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## Martin Kersels

SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART

Standing six and a half feet tall and weighing around 350 pounds, Martin Kersels is a big guy. “I don’t fit in a lot of places, literally and figuratively,” he says in an interview published in the catalogue for his first midcareer retrospective, aptly subtitled “Heavyweight Champion.” The conspicuousness of his oversize person and the awkwardness of not fitting in are the generative conditions of his practice, as seen in the show’s thirty-three works, spanning 1994 to 2007. (Newer works were concurrently on view at ACME gallery.) Kersels employs a range of media, from sculpture and photography to video and performance, and has produced a body of work at once hefty and nimble, slapstick and subtle, confident and self-effacing.

Beginning his career in the mid-1980s as part of SHRIMPS—a Los Angeles-based performance collaborative committed, in part, to showing large men enacting small movements—Kersels has long used art as a forum for wrestling with the limitations and possibilities of the physical self. Existentially resonant, bodies fill and move through his work with melancholy, bluntness, and humor. Installed here in salon-style abundance over two adjacent walls, the artist’s early photographs capture him engaged in energetic and parodic actions: falling and tripping in public, as well as spinning, tossing, and being smacked by friends. The photographs speak of momentarily altered states: letting go, passing out, tripping, being drunk and dizzy. In the tradition of Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari, Bas Jan Ader, and others before him, Kersels deadpans unheroic actions, frequently

arresting and romanticizing the moment when the body loses control, succumbs to gravity, fails itself. A pathos-filled physical comedy emerges, starring the artist as lovable, blooper-prone klutz.

Kersels’s sculptures are often kinetic arrangements of objects that conjure his girth, mass, and rotundity. A fat doll-like figure made of painted wood balls lies on top of a large Fender speaker in *MacArthur Park*, 1996, its swollen limbs moving up and down to the sound of Kersels’s voice singing pop songs of love and loss. A large aluminum pot half full of water is wired to audio equipment in *Sputterer*, 1999, the Rabelaisian sound of the artist and his wife growling and blowing raspberries causing its contents to roil. Woven from willow branches, *Dionysian Stage*, 2004–2005, is an enormous spinning whirlwind of a nest—for a monster baby Kersels?—holding countless knickknacks and household items. The biggest sculpture, *Rickety*, 2007, which consists of piles of found wooden furniture stacked on top of one another, doubled as a stage for a dance performed twice during the exhibition’s run.

Kersels has developed an expanded notion of the body as an unwieldy burdensome mass of great weight; a compressed volume



Martin Kersels,  
*Dionysian Stage*,  
2004–2005, willow,  
aluminum, steel,  
tractor wheel, motor,  
household objects,  
9' 9" x 13' x 12' 9".

relating to, and bumping up against, architecture; a wind instrument of voluntary and involuntary emissions; and an unstable object of uncertain balance swaying in resistance to gravity’s downward pull. Pathetic and revelatory, the artist plays out the banal traumas of his large physique with comedic lightness.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer