



The impossible in progress: "Every Girl Loves Pink." Video artist Kate Gilmore, featured in the Institute of Contemporary Art's season-opening show, presents striving, struggling, sometimes famous women, tackling precarious predicaments and confinements.

Art in a tight spot

Kate Gilmore's video installations are about strong women confronting physical challenges. Her claustrophobia doesn't help.

By Alicia Puglionesi
FOR THE INQUIRER
In her work, New York video artist Kate Gilmore often stars as a well-dressed female character struggling to overcome some obstacle or complete some daunting task — scaling a tower of stacked-up furniture, jumping rope in a pair of stilettos, or kicking her way out of a plywood box filled with pink taffeta. Gilmore recently discussed her new-

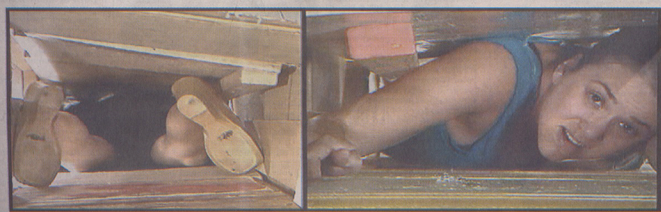
est installation, which opens Friday in the Project Space at the Institute for Contemporary Art in University City.

Question: Where did the idea for these performances come from? What was your pre-video background?
Answer: I began as a relatively traditional sculptor, using plaster and wood and stuff like that. I went to graduate school at SVA [New York's School of Visual Arts]. See GILMORE on D5

Art

Kate Gilmore

Friday through Dec. 7 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 119 S. 36th St.



In "Main Squeeze" Gilmore considers claustrophobia and "what that actually means in the world — to be stuck, to not be able to get out.... I'm in a tunnel that's actually sculpted around my body." The New York video artist's work is described as whimsical.

The art of the predicament

GILMORE from D1
[Arts], and continued doing installation work, but it wasn't that interesting. People would always come into my studio and say they were much more interested in the process that was going on than in the actual object.
So I started really thinking about my process ... what was so engaging about it? I mean, the studio was always a mess. I was always a mess. It was kind of this comical or antic place. And so, it started with photographs of me with my installations. I'd dress up as these specific cultural characters, like Martha Stewart or Hillary Clinton — that was a big one for a while — or a prom queen, or a Jersey girl. These strong female characters who have really recognizable identities in clothing.
Eventually I began to feel like it was kind of stagnant, though, like there needed to be things moving, and I started doing these very physical actions in the spaces. That's how I moved into these performance-based videos. People tend to think of me as a performance artist, but I don't do live performance, ever. I'm somewhere between sculpture and performance and video.

Q: Did you care about producing a finished sculpture when you started filming these pieces?

A: Well, no — I would build the thing, and then do these actions to it. I think the first successful video I did was this piece that was kind of cobbled together from wood. I attached a board to this rocker, kind of like a seesaw, and I was dressed up as this Hillary Clinton-like character, and we tried to balance on this floor that moves. So it was an impossible action, and I was constantly falling and having to get up, and then the video documented this whole transformation of character and object.

Q: Did you keep the object, or did it lose its importance once the action was over?

A: This is what made me realize that I wasn't really an object person — I never really connected to it in any way. That's changing a little bit now. I've sort of become sad to leave my objects. But they're very big, and you know, in New York you can't keep these kind of objects in a studio that's like 600 square feet. That's why I'm into this idea of doing these pieces

wherever I go.
Q: Do you set up the filming yourself, or do you have someone film you?
A: I do everything. I'm a bit of a control freak about that — the lighting, the color, the shot all have to be very good. It's not just about documenting a performance, it really has to look nice.

Q: If the objects are not important, the character at least seems to be enduring — a recurring type, a well-dressed female faced with some kind of obstacle. Originally it was a specific person; has that evolved over time?
A: When I started it was a very, very specific person, like Hillary or Martha Stewart. They all had things in common, these super-successful women who were also crazy in a way. They were people who seemed to have it all, who seemed really together, but it could totally fall apart at any moment.

The character has become more generic, but there are still very distinctive elements. Because of my size and my strength, and the outfits that I wear, it's sort of like, this is a woman who's clearly put together and she's considered her outfit. Usually the colors of the outfit are somehow connected with the installation itself. So this piece at the ICA is going to be very much about the color.

Q: Do you think there's something specifically about women in art that you're addressing? This is so different from a lot of early performance work produced by men — the really sinister or brutal edge to some Dennis Oppenheim and Vito Acconci pieces. People use the word whimsical in reference to your work.

A: When you deal with ideas about destruction and construction and you're a female figure dressed in a distinctively female way, these questions are going to arise. I think to say that it's just about women in art is too narrow. It's definitely about a female experience, but it's also — I think there is a very universal understanding of what struggle is. So I think it can be taken into all these different areas; struggle to try to make it past something, or to achieve something, or this kind of against-all-odds scenario.

Q: Are there physical limits to what you're willing to do, in terms of danger, or fear?

A: I don't see the work as really that dangerous. I'm not a daring person, and I'm definitely not one to want to hurt myself. People think that the work is really dangerous. ... I mean, of course it could be dangerous. A couple of the pieces that I've done, I kind of screwed up — I wouldn't do it again because I know it got out of control.

But I know what the limits of my body are. I know physically what I can take and what I can't. I'm not willing to cut myself or beat myself in the face or jump off a bridge. ... I'm scared of heights. At the same time, what I enjoy about making sculpture is this incredible physicality that happens, and that same thing happens in the performance-space videos.

Q: There are a lot of confinement situations. Is that important to you? I assume you don't have claustrophobia.

A: Oh, I definitely do. I'm very claustrophobic. I'm scared of heights and I'm claustrophobic — less than I used to be, but things with confinement are definitely hard to do. But also it feels like it's the only physical action I can do that would show a feeling: both being claustrophobic and also what that actually means in the world — to be stuck, to not be able to get out. I don't know if you've seen "Main Squeeze, the tunnel piece" — I'm in a tunnel that's actually sculpted around my body, so it starts out big and ends up small. It's me having to fit myself through this space that's built around my body, that's defined by my body, and it's very scary.

Q: Is that the most difficult piece you've done?
A: Oh, no. The most difficult piece was "Cubewalk, where I jumped rope in stilettos to heels. It's pretty brutal. I basically messed up my knees, maybe for life. I kept falling on the same knee.

The thing is that when I come up with these actions, I honestly think that I can do it. I don't film them so I can fail. I film them because I think that I can do it. So, that's the only piece I've ever done that I almost gave up on. ... Actually, no, that's not true. I had to give up on "Anything." That's where I'm climbing towards the camera, it's about 17 feet in the air and I couldn't reach it. I would have fallen. I don't think it necessarily changes the video that I failed — I mean, it doesn't make the video less successful. When I was doing it, though, it was terrifying.