



JOE KELLEY

Ruth C. Horton Gallery
July 14–August 24, 2016

August 4, 2016, 6-8 PM
Reception and Artist Talk

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JOE KELLEY

A longtime resident of Blacksburg, Joe Kelley has developed a unique aesthetic sensibility, melding an enduring interest and immersion in the folk culture of Southwest Virginia with his knowledge of and experience with contemporary art and artists.

A 1993 graduate of Virginia Tech's School of Architecture, Kelley has minimal formal art training but has nonetheless forged an inventive artistic path both in painting and in sculpture. A key influence in his development as an artist was his association with the prominent, nationally recognized artist, Ray Kass, with whom Kelley worked for 10 years and who introduced him to a wide range of artists, museums, and galleries. In addition to this foundation, Kelley's sources of inspiration are eclectic. They include folk art, in particular the work of James Harold Jennings and Howard Finster, as well as African fetish sculptures, spiritual traditions of the Far East, and the bricolage tradition that goes back over 100 years, yet regularly resurfaces as a vital current in contemporary art.

PIANO HAINTS (1993-2016)

In southern Appalachian lore haints are spirits, malevolent and sometimes mischievous, but also benign. They represent restless spirits of the dead trapped between this world and what may be beyond. The word is actually a slang term for ghosts, likely to have arisen as a result of the word "haunt" being pronounced "haint." In Appalachian legend haints are also guardian spirits with the ability to ward off evil. In 2001 Kelley began creating what would become an ongoing series of sculptures titled *Piano Haints*, assemblages made with carved wood and abandoned, weathered, and ruined parts from a turn-of-the-century piano found on the roadside. Struck by the craftsmanship of these antique, broken piano pieces; the fact that they were handmade and signed; and how, even as ruined objects, they were quite beautiful, Kelley made them central components of his sculptural forms. In many of these works, *Blue Guardian* (2013) for example, piano keys become hands or feet, and the sculpture's eyes are actual sockets from the piano's underside where the legs join the piano's main body.

Kelley's first sculptures were initially made in homage to two musicians from the 1950s, Noah and Charles Kinney of Lewis County, Kentucky, brothers who were also folk artists. Originally intended as part of a larger narrative, the sculptures were conceived of as puppets that would dance to music and act out ghost stories or as subjects for a video that might be eventually made. Instead they evolved into individual works of art, works that demonstrate an ingrained respect for craft, the handmade, and the music and cultural traditions of the region.



◀ *Self Portrait with Little Dog*, 2013
Carved wood, milk paint, and assembled piano parts
43 x 12 x 3 1/2 inches on base of 6 x 16 x 12 inches

Blue Guardian, 2013 ▶
28 x 35 x 24 inches
Carved wood, milk paint, and assembled piano parts
Photo by Avery Eliades





Alternately totemic and at times quirky, Kelley's sculptures also reference African masks and fetish sculptures—objects imbued with magical or spiritual powers often used to ward away evil spirits. Other references in the work, most notably in *Eyeball Monster* (2013), are images that suggest the Third Eye, a symbol in Eastern spiritual traditions that signifies the portal leading to inner realms of higher consciousness. Made with cast-off materials but infused with this eclectic brew of legend, mysticism, and local lore, Kelley's *Piano Haints* seem almost like woodland spirits or talismans—though immediately likeable, funky, and endearing.

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE UNDESCRIBED BIRDS (1993-2016)

Like his sculptures, Kelley's paintings demonstrate the artist's talent in transforming humble materials into works of art that resonate with an immediate and endearing impact. A multi-part panel installation mounted on the wall, *The Natural History of the Undescribed Birds* (1993-2016) consists of hundreds of intimately scaled paintings of imaginary birds that the artist has consistently created throughout the last 23 years. While varied in size, many of these are painted on four-by-four-inch scraps of plywood or MDF salvaged from cabinet shops and construction sites. Seemingly simple and intuitively rendered, these works reveal the artist's exploration of the infinitely variable possibilities of color within a consistent compositional format, while simultaneously

capturing an uncanny sense of emotion and character. Each panel, whether rendered with translucent washes or glistening with richly colored pigment, portrays a distinct sensibility—whether sad, pensive, joyous, dulled, or befuddled. While creating these works involves concentration and movement, this process becomes, for the artist, an almost spontaneous exercise, one that Kelley nonetheless often reworks later and even revisits over the years. It's an exercise that revels not only in the evocative power of color and what line and gesture can convey, but the artist's ability to imbue sentience and meaning into simple but symbolically potent imagery. Birds are beautiful, wondrous creatures, which throughout world cultures hold mystical, sacred, or spiritual significance. They represent ascendance, conduits or messengers between the earth and the heavens, between the terrestrial and celestial. While a depth of meaning can be attributed to Kelley's birds, that is not necessarily his intent, and he leaves them wide open for interpretation. That said, there is poignancy and strength in the authentic, genuine simplicity of these works, in how they become anthropomorphic and suggest a remarkable kaleidoscope of human emotion and experience. In one respect it could be assumed that all of Kelley's work, both the paintings and sculptures, are self-portraits that capture over time the artist's interior states of mind. There is a metaphoric depth of meaning in the work, but like that of many artists, Kelley's art comes out of the recesses of a subconscious, intuitive, and sometimes instinctual place, one that often cannot be, or even should be articulated. When queried about what his work means, Kelley responded in his typically disarming fashion, "I don't know; I just like making them." This genuine, unpretentious sensibility carries over into Kelley's art, lending sincerity and appeal to what is an accomplished and delightful body of work.



Margo Ann Crutchfield

Curator at Large

At top: ▲
Red Guardian, 2013
 Carved wood, milk paint, and
 assembled piano parts
 28 x 35 x 24 inches
 Photo by Sarah Tyler Miller

Selection of ►
The Natural History of the Undescribed Birds,
 1993-2016

Acrylic on wood blocks
 Dimensions variable, 2 x 2 inches to 12 x 12 inches



▼ Joe Kelly with *Self Portrait with Little Dog*, 2013
Carved wood, milk paint, and assembled piano parts
Over dimensions 48 x 16 x 12 inches
Photo by Sarah Tyler Miller



About the Artist

Joe Kelley was born in 1967 in Fairfax, Virginia, and he lives and works in Blacksburg, Virginia. He received a bachelor's degree in architecture from Virginia Tech in 1993 and attended archeological field school in 1993.

Kelley's one-person exhibitions include Virginia Western Community College in Roanoke, Virginia (2016); the Alexander Black House in Blacksburg, Virginia (2015); the Community High School Gallery in Roanoke, Virginia (2013); the Roanoke Library in Roanoke, Virginia (2008); Patrick Henry Community College in Martinsville, Virginia (2005); the Jacksonville Center in Floyd, Virginia (2004); In Tension Gallery in Blacksburg, Virginia (2002); XYZ Gallery in Blacksburg, Virginia (2000); and The Reynolds Homestead in Critz, VA (1998).

Kelley's selected group exhibitions include Roanoke College Biennial in Salem, Virginia (2015); Summer Art Show at Yellow Sulfur Springs in Montgomery County (2010); and the National Folk Festival in Richmond, Virginia (2005).

Over the span of his career Joe Kelley has actively participated in various Mountain Lake workshops and exhibitions, most notably *Fabricated troughs for Steps Performance* by Merce Cunningham Dance Company, New York City (2008); *Pathways* as part of Mountain Lake Workshop Retrospective Show at Montgomery Museum in Christiansburg, Virginia (2009); and *Steps and Breathing Lines: The Mountain Lake Workshop* at the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke, Virginia (2013).

Kelley also illustrated *Facts, Fancies, and Folklore about Snakes* by Hubert Davis in 1995.

ARTIST TALK: JOE KELLEY
August 4, 2016, 7 PM
Ruth C. Horton Gallery



Eyeball Monster, 2013 (detail); Carved wood, milk paint, and assembled piano parts; Approximately 26 ½ x 40 x 3 ½ inches on base of 6 x 16 x 12 inches.

Works in the exhibition

All works collection of the artist.

The Natural History of the Undescribed Birds, 1993-2016
Acrylic on wood blocks
Variable dimensions; 2 x 2 inches-12 x 12 inches

Bootsy, 2016
Carved wood, milk paint*, and assembled piano parts
32 x 12 x 6 inches

Bun Bun, 2016
Carved wood, milk paint, assembled piano parts
55 ½ x 6 x 3 ½ inches

The Goon, 2016
Carved wood, milk paint, assembled piano parts
34 x 18 x 3 ½ inches

Eye Box, 2016
Carved wood, milk paint, assembled piano parts
8 ½ x 8 ½ x 3 3/8 inches

Self Portrait with Little Dog, 2013
Carved wood, milk paint, and assembled piano parts
43 x 12 x 3 ½ inches on base of 6 x 16 x 12 inches

Big Ears, 2013
Carved wood, milk paint, and assembled piano parts
57 x 22 x 3 ½ inches

Eyeball Monster, 2013
Carved wood, milk paint, and
assembled piano parts
26 ½ x 40 x 3 ½ inches on base of 6
x 16 x 12 inches

Blue Guardian, 2013
Carved wood, milk pint, and
assembled piano parts
28 x 35 x 24 inches

Red Guardian, 2013
Carved wood, milk paint, and
assembled piano parts
28 x 35 x 24 inches

Sun Man Moon Man, 2004
Carved wood, milk paint, and
assembled piano parts
13 x 22 x 12 inches

2 Slat Towers, 2006-2007
72 x 24 x 24 inches each
Wood

*Milk paint is a traditional craft paint, characterized by its chalky texture and muted colors. Kelley buys it in powdered form and hand-mixes it.

On the cover:
Big Ears, 2013
Carved wood, milk paint, and assembled piano parts
57 x 22 x 3 ½ inches

Bootsy, 2016 ▶
Carved wood, milk paint, and assembled
piano parts
32 x 12 x 6 inches
Photo by Sarah Tyler Miller





Selection of *The Natural History of the Undescribed Birds*, 1993-2016 Acrylic on wood blocks Dimensions variable, 2 x 2 inches to 12 x12 inches

General Information

Admission to galleries and exhibition-related events is free.

Gallery Hours

Tuesday–Friday, 10 AM–6 PM
Saturday–Sunday, 10 AM–4 PM



For more information about exhibitions and events:

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June 2–August 7, 2016
Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery
and Sherwood Payne Quillen '71 Reception Gallery

Steven White: *100 Portraits*
June 30– August 14, 2016
Francis T. Eck Exhibition Corridor