

Kelly Heaton
Live Pelt
The Ronald Feldman
Gallery

Stillman, Nick. "Kelly Heaton
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If nothing else, Kelly Heaton succeeds at being distinct—and convincingly weird. *Live Pelt* is a sprawling, obsessive exhibition of her Tickle Me Elmo-inspired art, including several works made from Tickle Me Elmo dolls as well as any and all ephemera relating to Heaton's acquisition of them. While there are obviously several theoretical stabs at work here, most of them jab meekly in the dark.

The most obvious theme of *Live Pelt* is consumerism and fetishization of the luxury commodity. "The Surrogate," the show's centerpiece, is a full-size, bright red woman's coat, made entirely from the fur of skinned Tickle Me Elmos. With the help of embedded electronics, the coat vibrates in a way similar to the quaking movements of the functional doll when tickled. In the words of the gallery, "The Surrogate" functions as a "surrogate lover." The coat is made out of sixty-four dolls, all of which the artist won on eBay. The heads of sixty-one of the dolls are mounted on plaques and presented here as "N-Trophy." Currently, these are being individually resold by the artist on eBay, most of them going for around \$100. It seems pretty obvious Heaton is poking fun at the historical status symbol that is the fur coat, as well as the sad substitution of luxury in place of real companionship. While this deconstruction of the signifiers of status is territory well-trod by first-wave feminists and by a whole generation of artists in the 1980s, Heaton adds some spice by mimicking the already weird and gross writhing of Tickle Me Elmo with this bizarrely erotic coat powered by the same electronics that compose the doll's "guts."



Kelly Heaton, (detail) "Portrait of the Live Pelt Debutante" (2003) Digital C-print. Photo by Tom LeGoff. Makeup and hair by Tamah Krinsky. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Another theme of *Live Pelt* is the new consumer market, specifically the Internet. "New York Times Banner," a blow-up of a 1996 *Times* article detailing the absurd Christmas-time competition to buy Tickle Me Elmos at Toys-R-Us, highlights this. As "Live Pelt—The Trapper" (a meta-installation, part of which is a big box filled with print-outs of emails relating to Heaton's eBay purchases of the dolls) proves, she got most of these at a discount price. Incidentally, you find yourself engrossed in the banal back-and-forth relating to the logistics of shipping costs, batteries included/not included, and so on.

Finally, there are several references to the history of America's fur trade. You see it with the mounted Elmo-heads of "N-Trophy," and you see it much more explicitly in the ephemera pervading this show. As if "N-Trophy" didn't make the reference explicitly enough, Heaton bangs the point home by filling a glass case with objects relating to the fur trade and filling the rest of the gallery with similarly obvious symbols like a photocopy of the cover of a book called *How to Grade Furs* and an issue of *Fur Trade Journal*. And this is where it all starts to feel like a little too much. *Live Pelt* goes wrong in that it feels too self-serious and moralizing. Sure, "The Surrogate" is a pretty funny work on its own. But *Live Pelt* assumes the stance of consumer-culture critique, obviated by "De-Star Spangled Banner," a large "American" flag hanging on the wall, with the stars and stripes in a heap on the floor below, seemingly having slid off the flag into a pathetic pile. It's an angry piece, but also an obvious and clumsy one that gives away so much about the artist's attitude that it starts to feel like you're being preached at. The signifiers of the old fur trade are obvious and say little more than "Here are some objects which are products of the fur trade's history, and here are my objects which are part of the 'fur' trade's present." Unfortunately, this context reduces "The Surrogate," potentially a great piece of jokey, kitschy art, to just a gimmick.

—Nick Stillman