

ARTINFO

Modern Painters: Introducing - Kate Gilmore

INTRODUCING KATE GILMORE

Hearts, stars, chocolate, and even the color pink are forces to be reckoned with in this artist's physically demanding videos. By Lyra Kilston



Amid all the vicious mudslinging and claims for history-making during last year's American presidential campaign, one of the slyest acts that continues to resonate is Hillary Clinton's assertion that the glass ceiling now has 18 million cracks. No one can deny that it was a watershed year for women in American politics, yet despite all the wall-thumping and warmongering, broken ceilings remained mostly in the realm of metaphor.

For Kate Gilmore, however, to break a ceiling is an instruction to be followed literally. Famously outgassing a sledgehammer or powerfully kicking through drywall, in her videos the 33-year-old New York-based artist (swims, pants, and is covered in white dust, all the while wearing a pretty frock and high heels). Her actions are focused and stryke, as though she were following a one sentence script to be skate up a wooden platform finished with cheese-liner vinyl, back apart a giant wooden heart with an axe, force face through a star-shaped cut into bright orange plywood. The bluntness of her acts seems appropriate for the female stereotypes Gilmore parodies, yet this is not your mother's feminist video art: lipstick, color-matched hair ribbons, and an elegant phase make us up: 1970s straggly undecorated hair and original scruffs.

With a background in sculpture, Gilmore moved toward performative actions when she noticed that people visiting her studio were drawn as much to the wild fringes of the room, studied and overflowing with her staff, as to her artwork. The self-described jack-rat explains that "my humor, my reactions, and my frustration seem to come out in the work." She decided to cut her chaotic self as a character in photographs interacting with objects or sculpture. Her first attempt was in 2001—with one other than Hillary Clinton in mind, she donned a real blue suit and posed as though she were engaging in bizarre pursuits, like building a road for or trying to hang a fancy chandelier while standing on a hanging platform. Stillborn performance in the face of femininity emerged as her leitmotif, an invitation homage to the hands-that-women-of-Hillary's-generation, like the artist's own mother, had to fight. Gilmore describes this generation as "very successful, yet conflicted, they were over paid but full of inner rage."

From these initial experiments, Gilmore began to dilute specific characters (she also played Martha Stewart and a prison guard) in favor of an ever-present, and found the medium of video an ideal way to combine action and sculpture. Her videos are single-channel, short, and filmed with a stationary camera in one take. However, despite the switch in media, the physicality of sculpture remains primary. In *Between a Hard Place* (2006), she is shown linking and punching through several layers of gray drywall and plywood until she arrives at the final wall, painted candy yellow to match her heels. And in *Every Girl Loves Pink* (2006), a ceiling-mounted camera captures the artist wedged uncomfortably into a triangular space, nearly drowning in crumpled pieces of neon-candy-colored paper. She struggles to get corner even strain enough leaving to move, to go oval. Her works sometimes include crudely made hearts and stars in the background, which function as coddly witnesses to her unswerving acts, and regarding her sugary palette, she explains, "I like doing brutal things with hyperfeminine colors."

Which like those *Narcosis*, who has named more a child on its head simply by acting it out. Gilmore informs us on why by exploiting themes used in early video art, such as physical endurance and limitation. And yet, while her work acts as a psychologically rife as those of predecessors such as *Narcosis*, *Vito Acconci*, and *Marina Abramovic*, they possess a magnetic appeal quite their own. Watching her videos, one vacillates between anxiety at the threat of danger, and the funny and discomfort that seems when confronted with Duchampian absurdity. Gilmore's trials threaten victimization motifs—if she achieves and goal (like finally shaving her face through the plywood), we see a vaguely satisfied expression that seems to question why she was engaged in the creation action to begin with.

What is clear, though, is that Gilmore is only commenting on the classic third-wave feminist conclusions. Do we reject a reconstructing, male-defined femininity, or have we now arrived at a point where we are empowered enough to "have it all" and can welcome back our duty accessories? Gilmore herself assumes that her intentions are not limited to the experience of being female. Like *Stephan*, or the female protagonist in *Koko Alice*'s novel *Women of the Desert*, who must shovel sand all day long in order to survive, unswerving struggle becomes a metaphor for existence. Inevitably, Gilmore's upcoming project in Miami will involve sand. And while Gilmore's videos may seem to read as exercises in pure femininity, she sees them as expressions of defiance. Indeed, because of her enduring dismissal of complacency or defeat, the sense of revolt in her work is contagious. In the cringe inducing video *With Open Arms* (2005), Gilmore is dressed in a strappy lavender dress with a matching flower in her hair. Behind her, the backdrop is framed with yellow and silver stars. She spreads her arms outward in a "total" posture, smiling broadly. An overripe woman is hauled toward her and hit the backstop with a smack. This response "yada!" and "a di!" smack. Soon covered with dripping red pulp, she continues to persist herself with effusive confidence, despite an invisible public of detestants. ♣

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