

Beautiful, Ravaged Landscapes

BY LARISSA KIKOL

JON KESSLER

Portrait of JON KESSLER.
Photo by Rick Haylor.
Courtesy the artist.

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JON KESSLER, *Kessler's Circus*, 2009, multimedia installation, dimensions variable. Photo by Andrew Ohanesian. Courtesy the artist and the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin.

Jon Kessler's works are like the large digestive system of a crazy and tragic world. Wars, presidents, surveillance, mass-media floods, ideals of beauty, and death—these elements play into Kessler's cosmos of kinetic installations, where everything is turned around, flipped upside down, torn apart, and rebuilt. In the history of media art, too, there is no denying the influence of his works: screens, videos, photo collages, sculptures rattling with noise, devices that survive human error. And then there are the spatial installations that lie somewhere between truth and media output, whose sensory overload can make you dizzy.

Kessler became well-known for his diverse visual language. Today, he works on smaller sculptures in which animals live (even deer "sleep" in his works). Many of his sculptures are made of porcelain, partially glazed, a kind of biotope of abstract, inorganic plants. But these are far from idyllic (it simply wouldn't be Kessler if they were). Surrealism runs through his entire body of work, not necessarily as a common thread or stylistic device, but rather as the digestive juice that keeps everything moving. Whether it is in his large-scale political machines from the early 2000s or his current natural objects, they all write stories of our time and show the world as we process it in our dreams, or in our nightmares.

Jon Kessler, how did you come to art?

My dad had a workshop in the basement of our house and I would go down there and invent machines; my mom had a crafts project nearby. My parents recognized that I had talent, and they nurtured it and gave me art lessons at a local museum in Yonkers. I grew up close to New York City, and my grandparents would bring me to museums. In the end, art was just the only thing I was good at besides playing music. I wasn't very good at sports or academics. I always gravitated toward making things with my hands.

The circus is a well-used conceit in art history. One of the most famous examples is from Alexander Calder who, in the 1920s, built miniature figures from wire, traveling to various performances with his suitcases. Calder's circus played a special role for him, functioning as a laboratory and experimental field for his artistic work. You once called an installation of yours *Kessler's Circus* (2009). But the content is contradictory. Your work is about war—there are machines, figures of soldiers, and surveillance cameras. What do you think a circus critic might say about your circus?

I am using the term "circus" rather loosely here. In English there is an expression: to call something a circus means that it's frighteningly disorganized. A "shit show," so to speak. I'm implicating the American military-industrial complex in this piece, so the title seemed apt. Calder played with his circus and performed it for his friends. There was a sense of intimacy there. For me, the intimacy is with the GI Joe army action figures that I played with as a kid; that play is still at the root of my work. And then there is the circus tent association. I placed my installation under an enormous surplus army tent.

In the installation *The Blue Period* (2007/11), a star-like face-mobile moves, and there are large displays of people, screens, and abstract blue paintings all around it. How do painting and new media fit together here? And don't the faces suddenly become abstract signs and the paintings concrete blue traces?

The Blue Period installation has a rather simple premise. It is meant to be a physical manifestation of Guy Debord's 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*, in which he stated that modern media would alienate and isolate societies. My installation tries to do that by creating a *mise en abyme* for the viewer, as well as a loss of the real. The machine that you mention with all the faces simulates a large crowd scene in the monitors. Ultimately, their images mix with live and recorded footage to create an uncanny space of there/not there.

What irritations, feelings, and messages was the viewer exposed to in *The Palace at 4 A.M.* (2005)?

The Palace at 4 A.M. was my [version of] *Apocalypse Now* [Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 war film]—a work of art trying to come to

JON KESSLER, *The Blue Period*, 2007/11, multimedia installation, dimensions variable. Photo by Borje Mueller. Courtesy the artist.



terms with the insanity of war. Evoking the events of 9/11, the war in Iraq, and Hurricane Katrina with 60 mechanisms, hundreds of monitors, and six miles of cabling, this was my first video sculpture installation. It was bought by the late Harald Falckenberg and is permanently installed at his museum in Hamburg. This was the beginning of implicating the viewer as voyeurs and exhibitionists.

Let's talk about your working method. Kinetic art, screens, overcrowding, walk-in installations, chaos, cameras, puppets, mass media, political press—how would you explain your language or your working grammar?

There's no question that I want the viewer to be overwhelmed by my installations. But I also don't want to scare them away. Most often they will take the time to understand the systems and messages.

How do you plan these installations, how does it start, and when do you know it's finished for you?

My method of creating an installation is quite rhizomatic. I start with a broad theme and a few ideas, and just rely on my imagination and experience to bring the rest. It's always hard to get started but working generates ideas. Typically, because I build the large pieces in parts, I don't know what they're going to look like until they're installed so that's always exhilarating.

Art that is loaded with political content has very special criteria: it wants to communicate. What are your demands?

The most politically charged work that I ever made was *The Palace at 4 A.M.* I was so angry watching the [George W.] Bush administration make all the wrong moves following the 9/11 attack, and things have only gotten more confusing since. Now I feel like I'm watching a train wreck in slow motion as our country has re-elected Trump. The work is still political, just not so overtly.

You have taught at Columbia University for a long time and have passed on your knowledge to students. Is there anything you have learned from your students, or have they influenced you?

This is my 31st year at Columbia. I would retire now that I'm 67, except that I still enjoy it. It's an inspiration to see my students flourish and grow as artists. I also feel blessed to have such a large vibrant community of former students out in the world, many of whom live here in New York.

Your more recent works show certain changes. Your kinetic sculptures, for example, such as *The Petrified Forest* (2023), *Lagoon*, and *The Gate* (both 2024) are made of porcelain and wire, and animals play a major role. There are roaring polar bears, donkeys, deer walking on broken tablets, birds, and owls hanging upside down. What world are these animals in?

During the first Trump presidency I found it impossible to continue to make the political and somewhat assaultive video installations that I was known for. Instead, my studio became a haven from the hatred and toxicity that battered the country during that time. I began a series of intimate sculptures that used scraps from the bronze casting process in combination with stainless steel, ceramics, and porcelain figurines. As the work developed, it began to express the fragility and precariousness of our little planet, and when the pandemic hit that sense of vulnerability in the work only became more pronounced. The animals are living in a world that is post-event. Ravaged landscapes that are beautiful but toxic.

“The animals are living in a world that is post-event. Ravaged landscapes that are beautiful but toxic.”

Detail of JON KESSLER's *The Petrified Forest*, 2024, bronze, copper, glazed stoneware, selfie light, and porcelain figurine, 63×33×79 cm. Photo by Genevieve Hanson. Courtesy the artist.



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This change in your work is interesting, especially at the point in time that it took place. Now I can understand your retreat into the studio. Your newer works are worlds of their own. For a time, you cut off the connections to the outside world (previously through the monitors, films, photos, and other mass-media materials). Are your works more autonomous now?

The transition from making large installations to individual sculptures (and, I would add, quite traditional, pedestal sculptures) has been an interesting challenge. The world I’m creating is more focused than ever before, more consistent throughout each piece. So yes, I would say that they are autonomous, each tells a unique story but together they form a consistent vision.

We see references to nature in the form of nests, shells, and plant-like structures. But is it really still nature? Or is it transformed futurism or, on the contrary, traces of times gone by?

More traces of times gone by. I called the new series *Petrified* (2024-), so time slowing down is a big part of the feeling I want the viewers to have.

The porcelain animals in your works are representations for people and their emotional world. Perhaps that’s what you meant by the term “kitsch.” Jeff Koons, who also works with such figures, was concerned with curiosity in everyday life—the playful, the childlike, but also the readymades found in kitsch pop. Why did you choose these animals?

I did a deep dive into researching German porcelain, and in the end I settled on Hutschenreuther and Rosenthal figurines, which I buy on eBay. To me they are the most expressive and empathetic. They are cute, but not Disneyesque, and they are beautifully sculpted and glazed.

Jeff [Koons] and I rose in the art world together, although he rose a lot higher! Both of us were invested in taking found objects, some of them kitsch objects, and giving them new narratives.

Surveillance cameras are also still present. Do they point to people who don’t appear directly in your sculptures?

The surveillance cameras are a vestige of the work that came just before. A transitional bridge, so to speak. Now the cameras are porcelain casts—the technology no longer works. They are relics of a time when things functioned.

It’s still difficult for me to say whether these sculptures are more about life or about transience. There is something romantic about them, but also somber. On the other hand, some of the animal placements also make me smile. The movements hypnotize and can contemplatively reconcile or evoke eeriness. So let’s talk about feelings—what is the emotional world here?

I’m making landscape sculptures, which is an overlooked and neglected art form. They are romantic in some ways, but also tragic. They address kitsch but also the sublime. I’m looking at a lot of the Caspar David Friedrich paintings where small figures are set in a large burnt or barren landscape with traces of ruined buildings.

Bringing kitsch and sublimity together is extremely exciting. It’s also rare. Beauty actually mixes more easily with kitsch and decoration. In your works, is the kitsch broken by something sinister or does the retreat into kitsch outweigh their destroyed nature?

What separated me from the artists of my generation like Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach was that I always transformed the found object. And I’m still doing that, I don’t just present the kitsch objects. I manipulate them so they fit more seamlessly into my narratives. Therefore, I would say the kitsch is more complex because of the sinister tone of the work.

These works can be categorized as surrealist sculptures. In general, we are living in a time in which there is a great new surrealist art practice, whether in painting, film, digital art, or sculpture. Why do you think surrealism is currently so successful?

That’s such a great question, but I don’t really have an answer. It could be that we’ve given up trying to understand the world and humanity, and all that’s left for artists is to put things back together in an even more fucked up way that makes sense to us.

Do you see sad moments in your sculptures and in the worlds you create? Isn’t sadness actually an underestimated feeling that is perhaps too quickly overshadowed by anger?

I think the work is more nostalgic than sad: a longing for something that is lost. That said, I also think the new work suggests a hopeful new beginning after the storm.

Jon Kessler (b. 1957, Yonkers, New York) is best known for his chaotic kinetic installations that critique image-obsession and surveillance. In recent years he has shifted toward more intimate and mournful evocations of ecological fragility. Kessler earned a BFA from the State University of New York at Purchase and participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program. His awards include a Creative Capital Artist Grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He shows internationally, and has had solo exhibitions at galleries and institutions such as Luhring Augustine, New York; the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; the Drawing Center, New York; and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk. His works are held by some 30 international museums, including MoMA and the Whitney and Brooklyn museums in New York; the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

Larissa Kikol is a German art historian who writes for publications such as *Kunstforum International* as well as museums and galleries. In 2016 she won first place for art criticism in a competition organized by the C/O Amerika Haus Berlin. Kikol completed a doctorate in art history at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design and previously studied at the Weissensee Academy of Art Berlin. She lives in Marseille and Berlin.

JON KESSLER, *The Gate*,
2024, stainless steel, bronze,
brass, copper, cast iron,
glazed stoneware, Picasso
replica, and porcelain
figurines, 86 × 61 × 129 cm.
Photo by Genevieve Hanson.
Courtesy the artist.

