compilation of imagined self-improvements. "I really should pay them back. I really should put something on that before it gets infected. I really should buy some asparagus. I really should try and improve my vocabulary. I really should get the bills paid. I really should punish all those who defy me. I really should branch out ..."

The list spills on and on in an endless litany. But as these obsessive incantations pile up, we come increasingly to recognize the absurdity of all that striving. The piece backfires with a bang. Listening, you realize: I really should stop thinking about all these things I should be doing. I really should accept myself the way I am.

I really should.

Kelly Mark: Stupid Heaven continues at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery (Hart House) at the University of Toronto's St. George campus until Oct. 28 and the Blackwood Gallery, Mississauga campus, until Oct. 21 (416-978-8398).