

# SEAN KELLY

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## SAATCHI ONLINE

### Slater Bradley At Team Gallery, New York

Slater Bradley's *The Abandonments*, currently on view at Team Gallery in New York, represents a new level of technical skill—and storytelling chops—for the artist, a born filmmaker. The protagonist of all but one of the six "digital projections" is played by the artist's Doppelganger, a recurring "other" who is game for all of Bradley's collaborative suggestions. Like Bill + Ted having excellent adventures, with lyrical flair.

Although we're told that many of the central concepts in 31-year-old Slater Bradley's films are sparked by his own memories, autobiography is almost beside the point here. The artistry is in the poignant attempts to recreate those moments through the prism of one's current, possibly more jaded self. By substituting a (faintly more photogenic) actor/stand-in/double, Bradley is able to train his already masterful eye on his own journey. And the videos, which illuminate much more than the artist's still photography does, depict the moments in the life of the characters when small gestures travel far.

"Uncharted Settlements II" (2005) depicts The Doppelganger attending a Star Wars convention dressed as a white plastic-clad Stormtrooper. From his ominously slow descent on the escalator we follow the masked being through the strange world of Star Wars aficionados: some mime swordplay, others shop while riding electric wheelchairs.

Despite the fact that the protagonist is literally faceless, we sense his hesitation and psychological discomfort. Inside that helmet, his confusion teeters on despair. The collective face of the crowd takes little notice of one more grown-man-in-a-codpiece. But the Doppelganger/Stormtrooper is self-conscious anyway. He's hiding in plain sight, a non-fan having infiltrated this flock of obsessives. It's the actor's nightmare: he's in costume, but finds himself in a play being performed in a language he doesn't speak. At times the camera, in documenting The Doppelganger's every move, seems merciless. Occasionally it protects him like a bodyguard.

Our Stormtrooper does gradually acclimate, even relaxing enough to remove his helmet and pose for a picture with a man dressed as Chewbacca. "Uncharted Settlements II," like many of Bradley's works, is about posing—and anonymity. Self-discovery through impersonation. The bravery required to portray oneself.

In "Protector of the Kennel" (2004-2006), The Doppelganger plays a dog walker in downtown New York City. He starts off with a full-grown Weimaraner who is shown leading him around to a soundtrack of quirky German classical music and wah-wah trumpet sounds. Accumulating more and more dogs as the video progresses, the skills and patience of the dog walker are tested. In true Buster Keaton form, he forges ahead through the obstacle course around every corner. As a (perhaps inadvertent) send-up of William Wegman, the Weimaraner consistently remains Top Dog. In a lesser artist's hands this piece might have lapsed into children's television filler. But Bradley astonishingly manages to inject something resembling majesty into the canine capers. Much of the "business" clearly wasn't scripted; Bradley makes use of the moments he's given and pares the film down to the core of its spirit. The real comedy comes when the dog walker is forced to untangle six or seven leashes, as the viewers sit on corded headsets tethered to the gallery wall.

"Intermission" (2005) utilizes a haunting soundtrack of distant voices and children singing. The vintage style subtitles (lyrics from Michael Jackson's song "Childhood") are used in lieu of dialogue. A Michael Jackson-like character finds himself in a snowy Beckettian landscape. "I'm searching for that wonder from youth," we learn from the subtitles. His childhood has left him out in the cold. Voices in his head sing "ashes, ashes we all fall down" as he begins to gracefully climb a tree. It's a beautiful moment. At the top branch we instantly sense the reasons for his ascent: to escape his adult self, for better sightlines into the distant future, to grow taller. A subtitle begs, "Before you judge me try hard to love me" and the words repeat themselves as the letters weep off the screen. Finally, "End of Intermission."

In "My Conclusion/My Necessity," (2005) takes place in Pere LeChaise, the famous Paris cemetery. An older woman is applying lipstick to the lips of what must be her daughter, so that the girl can add her lip prints to Oscar Wilde's grave. This recent trend is apparently the latest in a long line of interaction with the Art Deco headstone, from the stolen willie to the grateful graffiti. (Interestingly, Jim Morrison's grave, the most visited in Pere La Chaise, is shown in the film to be barricaded. Even as recently as five or six years ago the gates weren't in place.)

It probably makes little difference to the young women who Oscar Wilde was; it's a safe bet that she has never read anything he has written. But if she could talk—and she can't, she's a character in a Slater Bradley video—the girl might say, "How cool. I'm gonna kiss it. Take my picture. Hurry." It may very well be her first kiss, and the rich irony in this small, elegant, illegal gesture is a typically evocative bit of Bradley's world. The girl points to her lip print, proudly singling it out for the camera.

The title of the show comes from one of the short videos in which an existentially challenged Willie Wonka dude is being followed by a rain cloud. Despite the dark comedy of the situation and the perfect computer-generated cloud, "The Abandonments" (2005-2006) in some ways has even more pathos than the other videos. The protagonist (played by The D.) comes prepared for his existence, and today's walk, with an umbrella. This simple image is sort of vast. The gentleman is resigned, as if the cloud has dogged him his whole life. But in top hat and tails, he is resilient, dignified even. "The Abandonments" depicts—to paraphrase Diane Arbus—the aristocracy achieved from having found one's test in life. The protagonist comes upon a port-o-potty, leans his umbrella against the green box and enters with a silent sigh. As he continues walking minutes later, it seems that he has left the umbrella behind. I begin to wonder if he has achieved a new level of bravery, or shed some sort of skin. But, no. The umbrella is there, clutched in his right hand, having reclaimed its place. He's walked a long way and is essentially in the spot where he started.

Playing in the rear gallery, "Dark Night Of The Soul" (2005-2006) is a centerpiece of the show. It is projected continuously on the wall, with the audio recording piped softly into the gallery. Here, the Doppelganger plays himself (playing Slater) this time dressed as an astronaut exploring The Museum of Natural History all alone. We witness the NASA gear weighing down his walk as the astronaut wanders from exhibit to exhibit. Through the fishbowl of the uniform's globe he wears a look of wonder. He is propelled to the next group of taxidermied animals in their educational panoramas, the realistic poses belying their deadness. At one point the traveler's breath fogs the helmet's shield, and briefly, we can't watch him watching the animals behind their glass.

Slater Bradley's video work is knowing rather than overly clever, and contemporary without being flashy. The soundtrack selections arguably play too large a part in evoking our responses. But the banal-seeming notions—snow, kisses, clouds—are consistently used to magical effect. Bradley's brand of stark sentimentalism is almost classical, and 19th century in its unabashed use of metaphor and memory. His looped little sonnets to the human condition are more emotionally sincere than anything you're likely to see this year.

Slater Bradley: The Abandoments  
Until 23 December  
Team Gallery (<http://www.teamgal.com/home.html>)  
83 Grand Street  
New York, NY 10013  
T: +1 212 279 9219