

Gilmore



Kate Gilmore: A Roll in the Way

Curated by Amy Smith-Stewart

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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The practice of Kate Gilmore spans video, sculpture, photography, performance, and installation. She is almost always the sole protagonist in her videos, recorded either privately in her studio or onsite, never rehearsed, and only attempted once. She assumes the functions of characters who are subjected to situations on makeshift sets that act as the catalyst for a mélange of wacky plays on art and life.

At The Aldrich, Gilmore debuts *A Roll in the Way* (2014), a site-specific sculpture and video that is a record of a private performance produced within the Museum's walls. Alongside *A Roll in the Way*, Gilmore will present two recent performance-based videos: *Love Em', Leave Em'* (2013) and *Like this, Before* (2013), further attesting to the sheer scale and incredible physicality of her practice.

This discussion between curator Amy Smith-Stewart and Kate Gilmore took place via email on August 8, 2014, and in person on August 12, 2014.

Amy Smith-Stewart: How did you first come to work with video?

Kate Gilmore: Like a lot of artists who move into video, I started as a pretty traditional sculptor. I was working in similar materials I work with today—wood, clay, plaster, etc., but I was using them in the way they were supposed to be used. In graduate school [School of Visual Arts, 2000–02] it became pretty clear that what I was creating was not as interesting as the process—the chaos of the making—and the way that I was engaging with the materials. I had to find a way to bring all of this together with the sculpture; that has taken the shape of video and performance.

AS: Performance acts as a catalyst to make the video. You are the “star.” I wonder why you decided to put yourself at the center of the work—had you ever “performed” prior to graduate school? How significant is it for “you” to play the leading role in your pieces? It seems to have been that way from the onset. Your piece, *Love is An Anchor* (2004), featured you trying to release your leg from hardening plaster in a painter's bucket. There was a heart duck-taped to the wall behind you. The studio itself was used as a prop.

KG: Initially, I decided to be the “star” of the videos because, quite honestly, it was the easiest thing to do. I was always available, I didn't have to be paid, and I could do things the way I wanted them to be done. I also knew that there was a certain physicality and risk to the work that I couldn't ask of just any person. So, I would say it started out of convenience, but then turned into something I really enjoyed and wanted to be a part of. I think, as a maker, I always felt intimately attached to the materials I was using, so that inevitably I became one of those materials in the video and, as you say, the studio became a prop or actor as well. Every aspect of my life as an artist became a player and still is to a certain extent.

AS: What comes first, the action or the stage/sculpture/prop for the action? Why did the sculptural props grow in scale and when did you start working outside the studio and making the pieces on location? It seems since ICA Philadelphia (2008) the sculptures have become more monumental, more elaborate, more deliberate. Do you deem them autonomous from the video, or are they always meant to be shown with the video, parts of a greater whole, like an installation? How did this larger site-specific direction inform the trajectory of your working methodology?

KG: The sculpture/installation always comes first. I have an idea of what I want something to look like physically, but what is tantamount is how it is will be seen on camera. Sort of a strange combination of imagining an object in real space and then seeing it exist through video. I always set up a shot first and then build the sculpture based on what the camera will see. After I have a physical idea of what the sculpture will be, I figure out a way that I can interact with it, manipulate and transform it so that it becomes something else. The scale of these pieces started to change when I began working more site-specifically. When I first started



*Like this, Before, 2013, (Installation view at deCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA)
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami
Photo: Stewart Clements*

making videos, I would re-construct the sculptures in the gallery and have the video playing with it. This didn't make a lot of sense, so I started to build the structures on site and shoot in the place where it would be shown. The scale of the pieces always depends on the scale of the space where it will be exhibited. I do hope that the sculptures can have a life of their own. It is definitely something that I have been working towards.

AS: Can your videos be read as autobiographical, or composites of roles played by women you know? Or are they meant to represent "everywoman"?

KG: I make work that reflects the life I live. That said, I don't think these "characters" are autobiographical, but they do examine the things I see, have experienced, and the individuals I spend a long time thinking about. All this said, I do hope that all different types of people can relate to these women, so there is definitely an "everywoman" desire there.

AS: You grew up in Washington, DC, with politically active parents. How did the politics of your home life influence your thinking?

KG: My family was/is politically active in the sense that we are fierce Democrats and highly invested and concerned with politics and Washington. My mother worked for the government and my father was definitely deeply involved as well. I think growing up with Washington being in my backyard and a political discussion at the dinner table every night really influenced the way that I think about the world, my work, even art. Hierarchies, political structures, social limitations, discrimination, class, race, sex all play out in a very obvious way in politics. I think I have taken that thinking and applied it to the way I consider my work.

AS: The desire to overcome something is a vein that cuts deep across your work. There is a cathartic release that occurs as you, the central character, confront your task and prevail. There is always the fear that something might happen in the event as it unfolds. The risk that you take in the making of the work is incredible. I wonder if you ever begin a work and realize that it is not turning out in the direction you had imagined—how do you deal with that in a one-shot-or-nothing scenario? Do you ever "rig" your pieces to ensure a successful outcome, and does fear and uncertainty affect the conception of the piece? Do you ever scrap something because you feel you just don't think you can confront it or are not up to the task?

KG: As I have gotten older, the way I think about my work has changed. I actually have a lot more fear than I ever did and I feel there are more consequences if I get hurt or can't achieve something I have set forth to accomplish. When I first started making performative work, I never thought this way. There was no doubt that I could do whatever I had planned to do, no matter how ugly or desperate I had to get to achieve it. Now, I plan a lot more, question everything, and figure out ways to make sure that I can carry out a task. However, the task always changes midway, the things I plan always fall apart, and what I thought would happen never does. I am always stuck, always struggling—no matter how hard I try not to.

AS: Your performative actions have been compared to Valie Export, Abramović and Ulay, Bruce Nauman, and Cindy Sherman. Works by you make references to Abstract Expressionism with its one shot, all-or-nothing, action-based ethos; Minimalists such as Donald Judd and Frank Stella; and Post-Minimalists Richard Serra and Lynda Benglis. And then of course there are the women of comedy: Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Phyllis Diller. Tina Fey. Who were your influences early on?

KG: My first art loves were the lady sculptors... Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, Eva Hesse. I then moved on to the extreme performers—Abramović, Burden, Acconci, Export. All the while, I still had a strong passion for pure beauty, color, and form. A Donald Judd and a Richard Serra will always blow me away. And, of course, comedy! Comedians have a way of expressing the darkest realities of humanity while making you laugh. You don't even know that they are calling you an asshole. That's genius.

AS: Color and the "frame" are extremely well considered in your videos. The action may be primitive or messy, but the composition of the video is tantalizing. What function does color play in the formation of these works and how do you decide on the palette? Even the clothes and shoes match the piece, albeit they are pedestrian, clothes that do not evoke any sense of individuality.



Through the Claw (Performance view at Pace Gallery, New York), 2011
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami
Photo: Carly Gaebe

Why is this “flattening” per se of gender important? Although you may play the protagonist, your appearance is so neutralized, it almost doesn’t matter. So why do you still find yourself the lead?

KG: Color and form are as much of a consideration as what will happen, what the structure will be, and how I am thinking about the piece. While I love performance, I always hate the way that it is documented. Coming from a pretty traditional art-making history, the aesthetic of a piece is very important. I try to use this as content as well, relating the “beauty” of the piece with the character that is transforming the objects. I like this idea of “flattening” gender. I never thought of it that way, but it’s an interesting term. I try to play with gender in the same way I play with materials. A pot is supposed to contain, to hold something in. What happens when it breaks, explodes? Is it just as beautiful with its insides spilling out? I look at the construction of the individual in the same terms. I am still in a lot of my work because I love it. I love the physicality, the challenge, the puzzle.

AS: You employ only building materials to make your pieces: house paint, sheetrock, plywood, plaster, and later clay. Why does this remain a constant, even as the works get more monumental in scale? Is the banality of the material akin to the banality of the woman performing the grueling chore?

KG: Artists are creatures of habit. At least I am. I get attached to a certain way of making and have a hard time letting go of that. There is something about using simple materials to create complex constructions that I am interested in; how something so known can cause surprise. As I mentioned before, I think that I look at the characters in my videos the same way.

AS: Some have labeled your work feminist as it deals with gender identity or recreation of real life female personas/stereotypes or attempts to re-write the scripting of gender. How do you position the “female” in your work?

KG: While feminism is a big part of my life (how could it not be?), I don’t enter work with just this perspective. I make work based on how I see the world; how I think the world sees me. Power—those with it, those without it. Desire—to be something more than what is expected. These are feminist ideals. They are also the ideals of anyone who does not feel on top of the pyramid. Those on the ins, those on the outs.

AS: Your performances are always private except for the cameraman, and you refuse to make public performances. You have “directed” several live performances, which have involved a stage/platform for your performer(s) to complete a repetitive, typically rudimentary set of actions. Why do you shy away from public performance? How does it feel to direct a performer to do something that you yourself could do, but choose not to? How do you determine if a hired performer is up to the job and then go about preparing them?

KG: I performed live once and hated it. You know you are a performer when after you have done a piece you feel relieved, exhilarated, the sickness and anxiety is over and you are elated. None of this ever happened for me. I am too aware of the audience, too concerned with how the work will look, so that performing live messes me up. I do feel exhilarated and relieved after a video though. I started moving into these live performances with large groups of people after I did a piece for the Public Art Fund in 2010. It was a challenge for me to figure out a public work, but when I did and we actually made it, it changed everything for me and opened up a whole new way of working. I needed this shake-up at the time and it has added a new dimension to my work that is still evolving. Luckily, I have been able to work with some amazing performers for these pieces. They are often former students of mine, so they have an intimate understanding of what I do and I have an intimate understanding of what they do. I try to work with individuals who are strong, both physically and mentally, are passionate, and are confident in their bodies. These characteristics usually make for a great performer.

AS: What part does humor play in the work, and how has that humor developed?

KG: I try to use humor in the same way that I use color and form. I am interested in making thought-provoking work, but I am also interested in the formal and aesthetic qualities of art making. This stands true for humor as well. I think when you are able to make someone laugh or please someone with form, a comfort happens. Then you are able to reveal darker thoughts (once they are sucked in with beauty or are laughing).

AS: The titles of the works are specific. Most are pop derived or even pop songs—they are always populist and evocative of a “feeling.” There is even a mainstream sway to the work as we can all identify with the emotional pathos, with the derailment of everyday life: losing it! Do you feel compelled to make work that speaks a common language?

KG: Definitely. I make work for lots of different people. I make work that can be read on a very human level. We all know what it means to struggle, to “lose it” as you say. I also make work for individuals who are interested in having a conversation about art history, about politics; about the way we function in the world. I hope there are lots of different ways to enter it.

AS: Breaking free. Busting out. Freefalling. Smashing things. At times your works mimic the emotional upheaval we all traverse internally over the course of our everyday lives. The buildups and breakdowns. Like comedy, it offers us a form of release. We laugh out loud at someone else’s absurdity. What does it feel like to make this work and how do you prepare? Then, how does it feel after it’s completed—are you ever surprised when you watch the videos? Marina Abramović talks about isolating herself, fasting, before a major performance. Do you have a pre-performance ritual?

KG: I never fast! While Abramović is someone I deeply admire, her approach is the total opposite to mine. I am more chaotic, less Zen. Tons of anxiety leads up to a piece. Obsessive planning, worrying, going over it in my head, doubting; this is my process. I have to psych myself up right before the piece, but the months before are pure stress. When something is a one-shot deal, that’s a lot of pressure.

AS: You place yourself in compromising positions. How did you become so comfortable with yourself, and when you see yourself on camera, how does it feel?

KG: I’m glad I appear that way! I don’t really watch the videos after they are installed. I usually watch in the editing/finishing stage and then that’s it. I don’t want to scrutinize it because that’s what happened and that’s what it will be for eternity. I guess I want these pieces to be reflective of as real a moment and a place as possible. I would say it’s less about being comfortable with myself and more about trying to be honest.

AS: At The Aldrich, you present a new site-specific, performance-based video with an accompanying sculpture, a “container” of the aftermath of the action. It is shot in the Project Space from an aerial perspective. You’ve shot from above many times. Why is this “view” interesting to you?

KG: As you mentioned, I do shoot from above often, as it is a way to flatten the space and make color pop in a way similar to painting. It also confuses space so you don’t always know what you are looking at, why something is happening in the way it is, etc. This has become one of my favorite shots. It is also a perspective we are not so used to seeing; the tippy top of a sculpture.

AS: An early work by Richard Serra, *Bent Pipe Roll* from 1968, is on view as part of the Museum’s 50th Anniversary *Standing in the Shadows of Love* exhibition in the Balcony Gallery above the Project Space, with a view down onto your work. Did the proximity to his work embolden you?

KG: *A Roll in the Way* came about because I was asked to think about the piece *Bent Pipe Roll* in creating a new installation/video at The Aldrich. Making a work in relationship to Richard Serra is pretty exciting and also something I have probably been doing for most of my art life anyway.

As sculptors, we all have to reckon with him in some way. I thought an interesting way to approach this new piece was to follow an action, a physicality, but to do it in the way I do things, which inevitably creates a dialogue about status, sex, gender, etc.

AS: Please describe the materials used and the actions utilized to make *A Roll in the Way*. How did you come to make these formal decisions?

KG: *A Roll in the Way* will consist of a large base made onsite for The Aldrich. The video will show me picking up logs that have been cut to approximately a height of two feet and placing them upright onto the base, rolling them on the structure, leaving a mark of color that will gradually change as all the logs are added—enough logs to fill the entire base. As you mentioned, this piece will be shot from above, framed perfectly to the structure. The height of the Project Space made perfect sense to do a piece with this shot. I also like the idea of filling the room with a large structure that you don't totally understand until you move to another floor. This is the interesting thing about shooting from above—the perspective alters and you have to move to different locations to totally understand what is happening.

AS: *Love Em', Leave Em'* and *Like This, Before*, both from 2013, are shown concurrently with *A Roll in the Way*. Is there a commonality other than you, the bold color, and raw corporeality to be found in these works?

KG: *Love 'Em, Leave 'Em* was made for my solo exhibition at MoCA Cleveland in 2013 and *Like this, Before* was made for the deCordova Museum in Massachusetts in 2013, as well. Both of these pieces deal with the making and breaking of vessels to create an elaborate painterly installation. Using store-bought ceramic pots for *Love 'Em, Leave 'Em* and store-bought glass vases for *Like This, Before*, I am creating “macho” paintings reminiscent of prominent art-historical figures, yet doing it in a way that requires the labor of a female body and the production of objects in a non-identity-based process. What does it mean when an Abstract-Expressionistic painting is made by a woman climbing up and down a structure over and over again, breaking Martha Stewart-inspired ceramic pots that explode with hot pink, black, and white paint? Perhaps a bit of fun is being made of these myths while still subscribing to their power.

AS: Where do you see your work evolving—as you get older, do you think you will be up to the physical rigor? Does “age” matter to the perception of your “character”? How will it alter it? Do you think about this?

KG: I think about this all the time. I love seeing performers age. The process will have to change—and it has, to a certain extent. Not only physically, but I have changed as a person. I seem to be filled with less immediate angst, but contain a more consistent pissed-offness. It's less boom boom boom and more boooooooooooooooooommmmm. I would love to keep doing what I do as long as I can. It will change, as we all will.

Kate Gilmore was born in 1975 in Washington, DC, and currently lives and works in New York City.

Works in the Exhibition

Like This, Before, 2013
HD video, color, sound; 13:38 minutes
Edition of 5, 2 AP

A Roll in the Way, 2014
Plywood, paint, tree logs
Dimensions variable

Love 'Em, Leave 'Em, 2013
HD video, color, sound; 60 minutes
Edition of 5, 2 AP

Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery,
Miami

A Roll in the Way, 2014
HD video, color, sound
Edition of 5, 2 AP

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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Love 'Em, Leave 'Em (Installation view at MoCA Cleveland), 2013
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami
Photo: Cliff Borrass

