

MASI Lugano

Museo d'arte
della Svizzera italiana,
Lugano

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Kaari Upson. Dollhouse A Retrospective

6 September 2026 – 10 January 2027
Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano

Curated by Francesca Benini and Taisse Grandi Venturi

PRESS RELEASE
Lugano, 22 July 2026

MASI Lugano presents the first major posthumous retrospective dedicated to the American artist Kaari Upson (1970-2021). Upson, who gained traction in Europe after taking part in the 58th Venice Biennale (2019), is one of the most intense and original voices of her generation. In a career that lasted just over fifteen years, and spanned sculpture, video, drawing and installation, she constructed a layered language that she used to explore themes such as relationships, the body, illness and loss. Her works – suspended between intimacy and alienation – evoke an unsettling universe, in which everyday objects and environments become repositories for obsession and trauma. And though her art is rooted in her lived experience and her hometown of San Bernardino in California, it channels an intimate yet universal vision of the contemporary psyche.

The exhibition at MASI takes in her entire oeuvre and is structured in five broadly chronological sections that bear witness to her gradual progression towards intimate themes connected to her own personal and family history: *When Kaari met Larry*, *The Life of Things*, *Dollhouse - a Giant Miniature*, *Inner Cartographies*, and *Body, Memory, Decay*.

The show features a number of seminal works, including some series from the famous *Larry Project* (2005-12); the imposing installation *THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS OUTSIDE* (2017-19) created for the 2019 Venice Biennale, and the environmental piece *Mother's Legs*, as well as her latest series, *Foot Face Paintings*, being exhibited for the first time.

"*Kaari Upson. Dollhouse*, the first major posthumous retrospective dedicated to her, is an invitation to encounter an artist whose unsettling, moving and incredibly topical work continues to resonate after her untimely death", commented Francesca Benini and Taisse Grandi Venturi, the curators of the exhibition.

The show at MASI Lugano is the final leg of the exhibition project *Kaari Upson. Dollhouse*, produced by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, in collaboration with MASI Lugano and Kunsthalle Mannheim.

"Kaari Upson. Dollhouse", the exhibition layout

Hosted in the LAC venue's underground space, the show opens by immersing visitors physically and symbolically in one of the obsessions which shaped Upson's early work, the *Larry Project* (2005-2012). The project was inspired by a real man by the fictional name of Larry, a neighbour of the artist's parents in San Bernardino, and whose existence she went on to imagine, after sneaking into his abandoned home in 2003. With an almost forensic approach, she set about trying to reconstruct Larry's life and identity, casting him as an alter ego and projecting a febrile artistic practice onto him, in what became a mingling of obsession, role play and transgression.

The show opens with the large installation *Recollection Hysteria* (2012), which reproduces a room in Larry's house. The replica, that Upson created by means of a complex process using liquid latex, is almost perfect, but the floor, ceiling and walls are topsy turvy, creating a disorienting universe in which the inversions, doubling up and material mirror images of the space serve as an opaque, disquieting reflection of complex dynamics of the human psyche.

In Upson's work, Larry appears as a body, a double and a projection that she treats in various different ways. In the *Kiss Paintings* (2007-2008), for example, she wants to merge with him, pressing a still-wet self-portrait against one of Larry to give rise to a painterly fusion that intertwines their identities. In the video *As Long as It Takes – Part 1: The Head* (2008) Larry is a body that she dissects, empties and then wears like a second skin; in *Untitled (Charcoal Figures)* (2009) he is a charred presence: the piece hints at Upson's attempt to put an end to the obsession that fuelled her art for years, in order to be rid of it once and for all.

For the artist, one possible way into people's inner-most selves are the traces their bodies leave on domestic things like sofas and mattresses. The section *The Life of Things* includes a number of polyurethane and silicone sculptures from the early 2010s, based on latex casts of old mattresses found on the streets of Los Angeles, subsequently worked on by Upson. The sculpture/mattress *192*, for example, presents big black marks in charcoal and pigments that emphasize the imprints of two bodies. Upson is not interested in creating flawless reproductions; for her, the profound meanings creep in precisely through the distortions and imperfections of the copying process.

Her interest in doubling things also informs the imposing installation *THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS OUTSIDE* presented in the section *Dollhouse – a Giant Miniature*, which gives the exhibition its title. For this work, Upson digitized and created a large-scale reconstruction of a dollhouse that belonged to her mother, transforming this domestic model – a setting for play and intimacy – into a sort of dark theatre set, against which she stages family conflicts and investigates gender roles handed down through the generations.

Kaari Upson's exploration of blood ties also leads to reflections on illness and impermanence. In the works of more recent years, the artist's gaze progressively shifts from the outside to her own story and body, as can be seen in final section of the show, *Body, Memory, Decay*. The works of this period testify to her ongoing experiments with herself: her shattered body is superimposed onto her mother's, becoming a site for memory and dissolution. The installation *Mother's Legs* is a case in point: Upson has constructed a sort of forest of suspended legs, based on casts of her own knees and the trunk of a tree that grew in her parents' garden, later cut down. Walking through these forms suspended from the ceiling, which recall carcasses hanging in a slaughterhouse, there

is a sense of restlessness, intertwined with memories of childhood, when clinging to one's mother's knees still represented a source of reassurance and protection.

The *Foot Face Paintings* (2020-2021) are her last series of works. All the works on paper feature a single subject: a wide-eyed face partially covered by a foot. The project, which involved doing a drawing a day for a whole year, went unfinished due to the artist's early death. Presented like a visual diary, the 140 paintings stand as an intense, touching daily record of the final months of her life.

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue published by DISTANZ Verlag and curated by Francesca Benini and Taisse Grandi Venturi. It includes critical essays by Francesca Benini, Tobia Bezzola, Elena Filipovic, Michael Ned Holte, Johan Holten, Nanna Stjernholm Jepsen, Anders Kold and Paulina Pobocha. The Italian edition of the catalogue is based on the first edition in English, published by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and curated by Lærke Rydal Jørgensen, Kaspar Thormod and Anders Kold.

The artist

Kaari Upson (1970–2021) lived and worked in Los Angeles and New York. Her work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, including the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2023, 2007); Deste Foundation, Athens (2022); Kunsthalle Basel and Kunstverein Hannover (2019); and the New Museum, New York (2017). She participated in numerous group exhibitions and international biennials, including the 58th and 59th Venice Biennale (2019, 2022), the Whitney Biennial (2017), and the 15th Istanbul Biennial (2017), as well as exhibitions at institutions such as Kunstmuseum Basel, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, SFMOMA, Cleveland Museum of Art, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, CAPC Bordeaux, Belvedere 21, Vienna, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

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Press images

01.

Kaari Upson con *Mother's Legs* (2018-2019), *Go Back the Way You Came*, Kunsthalle Basel, 2019

Photo: Dominik Asche

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02.

Kaari Upson

Untitled (Foot Face)

2020-21

Coloured pen, pigment and matte medium

133 elements

© Esmé Trust / Kaari Upson Trust.

Courtesy Sprüth Magers.



03.

Kaari Upson

Untitled (Kiss)

2008

Oil on panel

Private collection

Photo: Martin Elder

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04.
Kaari Upson
Recollection Hysteria
2012
Latexpaint, pigment and metal
Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Gift Bert
Kreuk Collection
© Esmé Trust / Kaari Upson Trust.
Courtesy Sprüth Magers.



05.
Kaari Upson
Untitled
2007
Oil on canvas
Private collection
Photo: Ed Mumford
© Esmé Trust / Kaari Upson Trust



06.
Kaari Upson
192
2013
Silicone, pigment, charcoal
Private collection
Photo: Natasha Polymeropoulos
© Esmé Trust / Kaari Upson Trust



07.

Kaari Upson

Portrait (Vain German)

2020-21

Urethane, resin, aqua resin, pigment and aluminum

Photo: Ed Mumford

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Courtesy Sprüth Magers.



08.

Kaari Upson

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS
OUTSIDE

2017-19

May You Live in Interesting Times,
Biennale di Venezia, 2019

Room installation, mixed media and
video

Photo: Timo Ohler

© Esmé Trust / Kaari Upson Trust.

Courtesy Sprüth Magers.



09.

Kaari Upson

Oma (Blue Eyes)

2020

Medium-density fibreboard, acrylic and
oil paint

Photo: Brica Wilcox

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