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ART IN REVIEW

Mary Reid Kelley: 'The Syphilis of Sisyphus'

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536 West 24th Street, Chelsea

Through Jan. 7

As artist, poet, actor, filmmaker, set and costume designer and intellectual mischief maker, [Mary Reid Kelley](#) wears many hats to make her enormously clever short videos. Just two years out of graduate school — Yale M.F.A., 2009 — she is a talent to be reckoned with.

"[The Syphilis of Sisyphus](#)" is a black-and-white, 11-minute video projection in which she plays a young, pregnant, 19th-century French *grisette*, or bohemian, named Sisyphus. With her face painted to resemble a skull, she recites in rhyming, four-beat couplets a mordant, pun-filled monologue about nature, artifice and modernity. She appears in elaborate, cartoonishly painted sets representing her garret dressing room, the street and a hospital.

Other characters include Jesus, Napoleon III, Karl Marx and Baron von Haussmann, the 19th-century architect who modernized Paris. All have eyes resembling Ping-Pong balls, with little dots for pupils, which give them a funny, buglike look.

Much will be lost on viewers not steeped in French history, but it is generally clear that Ms. Reid Kelley is touching on various Romantic-era artistic and intellectual controversies in which a decadent French society and culture were embroiled.

"My blistering wit and its deep lacerations are signs of advanced forms of Syphillization," declaims our heroine in the video, which is also a thinly veiled satire on today's culture of vanity and waste, and on the unrealized promises of progress. Ms. Reid Kelley implicitly mocks the boilerplate theories of American professors influenced by French postmodernist thought — the tenured radicals who have taught her and many other contemporary artists. This is altogether a heady brew, and Ms. Reid Kelley serves it up with biting panache.

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