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A Conversation with

Keith Edmier



Storytelling As Life Cycle

BY JADE DELLINGER

Opposite: *The Pink Orchid* c. 1875–90 (Blc.
Laura Bush 'First Lady' AM/AOS, 2015.
Dental acrylic and acrylic paint on Ten-
nessee marble base, 15 x 11.5 x 8 in.

Above: *The Kelly Bag (Salmacis)*, 2015.
Glass, dental acrylic, polyurethane,
acrylic paint, and silk on limestone base,
11.5 x 19 x 12 in.

Born on the South Side of Chicago in 1967, Keith Edmier grew up in the suburb of Tinley Park, Illinois. At the age of 17, he moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in the film industry creating make-up special effects. He briefly attended the California Institute of the Arts/CalArts, then moved to New York in 1991 to commit himself to making art full time. Eroticism, mortality, and autobiography (often overlapping with pop culture) form his core interests and have remained central themes for more than 25 years. Edmier has shown extensively around the world, including solo exhibitions at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum in Tampa, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Andy Warhol Museum and major surveys at the CCS Bard-Hessel Museum of Art in New York and the Frans Hals Museum/De Hallen Haarlem in the Netherlands. He is currently collaborating with curators at the Walker Art Center to organize an exhibition around his *Bremontowne* project; he will also present “Keith Edmier: The Year Without Summer” at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida Southwestern State College this fall.



Above: *Bremmentowne*, 2008. View of installation at Friedrich Petzel Gallery. Left: *Bremmentowne*, 2008. View of installation at CCS Bard.



Jade Dellinger: With a museum retrospective not long ago in the Netherlands, your first in Europe, and a major commission for the “Empire State” exhibition at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, which became the central component in your recent Friedrich Petzel Gallery show, you have been alternating between new production and reflection on past projects. What have you learned in the process, and have these recent endeavors had any impact on how you perceive or approach your work?

Keith Edmier: I have become increasingly attentive to architecture in the last few years, probably starting with *Bremmentowne*, which is a faithful re-creation of the interior of my childhood home that I made for an exhibition at the CCS Bard-Hessel Museum of Art. As a result, the specific places and spaces where my work gets shown have become more

and more important. Site visits seem almost essential to me now because they often provide a stimulus and source material for developing ideas. I think it is ultimately still about some of the same core issues and themes, but I find myself less and less interested in making works of art for the white cube—even if the final product eventually ends up being shown in the context of a traditional gallery. My early work was always attempting to transform a highly personal narrative into something that could be universally (or at least generationally) understood, but I’m approaching large-scale projects these days from almost the opposite direction. I have also found that I tend to do a lot more preparatory research when the subject matter is less tied to my own story or life experience.

JD: Was it difficult to make such autobiographical art?

KE: As is the case for many artists, there was a time soon after I moved to New York in the early ’90s when I struggled to

Piano Leg IV (Brandy), 1992–93. Rigid urethane and polyurethane enamel, 24 x 15.5 x 4.5 in.

develop a cohesive body of work. That was a period of intense self-reflection, which was clearly evident in the objects I produced; but personal history has been (and continues to be) a basic thread throughout my work. The brief time I studied with Mike Kelley was critical to my development, but the full-scale “Piano” and “Piano Legs” series (made a year or so after arriving on the East Coast) were probably the first mature works I made.

JD: *What was the significance of the “Piano Legs” series?*

KE: *Piano Legs I–III* (1992) is a sculpture inspired by a story that my parents would often recount of a memorable event from my childhood. My father, a musician and piano teacher, gave me a toy baby grand piano as a Christmas present when I was about three years old. Instead of playing the piano, I broke the legs off. According to my parents, I then inserted the plastic legs into the box that the toy piano came in, turning it into my own imaginative version of a “rocketship.” To his credit, my father, instead of being upset by this, viewed it as a highly creative act—likening it to Picasso making a sculpture of a bull using a bicycle seat and handlebars—and praised me for my artistic instinct.

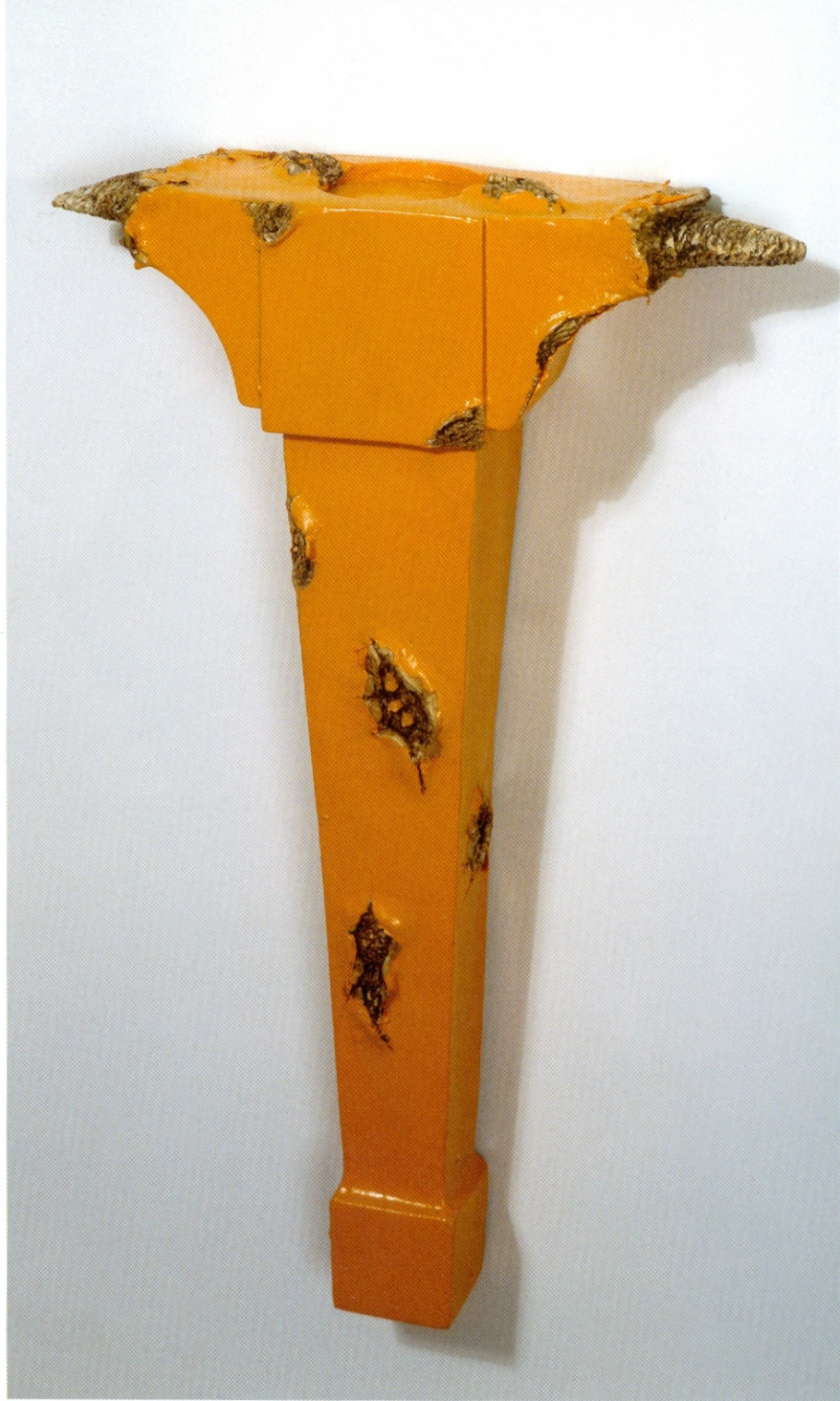
JD: *Why were the surfaces altered by teeth marks?*

KE: I was collecting artifacts from my childhood for possible use in my work. My mother had saved my baby teeth and sent me the box. I decided to cast them in the form of a denture using dental acrylic to resemble my adult palate. I was already familiar with dental acrylic since I had worked at a dental lab in high school, and I have returned to it many times. I also made a contemporary cast (impression) of my own teeth as a reference. It all sat around my studio for some time.

JD: *Is this when you became interested in using your teeth as a tool for sculpting?*

KE: Yes, and I made a conceptual link between my “baby teeth” and the idea of a “baby grand piano.” As with the reconstruction of my dental palate, I substituted the “toy” baby grand piano for a “real” baby grand piano as a metaphor for the transition into adulthood. Casts were made of full-scale disassembled piano legs in clay, and I began digging into them with my baby teeth denture/tool—making marks resembling what a teething baby or a puppy might do to a piece of furniture. One had an exaggerated, cartoonish appearance, while *Piano Leg III* ended up looking like a prehistoric pickaxe or crossbow-like weapon. The clay models were then cast in polyurethane and hand-painted.

JD: *There is an unsettling familiarity about the color you chose for these objects. You used periwinkle blue in other early works and in later collaborations with Farrah Fawcett. What interested you about the yellow-orange color?*



KE: Just as I associated periwinkle with adolescence and feminine sexuality, that particular golden-yellow shade was a memory color from elementary and pre-school. It was the color of school buses, Crayola boxes, Kodak film, and National Geographic. It was used for road signs (cautions and warnings), but it also gave the “Piano Legs” the look of a pencil—a No. 2 pencil that had been nervously, habitually chewed. *Piano Legs I* and *II* were hung on the wall vertically, while *III* lay on the ground horizontally. It was a play on the vertical/horizontal sculptural dialectic, and a metaphor for life and death—central themes even today.

JD: *Of course, teeth represent our first experience of the body’s diminution through loss. The Surrealists, including Dalí and Buñuel, materially connected them to the ivory keys of an anthropomorphic piano. Some of your early sculptures were influenced by Miró. When were you first exposed to their work?*



Beverly Edmier, 1967, 1998. Cast urethane resin, cast acrylic resin, silicone, acrylic paint, silk, wool, and Lycra fabric, cast silver buttons, and nylon tights, 50.75 x 31.5 x 22.5 in.

casting and fabrication projects for Vito Acconci, Jeff Koons, Ashley Bickerton, Laurie Simmons, Robert Gober, and others. My special effects portfolio landed me lots of small jobs long before I had a proper art résumé or exhibition history. For several years, I also shared a studio with Michael Joaquin Grey and Matthew Barney, and that led to many formative exchanges.

JD: *Over the last two decades, you have enticed pop icons like the legendary motorcycle daredevil Evel Knievel and the “Charlie’s Angels” actress Farrah Fawcett to collaborate with you on elaborate sculptures and exhibitions. You have created bronze and granite memorials to your deceased grandfathers and transformed your pregnant mother with a transparent belly and fetus visibly in utero (presumably a prenatal self-portrait) into a cast pink/red resin representation of the mourning Jacqueline Kennedy immediately following the assassination of J.F.K. (Beverly Edmier, 1967). How do you view the relationship between these figurative works and the botanical works that you have made and shown concurrently?*

KE: They are inseparable. I have been incorporating plant forms into my work since about 1995. I was looking for a way to connect human experience and realities with the natural world. I was interested in working with actual plants and began to cast living botanical forms in an effort to freeze time—to provide permanence to the impermanent and ephemeral. Molding giant Amazonian water lilies, rare species of orchids, ancient cycads, and Double Fantasy hybrid freesia became a way of storytelling for me: their life cycles, behaviors, histories, and mythologies provided a means to comment on my own experience, to reference art history and pop culture. For my exhibition at the Frans Hals Museum/De Hallen Haarlem, I presented some new works inspired by the Vleeshal’s Renaissance architecture and the 17th-century phenomenon of tulip mania. One need only look back at the Dutch tulip bubble of

KE: I have strong memories of family visits to the Art Institute of Chicago. My early “Flicka” sculptures were adaptations of Miró’s *Oiseau solaire* (*Solar Bird*), but I was also well aware of this connection to Surrealist painting and cinema when I began work in the ‘80s as a make-up special effects artist in Hollywood. Legendary effects artist Dick Smith was a mentor to me as a teenager and helped me to land my first job working for Rick Baker on Michael Jackson’s *Captain Eo*, which was made for Disney and directed by Francis Ford Coppola. I then worked for Chris Walas on David Cronenberg’s version of *The Fly*, which won an Academy Award for best make-up in 1986. I supervised effects for films like *Bride of Re-Animator* and Joel and Ethan Coen’s *Barton Fink*, and worked on the television series “Freddy’s Nightmares.”

JD: *How did your experiences in the movie business influence you as an artist?*

KE: I developed an unusual skill set and understanding of synthetic/non-traditional materials that has continued to inform my work, and that also helped me to sustain myself financially in making the move to New York. There is a long tradition of young artists apprenticing or acting as studio assistants, but I did more than my fair share of consulting on

Fireweed, 2002–03. Vinyl, co-polyester, vinyl mono-filament, dental acrylic, paper, oil and acrylic paint, and volcanic ash over steel armature, 2 elements, 72 x 15 in. each.

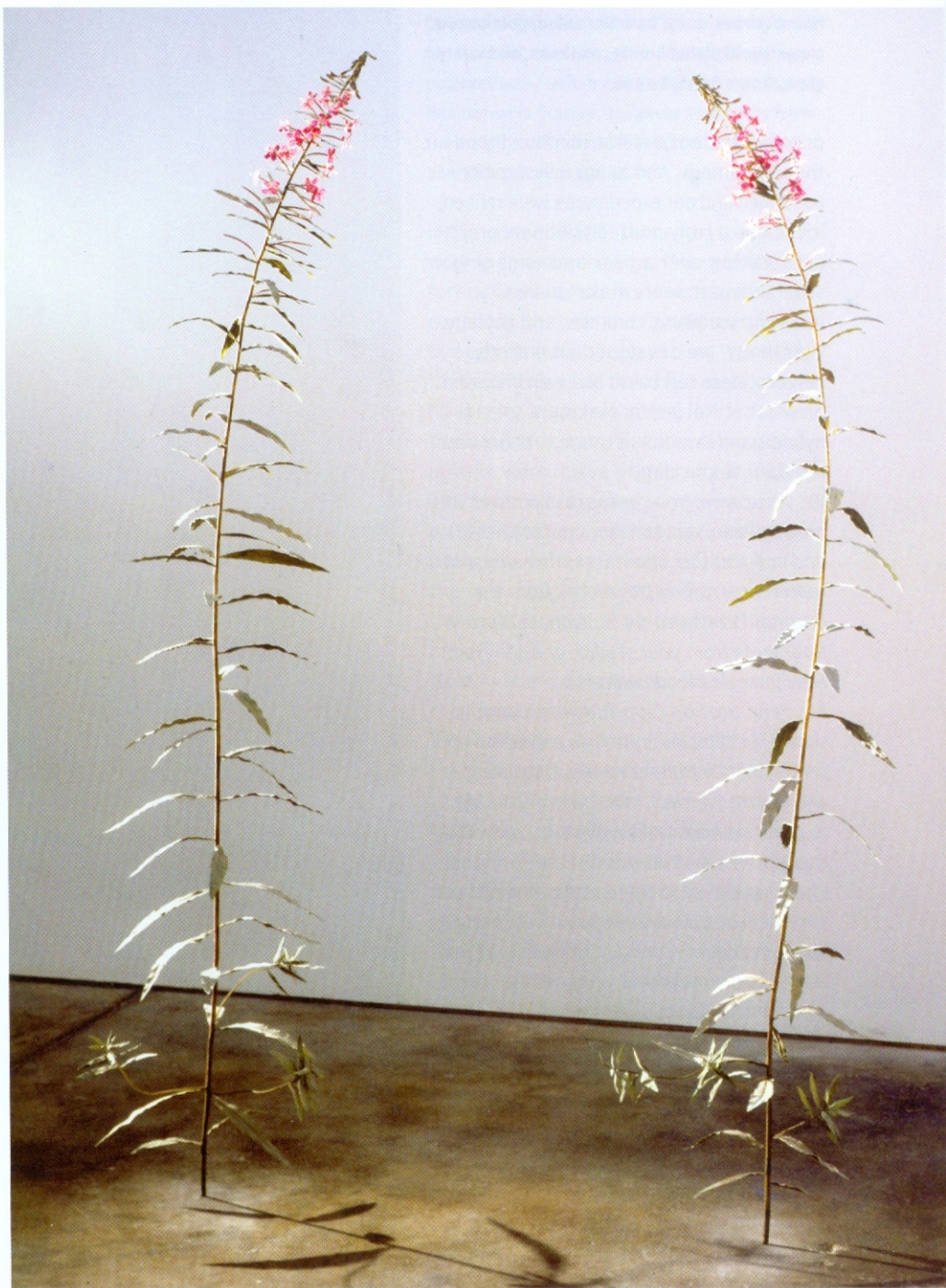
1637 to grasp what has been happening with the U.S. stock market and recent real estate speculation.

JD: *Your early work was often characterized by a use of unconventional and synthetic materials like polyester resin, polyvinyl, Crayola crayons, and whatever makes up those waxy plastic pellets that are melted down in coin-operated Mold-a-Rama machines to cast souvenirs. What inspired you to begin working with basalt?*

KE: Allan McCollum shared a story with me about a Hawaiian public television program he had seen that featured artists making sculpture by shoveling molten lava from a surface flow into plaster molds. It all seemed too good to be true. I started thinking about using volcanic materials—ash and molten rock from the earth's core. I just couldn't resist, so I made trips to Hawaii, the Pacific Northwest, and eventually to Iceland to study the material first hand. The utter devastation, the dramatic resulting landscape, and the phenomenon of lava tree molds (formed when molten basalt engulfs and hardens around live, wet trees, which leave negative cavities) had a profound impact on me.

JD: *You photographed some of these lava tree molds on a visit to Washington state, and even managed to crawl through a lengthy basalt cavity lying partially buried along the ground.*

KE: Yes, and soon after that trip, I produced a sculptural edition with Graphicstudio at the University of South Florida (USF)—*Fireweed*, a plant form “dusted” with ash collected from the Mount St. Helens eruption of 1980. Initially, I had hoped to work with the molten material in its natural environment, but, though that was not impossible, I quickly learned that it would be very difficult and costly. To work with lava, you need to be near an active volcano, like Kilauea. The big challenge, however, was that lava was only flowing on federal property in a national park, and, therefore, it was (and is) illegal to remove it. I briefly considered trying to obtain government permission, but



imagined running into red tape and roadblocks. On top of the legal problems, there would be logistical and financial ones as well. Usually, molten lava comes to the surface in remote areas.

JD: *You would have needed a team of collaborators, with materials and equipment airlifted via helicopter.*

KE: Exactly, and in addition to all of these issues, the material itself was still a major problem. When lava cools in nature, it generally cracks, making it extremely fragile. In the meantime, I learned that basalt could be cast industrially.

JD: *What role did Graphicstudio play in this process?*

KE: With the help of Graphicstudio, I located some decorative floor tiles from the Czech Republic and started melting them down and studying them. We did a series of test

Hieros gamos, 2015. Cast aluminum, gold-plated copper, gold-plated bronze, platinum, and safety glass, 8.25 x 6.25 x 6.25 in.

pours of molten basalt at the foundry on the USF campus. And as our investigations continued and our experiments were refined, it became a truly multi-disciplinary project — taking over a year and engaging several departments at the university, including sculpture, ceramics, and geology. Eventually, we developed an entirely new process to cast basalt and even improved on Mother Nature by making a special hybrid super-lava that is much stronger and resistant to cracking.

JD: *What were your primary objectives in making Penn Station Ciborium (2012–13), and can you talk about its rather unusual materials — railing fragments from the original Pennsylvania Station, sculpture fragments from your studio, and soil from New Jersey's Meadowlands?*

KE: *Penn Station Ciborium* was commissioned for “Empire State,” an exhibition presented in Italy that featured artists living and working in New York. I was encouraged to create an ambitious new work. Early in the process, it struck me that even though I have now lived in Manhattan longer than anywhere else, I have made very little work about my decades-long relationship to this place. I did a preliminary site visit to the Palazzo delle Esposizioni and was immediately drawn to its rotunda space. I was reminded of the physical effect that I experienced entering the Pantheon for the first time in the 1980s. After months of follow-up research, I settled on creating a ciborium or baldachin — the four-column, square-roofed, canopy-like structure protecting the altar in large Catholic churches. My initial impulse was to mirror the dome of the rotunda in Rome, and then I started investigating Rafael Guastavino and the hundreds of vaulted tile arches and domes that he built in New York during the 20th century.

JD: *Isn't your primary studio very close to Penn Station?*

KE: Yes, I commute to and from my studio on West 36th Street, so I have gone through Penn Station almost daily since 1995.

JD: *Did Rafael Guastavino have a hand in designing it?*



KE: As I discovered, Guastavino was responsible for the dome over the central crossing in the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, the tile vaulting of the Oyster Bar in Grand Central Terminal, and the tile domes in the original Penn Station. Of course, the original Pennsylvania Station was demolished in 1963 and replaced by Madison Square Garden, with the present-day station and subway stop below street level.

JD: *Did the Grand Central Oyster Bar provide the impetus for the cast oyster shells attached at the base of the steel beams in Penn Station Ciborium?*

KE: I was interested in using a form of nature specific to New York that could represent and leave evidence of a birth-to-death life cycle on the architectural structure. Oysters



Left and detail: *Penn Station Ciborium*, 2012–13. Steel, wood, concrete, glass, epoxy, fiberglass, polyurethane, railing fragment from the original Pennsylvania Station, sculpture fragments from the artist's studio, and soil from the Meadowlands, 226.38 x 157.48 x 157.48 in.

intrigued me and felt connected to my past work in a number of ways: I've used shell forms, explored plants and animals that contain both male and female reproductive organs (technically making it possible for them to fertilize their own eggs), and have long been interested in life forms that predate human habitation. Of course, oysters were also a primary food source, an economic resource, and a natural water filtration system before we essentially killed them off with pollution at the beginning of the 20th century. Now, the New York oyster epitomizes the ruin of nature.

JD: *Why was it essential to include soil from the Meadowlands?*

KE: As I began delving more deeply into the research, I learned that much of the remains of the original Pennsylvania Station ended up in a landfill in the Meadowlands. At Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, one can see soil brought to Rome by St. Helena, which was said to have been from the site of Christ's crucifixion and presumably containing his blood. I was inspired by Bernini's baldachin at St. Peter's (which is decorated with the Barberini coat of arms and additional imagery that transforms into a putto and has been interpreted as a narrative about birth), but most of the architectural elements that form the primary structure of my sculpture are based on Penn Station as it once was.

So, if one can be persuaded to believe in relics, religious or otherwise, the soil from the Meadowlands and the x-shaped steel fragment of original Penn Station railing are meant to lend a certain authenticity and a reliquary-like sense of reverence to my efforts.

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