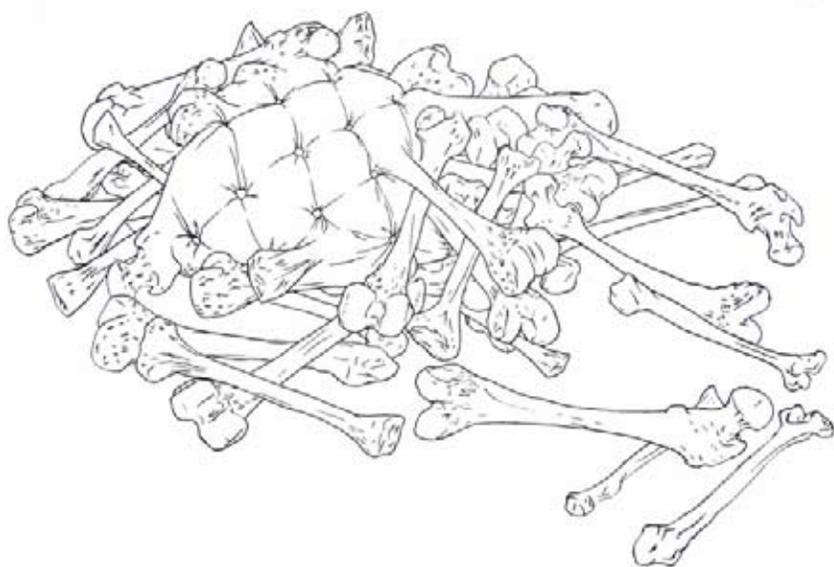


This essay accompanies the exhibition *And fastened to a dying animal* by Jean-Paul Kelly  
October 16 to November 15, 2008

**Gallery TPW** gallerytpw.ca

## It was a dark and stormy night...

by Jon Davies



The first thing you should know is that all the ghosts that appear in Jean-Paul Kelly's work look the same. They are all made of a bright white sheet with two black holes cut out for eyes, like what a poor kid would dress up in for Halloween. The effect isn't comical, exactly, it's actually a little bit unsettling. It's the uncanniness of seeing a cartoon stand in for the real: such a ridiculous and unsophisticated figure shouldn't be invested with so much anxiety and terror, but there he is. Of course, there are other ghosts as well: every older person is a kind of ghost of who they were when they were young, every dying plant or aging pet haunts us with a reminder of its glory days, every mistake we make leaves a stain that can't be washed away.

Kelly's exhibition "And fastened to a dying animal" brings together five single-channel videos on monitors

arranged into viewing stations around the gallery. The series finds its conclusion in a large-scale digital animation, while a number of mostly black ink-on-white drawings and, last but not least, a set of photographs, pick up some of the videos' narrative, thematic, and iconographic threads.

One of the most striking images in Kelly's show could be imagined as the grotesque innards of this crude ghost: it is a precisely rendered drawing of a pile of human bones — imagine a mass grave but with the skeletal remains scrubbed clean — some of which have fused into a piece of upholstery. The upholstery is very tactile, but hard to hold onto — its consistency is that of ectoplasm: the materialization of a psychic projection. The title of this drawing, in fact, is *The Spirit Is a Bone*, and it's easy to see a gleaming white bone as the brutally tangible but no less eerie counterpart to the ethereal white-sheet ghost.

As this piece might suggest, Kelly is interested in the use of metaphor to create narratives out of traumas, or simply out of the matters of day-to-day living that trouble us. He became interested in drawing upholstery through the Lacanian term “point de capiton” — its root is French for upholstery button. It is the “quilting point” where signified and signifier are knotted together, the caption that determines the meaning of an image, momentarily stabilizing it into something communicable and therefore comforting, like an overstuffed couch.

The title of Kelly’s exhibition is a line from William Butler Yeats’s poem *Sailing to Byzantium* — the “dying animal” is a metaphor for Yeats’s own aging body. Kelly’s video series *Good by Good Acts*, which forms the backbone of his exhibition, is a quintet of six-minute home videos starring the aging bodies of Kelly’s much beloved parents. They are contained inside their Northern Ontario home over the changing seasons with their cat Tuffy, their dachshund Bean, and a menagerie of plants. Kelly is there too, always behind the camera but in conversation with his parents and the living things they take care of, as they once took care of him.<sup>1</sup>

Their front yard is guarded by two rickety wood frames covered in the ghost’s white sheets and in burlap “skirts” that protect the seedlings beneath from heavy snowfall. They are “our babies,” mom claims. Dad, by contrast, calls one of these lovingly constructed but inelegant structures “a ghost,” but they look more like mummies to me. In the final act, which ends where act one began, with a shot of this typical suburban house from across the street, it is springtime and Kelly can’t resist peeking underneath the bandages to see the

young green flesh beneath (or is it skin that he’s peeling back, exposing a wound?).

In act two of *Good by Good Acts*, mom introduces us to the killing field that is her sunny indoor garden, where thousands of aphid corpses speckle every surface. Kelly films them in extreme close-up with a quivering intimacy. To protect life, mom must take it away. The plants will not survive if she does not squish the aphids even though, as she tells us, the females are born with babies already in their bellies (the males by contrast just “fly around and screw”). Then it’s time for pie and ice cream at the kitchen table.

The emotional climax of the series, act three is suffused with a near-unbearable pathos: Bean has had surgery, and flails about on the floor as mom and dad, each on bended knee, lift up his tail to help him walk, and apply Vaseline to the tip of his penis to stave off chafing. Like Kelly’s drawings of a cat and dog with their fur upholstered, *Cat (Mom)* and *Dog (Dad)*, stuck in suspended animation, Bean boasts stitching on his coat like a darned sock. Here, a live animal, when taken ill, slips uncomfortably into dead hide: the line between our world and the next is razor thin. Mom and dad’s cuddling and consoling is utterly heartbreaking, particularly when we catch a glimpse of a plastic bag stamped with the coldly bureaucratic phrase “PERSONAL BELONGINGS” that hints at the fact that Kelly’s father is not well, and has spent considerable time in the hospital in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Intimations of mortality seem to animate every mundane gesture in this cozy house as Kelly deepens our attention to the fragility of life, not to mention the tragicomic beauty of these two old people on the floor, trying to comfort their ailing pooch. Then there’s more pie and ice cream.<sup>3</sup>

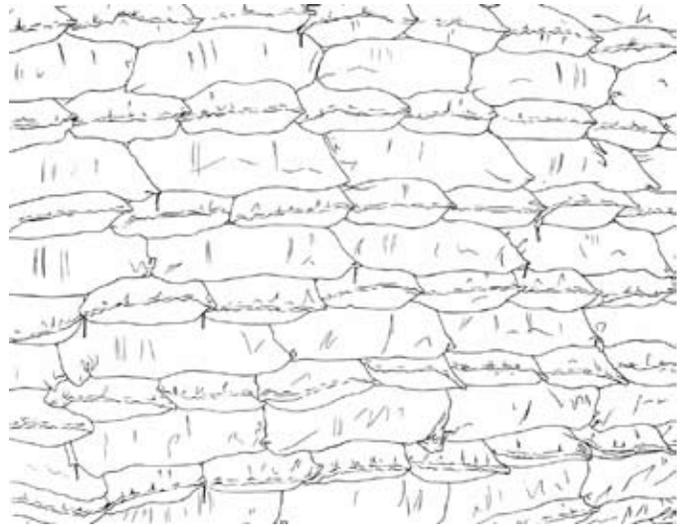


Jean-Paul Kelly, video still from *Good by Good Acts, Act I, 2008*



Jean-Paul Kelly, video still from *Good by Good Acts, Act V, 2008*

All the remaining work in the exhibition orbits around this suite of carefully orchestrated home videos. Kelly's accomplished drawings consist of a very precise — almost inhumanly precise — black line that traces out darkly comic or enigmatic scenes with great detail. (Kelly is the first to admit that his sense of control over his line is a screen for his neuroses). An example of Kelly's wry political acumen are his half-dozen pairs of drawings of sandbags, each titled after a natural or man-made disaster that plagued the globe during the years in which the *Good by Good Acts* videos were shot (late 2004-early 2007). Each diptych juxtaposes references to these world crises, triangulated with the experiences of he and his family at home in *Good by Good Acts*. The sandbag diptychs refer to events in different parts of the world: *Caledonia, Ontario, Canada, February 28, 2006 / Kandahar, Afghanistan, February 28, 2006*, for example, or *Banda Aceh, Indonesia, December 26, 2004 / Susan Sontag, New York City, U.S.A, December 28, 2004*. The death of one woman, Susan Sontag, stands alongside calamities of epic proportions, and why not? Written one year prior to her death, her 2003 *Regarding the Pain of Others* develops a rich and nuanced ethical vocabulary for understanding what happens when we look upon photographs of human suffering. The sandbags protect from harm but they shield us from everything else as well, including memory. Equally soothing are the endless, rote images of global strife that Sontag examines, and Kelly's cheap metaphor for tragedy handily satirizes our collective numbness. His diptychs erase the particular experience of each event, drawing attention to how the discourse of catastrophe dulls us to the pain felt by each individual subject of these traumas.<sup>4</sup> While striving to make them identical,



Jean-Paul Kelly, *Banda Aceh, Indonesia, December 26, 2004*, drawing, 2008

Kelly drew these walls of sandbags by hand, so the flaws and foibles of the artist's human body do manage to bring back traces of the embodied specificity of each life lost or endangered.<sup>5</sup>

While the sandbag drawings are claustrophobic, generic and frustrating, many of Kelly's other drawings achieve a state of transcendence through his use of expanses of empty space — voids — on his paper. According to Kelly, "each thing has its heaven" — a tree has fallen and squashed a lumberjack, but there's plenty of room for his ghost to float off into the atmosphere. Dad's little Chrysler has managed to emit a monumental plume of smoke that fills up the sprawling page to capacity. The car's dead (in *Chrysler [Dad]*), the house has been foreclosed (in *Dwelling* — its windows are boarded up like the ghost's vacant eyes), and the cat has stolen the canary (in *Of What Is Past, Passing and to Come*).



Jean-Paul Kelly, video stills from *Good by Good Acts, Act III*, 2008



Then there is the majestically funereal array of large-scale photographic portraits of the “sympathy plants,” often visible in *Good by Good Acts*, given to Kelly’s parents in 2005 (for undisclosed reasons) and documented in 2008 in their various states of health. The photographs’ intensely deep black backdrops stand in sharp contrast to Kelly’s stark white “heavens” and the white sheet — or is it a screen? — through which the ghost materializes in *When All Is Said and Done*, his fantastic coda to *Good by Good Acts*.

Clearly, Kelly’s work is haunted, and the artist uses the ghosts of men, houses, cars, plants and animals as metaphors for the uncanny return of the repressed. The very structure of the exhibition sees the familiar, familial home-video images in *Good by Good Acts* make their return in the uncanny and oblique form of Kelly’s petrified-looking drawings and photographs. In his 1992 study of surrealism, *Compulsive Beauty*, Hal Foster stated that one of the effects of the uncanny was “a usurpation of the referent by the sign or of physical reality by psychic reality” — an apt précis of Kelly’s practice, and one that reaches its zenith through the powers of digital animation, which is capable of fully superimposing a fictional world onto a real one.<sup>6</sup>

Kelly is interested in the redemptive power of animation: when he cites cartoons he is drawing on their capacity to completely unmoor representation from an indexical relationship to reality — anything is possible, including a state of grace for our sad, dejected species. The animated *When All Is Said and Done* was inspired by and borrows the orchestral score from a Casper the Friendly Ghost cartoon entitled *There’s Good Boos To-Night*. In that 1948 cartoon, Casper tries

to make friends with some local animals who invariably run off in terror at the sight of him — all except for a friendly and lovable fox, whom the ghost names Ferdie. All is well until an evil hunter and his hounds chase the cute animal to the point of terminal exhaustion. The fox dies, and an anguished Casper carries the adorable woodland creature’s limp body in his arms and solemnly buries him — then, suddenly, Ferdie returns from the dead as a ghost and the best friends reunite. This is the kind of ethos and atmosphere that inform *When All Is Said and Done*. The living can’t be gotten rid of that easily in the cartoon world, and a happy ending can be wrenched from the most tragic circumstances.

*Good by Good Acts* begins with a foreboding storm, and *When All Is Said and Done* returns to it — not just as a punctuation but as a kind of reimagining of the series. This time, the storm sparks off Kelly’s narrative of a ghost committing a pair of failed mercy killings. His ghost is not as friendly as Casper; he is terrified by the living. The ghost is fretful that the nearby dog and cat will be endangered by the approaching storm, so he has to save them — but how when he is paralyzed by fear of their beating hearts? He semi-successfully tries to shoot the dog and drown the cat, but, reanimated by a strike of lightning, they come back to haunt him — as living things are wont to do to the dead in Kelly’s brilliant, topsy-turvy cosmology. As the ghost flees back into the sheet hanging on the laundry line out of which he had emerged, the video loops and the story begins all over again. This haunted narrative suffers from — what else? — compulsive repetition.



Jean-Paul Kelly, video stills from *When All is Said and Done*, 2008



**1** It is as if mom and dad are burdened with an excess of love and nurturance to share; one can palpably sense the ghost of Kelly in the house, their long-moved-away child.

**2** Which reminds me of one of Kelly's most startling works: a series shown at Gallery TPW as part of Kelly's 2005 exhibition with Steve Reinke and Anne Walk (under the collective pseudonym the Fennel Plunger Corporation) Regarding the Pain of Susan Sontag (Notes on Camp). It consisted of six colour photographs of his mother and father cheekily posing in revealing hospital gowns as if shot for a naughty calendar (Mom & Dad series, 2005).

**3** Act four, meanwhile, catches the family ensconced at home, nestled in for the winter with Mom, Dad, Tuffy and Bean each in their rightful places in the living room.

**4** On the reams of "unforgettable" photographs of the dead and dying in Africa, Sontag writes "The ubiquity of those photographs, and those horrors, cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward – that is, poor – parts of the world" (71). She continues a few pages later, regarding the photos of Sebastião Salgado, "Making suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to feel they ought to 'care' more. It also invites them to feel that the suffering and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder – and make abstract" (79).

**5** It should be noted that Kelly sees drawings as a form of compositing: this is the editing process behind his hybrid live-action/digital animations, as they are cobbled together from Google image searches that complicate their connection to real-world scenes.

**6** Reading philosophy and theory extensively, and giving lofty ideas metaphorical form is central to Kelly's art practice. Three key references of late have inflected the haunted quality of Kelly's work. The first is Frank Kermode's 1967 book on narrative, temporality and apocalypse *The Sense of an Ending*, which suggested that the way that fantasies of apocalypse structure history as a narrative is a useful analogy for the flow of fictions: an end is always in sight in every story, and we fully expect to encounter a number of unexpected turns to eventually get us there. The second is film theorist Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second*, which discusses how digital viewing technologies have allowed us greater access to the single, still frame that is the building block of cinema, composed of 24 potential frozen (dead) moments each second. The third is Lev Manovich's indispensable *The Language of New Media*, the Bible – or, according to Sean Cubitt, Mao's *Little Red Book* – of dazzling digital media theory, which includes extensive reflections on compositing, a key element of Kelly's practice.

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Based in Toronto, Jean-Paul Kelly's work has been exhibited in galleries and festivals across North America, Japan, and Europe, including *Art-Action: Rencontres Internationales 2006* in Paris, Berlin, and Madrid. He is a member of the *Pleasure Dome* experimental film and video programming collective. Kelly has also worked as an instructor in the Visual Studies program at the University of Toronto and in the Integrated Media program at OCAD University.

## ABOUT THE WRITER

Jon Davies is a curator and writer based in Toronto. He holds an MA in film and video, critical and historical studies, from York University. He is currently the Assistant Curator of Public Programs at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery; the guest curator of the exhibition "People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell," which opens at the Oakville Galleries in December 2008 before touring Canada; a programming committee/board member of the artists' film and video exhibition collective *Pleasure Dome*; and a curatorial advisory committee/board member of Gallery TPW. His writing has been published in a wide variety of publications from *C Magazine* to *GLQ: The Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, as well as in a few anthologies.

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