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ART REVIEW

'Martin Kersels: Heavyweight Champion'

A retrospective at the Santa Monica Museum of Art presents the artist's brand of performance sculpture, funny and intense.

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In the 1980s, Martin Kersels was a performance artist.

In the 1990s, he became a performance sculptor.

Kersels' sculptures don't look like robots, conventionally conceived by Hollywood and less predictably so in the scientific engineering lab. But in the final analysis, the products of this artist's studio often recall eccentric androids, which perform actions that make us wonder how programmed our own social brains might be -- that we're humanoids as much as humans. It's a sobering thought, which Kersels presents with sweetness and disarming wit.

The concise survey of Kersels' work since 1994 at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, "Martin Kersels: Heavyweight Champion," opens with a monumental sculpture of a bird's nest. "Dionysian Stage" is a massive tangle of twigs, nearly 10 feet tall and more than 13 feet in diameter. Enmeshed in its willow branches is a veritable laundry list of household stuff.

A very partial list includes a lamp, a typewriter, curtains, china, an ironing board, a grandmother's clock, a crib, decorative deer antlers, Christmas wrapping, articles of clothing, coat hangers, a captain's chair and assorted toys. This accumulated tonnage of homey material is threaded into the giant nest, lifted off the ground, set atop a tractor tire and motorized. "Dionysian Stage" rotates, an absurd merry-go-round of domestic happiness and horrible drudgery.

Dionysus, patron of the arts and the only Greek god with one mortal parent, had a dual nature. As befits the god of wine, he embodies a merger between ecstasy and rage. Kersels' performing sculpture identifies the ordinary American home as the contemporary locus of ancient, colossally conflicted feelings.

The most recent work, "Rickety," is a more typical performance stage. A sleek wooden platform with a stage set composed of scattered trees is lifted off the ground, built on top of a superstructure of domestic furniture. For the show's opening, the stage was outfitted with a rock 'n' roll drum set, electric guitar amplifiers and microphone stands.

A video nearby shows a past "Rickety" dance performance, sans musical equipment, with dancers snaking awkwardly through the cramped domestic spaces below, in between the bedroom dressers and underneath the kitchen table. Then they climb up on stage to reenact similarly discomfiting movements as a polished, seemingly abstract, aesthetically pleasing modern dance. The upper stage is a kind of heaven, the underworld-home a nominal hell, and each is yoked to the other.

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The exhibition, organized by the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., assembles 14 sculptures and videos and 19 large-format color and black-and-white photographs. The earliest sculpture is "MacArthur Park," an Audio-Animatronic assemblage made from a speaker, amplifier, CD-player and a strange, painted-wood form, all stacked on a living room side table.

The painted-wood form, wedged between the speaker and the amplifier, is a partial sphere from which chains of smaller spheres dangle. As the CD plays wobbly karaoke versions of late-1970s disco hits -- "I will survive!" -- the dangling spheres rise and fall on wires, tethered to a motor hidden beneath the table.

This wondrously weird construction is like a garage tinkerer's version of Robby the Robot, crude but cuddly techno-star of the 1956 science-fiction screen classic "Forbidden Planet" and progenitor of "Star Wars" celebrity R2-D2. ("Star Wars" was released in 1977, coinciding with the disco music playing on the sculpture's karaoke soundtrack.) The outer space story of "Forbidden Planet" is loosely based on Shakespeare's "The Tempest," and the Hollywood merger of Pop art trash and high art treasure is also a staple of Kersels' work.

As, indeed, it was the Bard of Avon's.

This seamless fusion of high and low also informs Kersels' photographs. The pictures of the artist and friends in various states of falling, whirling, stumbling, tossing, rolling and slipping find Buster Keaton looming in their slapstick ancestry. Kersels bridges the chasm again in a diptych commissioned for a 2000 show at the J. Paul Getty Museum, where -- clutching a life-size, carved-foam copy of the Getty kouros -- he launches himself into space, where inevitably he and the kouros will crash to the ground.

The famous kouros, which is either an ancient Greek sculpture of an idealized man or a modern forgery, assumes a provocative relationship with the L.A. sculptor. And in the retrospective, the kouros becomes a most peculiar pivot between Robby the Robot and the Dionysian stage.

Kersels' work is indebted to a number of other performance-minded sculptors, including Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden and Charles Ray, all of whom taught at UCLA. (Kersels received his master's there in 1995.)

In addition, Mike Kelley's influence is seen in a number of colorful felt banners, titled "Devotionals," whose imagery of an open bird cage or a highway intersection marks significant moments of doubt or passages in life. They derive from the post-Vatican II practice in many Catholic churches of making felt banners to proclaim articles of faith.

Kelley's career-long interest in the domestic horrors of American adolescence also hovers in the distant background of what is perhaps Kersels' masterpiece -- a 20-minute video titled "Pink Constellation" (2001). To make it, he had an entire teenage girl's bedroom built inside a rotating superstructure, with a video camera attached. When the room spins, the attached camera makes the space appear to be stationary. It's the kind of contraption MGM built in 1951 for "Royal Wedding" to create the illusion that Fred Astaire could dance up the walls and onto the ceiling of his room.

In Kersels' pink teenage version, the girl doing the dancing seems to be experiencing youthful fantasies of escape, or else she's indulging in private behaviors that Mom and Dad know nothing about. Later, when Kersels occupies the room, the furniture has been unbolted from the floor and walls. The illusion created by the turning room is that an unseen storm is blowing through the

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space, with the bed, dresser, desk, chair and everything else sliding around, chasing him up the walls and onto the ceiling, creating a most distressing shambles.

The work is at once funny and emotionally wrenching. As an image of familial stresses and strains -- and ultimate loss -- it's quietly intense.