

DEPT. OF COLLECTING ART STALKER

Last Thursday, when the director Robert Wilson received this year's Jerome Robbins Award for a life of achievement in the performing arts—a hundred thousand dollars and a bronze “Jerry,” designed and cast by the Red Hook artist Robin Heidi Kennedy—Kennedy had a word of advice for Wilson: Hide it! Kennedy has a stalker, though not the kind you'd expect in the case of a willowy brunette with a loft in one of the happening precincts of the new Brooklyn. The body that Kennedy's stalker trails, and takes, is her body of work.

“Somebody *really* likes it” is how Kennedy put the problem the other day, describing a call she got in August with the news that one of her bronze “bottle dancers” (an homage to “Fiddler”) had disappeared from its perch on the bar of Mikhail Baryshnikov's new arts center, in Hell's Kitchen. It turned out to be the only art stolen from a building full of paintings, drawings, tiles, and photographs, many from Baryshnikov's own collection. (It was also, at more than forty pounds, the heaviest.) “I'm not amused or particularly flattered,” she said, “but I am a little disquieted. I mean, I'm still alive—it's not like there's a finite number of pieces out there.”

Kennedy's art stalker began what she sometimes calls “collecting me” in the mid-eighties, when she was just a few years out of art school. His first heist was modest: a pastel drawing of three girls playing handball in a courtyard, which he lifted from an apartment on Central Park West where Kennedy was staying with an artist friend named Carol Collier.

“There was this wild party—a roommate's party—going on in the living room,” Collier recalled. “It got out of hand. There were people we didn't recognize. They weren't artists, like us. They were editors—editorial assistants! We went to sleep, and the next morning, when we came to the kitchen to

make coffee, there was an empty frame lying on the table.”

For a while, Kennedy figured the thief for one of those drunk editorial assistants. But the next time he struck—it happened a few years later, in another New York apartment, and the Kennedy that went missing then was a large painting of Isadora Duncan, “all done in transparent whites and warm skin tones over a blood-red enamel ground”—she changed her mind, if for no reason than that he also left with a stereo and a television set. She began to think of her stalker “more as some desperate burglar or junkie, but nonetheless sensitive to the charms of a dream painting of a dancer.” She imagined her stolen work hanging “in some filthy lair, with a bunch of hardened criminals sitting around cleaning their pistols.”

Fast-forward about a decade, by which time Kennedy had a serious reputation as a sculptor and painter. Her stalker turned up in London, where he scaled a nine-foot brick wall and then a twelve-foot hedge surrounding the garden of the film director Terry Gilliam. He landed, as Gilliam put it, cheek by jowl with a big bronze elephant, perched on a steel column, signed “Robin Kennedy.” That was the last Gilliam saw of his elephant. “The guy must have had help,” he said. “I couldn't lift that elephant. Or else it was a commissioned heist. Nothing else went missing, not even my cannons from ‘The Adventures of Baron Munchausen.’”

Kennedy gave Gilliam a new elephant, and she's planning to make another bottle dancer for Baryshnikov next summer. For years, she resisted the thought that one person had been on her trail. Not anymore. People who buy Kennedys today are forewarned: they lock them up. Gilliam keeps his new elephant in the house. Stanford Makishi, the executive director at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, keeps the center's two remaining bottle dancers in his office. Makishi still can't believe that anyone could steal a heavy bronze statue “in broad daylight, from a space with people coming and going all the time.”

“Those dancers, together, were very handsome,” Makishi went on. “We wanted everyone to see them, and the idea of bolting them down was somehow disrespectful. But one day I noticed

that the dancer on the right was gone. At first, I thought that it had been moved, because we needed to clean up some oxidation on the bar, and that it was probably in the storage closet. After a few days, I e-mailed two members of the production staff. No one knew where it was. I figured, well, maybe Misha has taken it home to photograph it. So I asked him. I asked everyone. Finally, we admitted to ourselves that it was stolen. And we went to the police.”

“It's just so mean and dark,” Kennedy said. “What kind of person would steal from Misha—from an arts center, a nonprofit theatre? That said, the whole art market is such thievery. It's *all* stalkers, it's cops and robbers.” She tried to be philosophical. “If I really isolate it, the idea that somebody wanted my things so badly that he stole them—well, I wish he would get in touch and make a deal. That would be impressive. I'm sure we could work something out.”

—Jane Kramer

