

John Kelly: Left to right, *Egon*, *Mona* and *Waldemar*, all 2005, ink on paper, 20 by 16 inches each; at Alexander Gray.



## JOHN KELLY ALEXANDER GRAY

"The Mirror Stages: Self-Portraits 1979-2009" brought together 40 works representing as many guises of John Kelly, who is best known as a performance artist of unusual breadth. Emerging from New York's fertile East Village scene in the early 1980s, he could easily have made his mark with just one of his highly developed talents: he is an operatically trained singer, dancer, actor, writer, choreographer and composer. During the run of this self-portrait exhibition, for instance, Kelly sang at Symphony Space, performing *Brother*, a piece for piano and voice that he wrote in collaboration with the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Del Tredici; the same month, Kelly revived his now-legendary tribute to Joni Mitchell for a two-week run at the Abrons Art Center.

As anyone who has seen him as Joni Mitchell knows, when Kelly adopts a persona his essential nature is never entirely submerged. Instead, the two become one, and a new aspect of Kelly is revealed every time. This phenomenon, so evident in his performances, is visually manifested as well in these paintings, drawings and photographs, made over the course of his career and hung salon style. Kelly imagines himself as various notables, male and female, from the history of culture: Gustav Mahler, Jean Cocteau, Martha Graham, Maria Callas, Egon Schiele and the Mona Lisa, among others. With all, it's as if Kelly were portraying offspring who resemble him and his subjects equally.

Kelly appropriates not only the sub-

jects' likenesses, but the art historical style that best suits them. As a result, the works veer from messily painted semi-abstractions to fine drawings in all manner of mediums: oil, oil pastel, acrylic, pencil, spray paint, photograph or collage on canvas, linen, paper or panel. Some are more successful than others, but to judge the works individually would be to undercut the power of the group, which holds together like a performance of its own—and is more revealing, speaking to the many facets of any personality and its change over time, than the frozen moment most artists capture in their self-portraits.

Despite all his self-exploration and the discipline it requires (when asked how he knew he could sing like Mitchell, he replied, "Will"), Kelly clearly does not take himself too seriously. While he has obviously spent an inordinate amount of time in front of mirrors, and must be aware of just how visually compelling and charismatic he is, neither in performance nor in these portraits is there a whiff of narcissism. That Kelly is conscious of his beauty does not mean he relies on it—it's simply another tool he uses in reaching beyond the merely physical to reveal something lodged within.

—Carol Diehl