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## Kate Gilmore and Suzanne McClelland in Albany

by [Whitney Kimball](#) on December 20, 2013 [Reviews](#)

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Image for “A Tisket, A Tasket,” Kate Gilmore (courtesy of University at Albany)

Rarely does scenery get as surreal as the drive up to the University at Albany, in the middle of a blizzard, on the night before Thanksgiving break. A few hours past the Storm King sculpture park, the campus at first looks like a distant airport; far down the vast roundabout, Edward Durell Stone’s glittering modernist campus is a Space-age Oz, encircled by long modern-Gothic colonnades, surrounding a slim water tower and fountain. The architecture alone is worth the drive. A few students shuffled along the tunnels, which, as one blogger [points out](#), tend to draw in and funnel the winter winds. All heighten the otherworldly journey toward the University Art Museum.

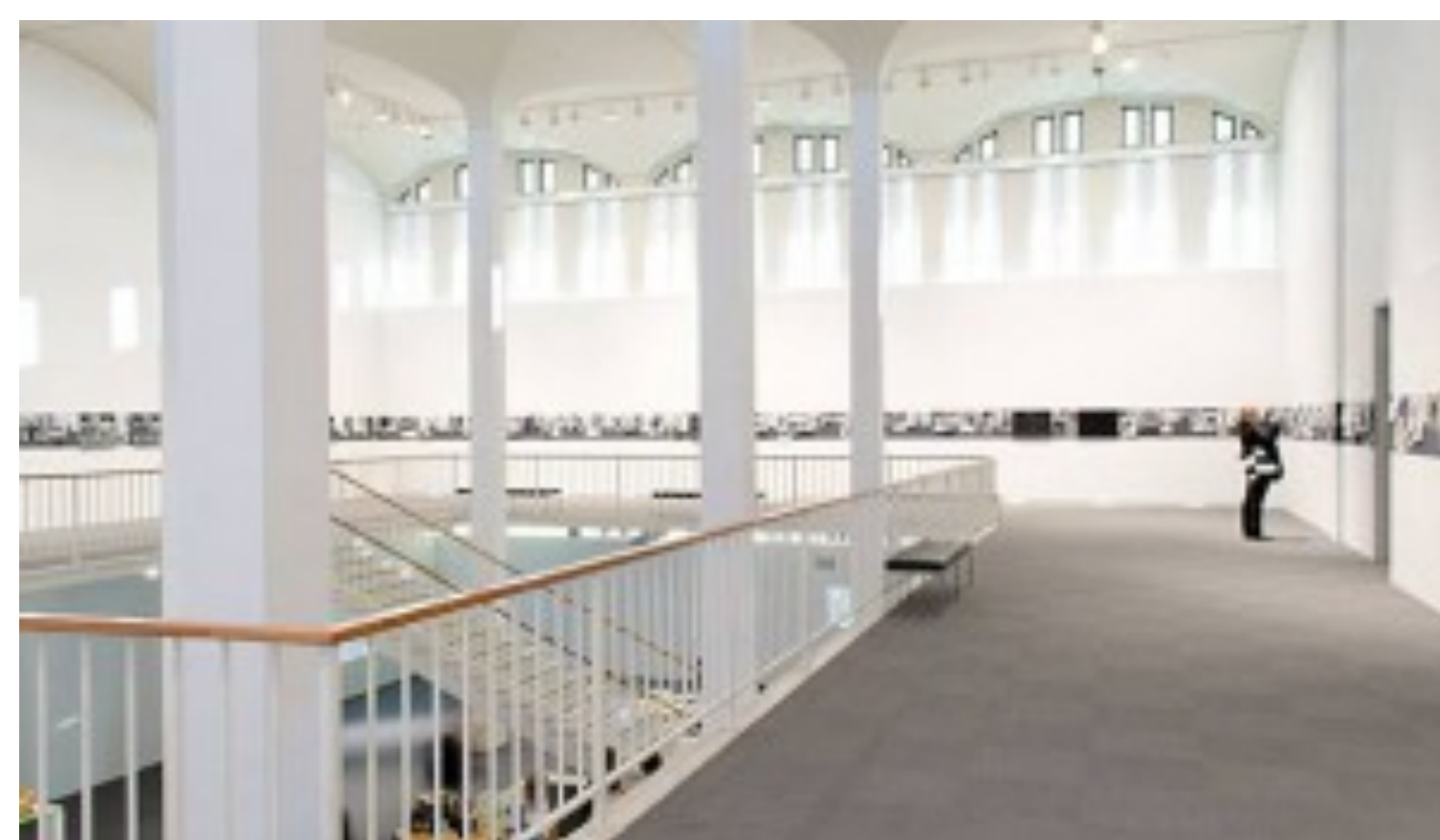
This is all embellishment, but the place does create the feeling that anything could happen— whether that's a *Men in Black*-style spaceship flying off the observatory tower, or just, in my case, a couple art shows that break the mold.

Enter New York City imports Kate Gilmore and Suzanne McClelland, whose two solo shows create a surprising symmetry in the museum's atrium gallery. The first floor is filled with screens playing Gilmore's performance art war on domesticity, and the second is wrapped with McClelland's quiet, eclectic collage.

On floor one, Gilmore's videos provide a career sampling over the past decade. As always, her performances involve manual labor, typically in a dress and heels. In her first piece *Love is an Anchor* (2004), Gilmore attempts to hammer her foot out of a cement bucket; in *Anything...but* (2006), she reaches continually up at the camera, while climbing a pile of furniture; in *Pot, Kettle, Black* (2010), she fills pottery with black water and stacks them on white shelves. The sounds of heaving and hammering create an ambiance of a sweatshop.

With all of the domestic elements of Gilmore's work, it's easy to read this as a fairly straightforward feminist critique. But this feels more local to individual artistic practice; if Gilmore is Sisyphus, then her boulder is art supplies. Ink, plaster, paint, wood are all obstacles to be perpetually overcome. The hurdle becomes even clearer in new work like *A Tisket, a Tasket*, a ten-foot-tall homemade step pyramid up which Gilmore to pushes baskets full of paint (the by-product sits next to the video screen). The pyramid recalls a thousand artist narratives about arduous process, pushing the limits of your mind and body with the expectation that something transcendent will result.

Still, is this more work, for the sake of work, even in Gilmore's commentary *on* work? What, for example, is she saying here that wasn't achieved by Cheryl Donegan's paint-pushing in the late nineties? I've never found a satisfying answer to that question, but, at least, the conversation reaches its essence in *Star Bright, Star Might* (2007), a close-up of Gilmore, pushing through a star in a piece of plywood. As she pushes through the tears like some sort of masochistic self-birth, it's the clearest depiction of compulsive pain in the whole show— and it feels like something you wouldn't do unless you were convinced that you had no other choice. In a time when women seem to be getting fewer and fewer shows these days, it's a message that bears repeating; it's been said, but those problems die hard.



Part of Suzanne McClelland’s “Furtive Gesture” at the University at Albany (Image courtesy of [www.albany.edu](http://www.albany.edu))

Upstairs, Suzanne McClelland’s “Furtive Gesture\_CEDepart2”, pleasantly, comes out of nowhere. The piece de resistance *Furtive Gesture* looks less like art for the canon than a huge class assignment: a long line of stained, painted, ripped, decaying, and crumpled printer papers and newspapers are tacked up along a long chalk board band, wrapped around four walls. The simplicity doesn’t over-direct your experience, so all you have to go on are the images– often, media photos. There are a lot of political handshakes, like Barack Obama and Chris Christie; Zimmerman and his grinning defense lawyers; Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev; Bush hugging Barack Obama. They’re images that, at a time of chaos, crystallize public opinion. Back in 2009, Bush hugging Obama would have been more than off-putting; but now thanks to collective amnesia and cat paintings it’s almost cute.

The further you walk down the line, the evidence gets more violent. Mothers hugging automatically indicates school shooting. A circled photo of Jahar Tsarnaev recalls the day when Redditors [tried to identify](#) the Boston Bombing suspect. The images reminded me that while I didn’t actually know anything about the incident, I’d just made assumptions based on what I’d seen on twitter that day. McClelland seems to acknowledge those media-forged biases. Several more surveillance stills show police hunting black kids like animals; to me, it automatically looks like a Sanford, Florida episode of “Cops”.

And in the end, a few of McClelland’s papers seem to hint at context; there are lists of numbers, and simple math equations, made by children. It’s as though to suggest that you can consume an innumerable mass of images, but in the end, the problems we’re given to look at always adds up to the same set of answers.

Another installation is more abstract, and ethereal; McClelland mashed up of videos (Bytches With Problems, mixed with the documentary *Jackson Pollock 51*) and projects them onto a long curtain in a dark room. But like *Furtive Gesture*, it reflects the look and feel of collaboration. (It’s an underlying spirit of both shows, which come with the [artists’ interviews](#) of [each other](#)).

I wouldn’t describe either exhibition as sensational (though both artists are stars); these shows are not particularly photogenic, and they float their ideas in a way that might get lost on the maximum-force commercial setting. But with the world of Zwirner and Gagosian lightyears away, McClelland and Gilmore suggest that art can be slower, and more destabilizing than that.

Tagged as: [kate gilmore](#), [Suzanne McClelland](#), [University Art Museum](#), [University at Albany](#)

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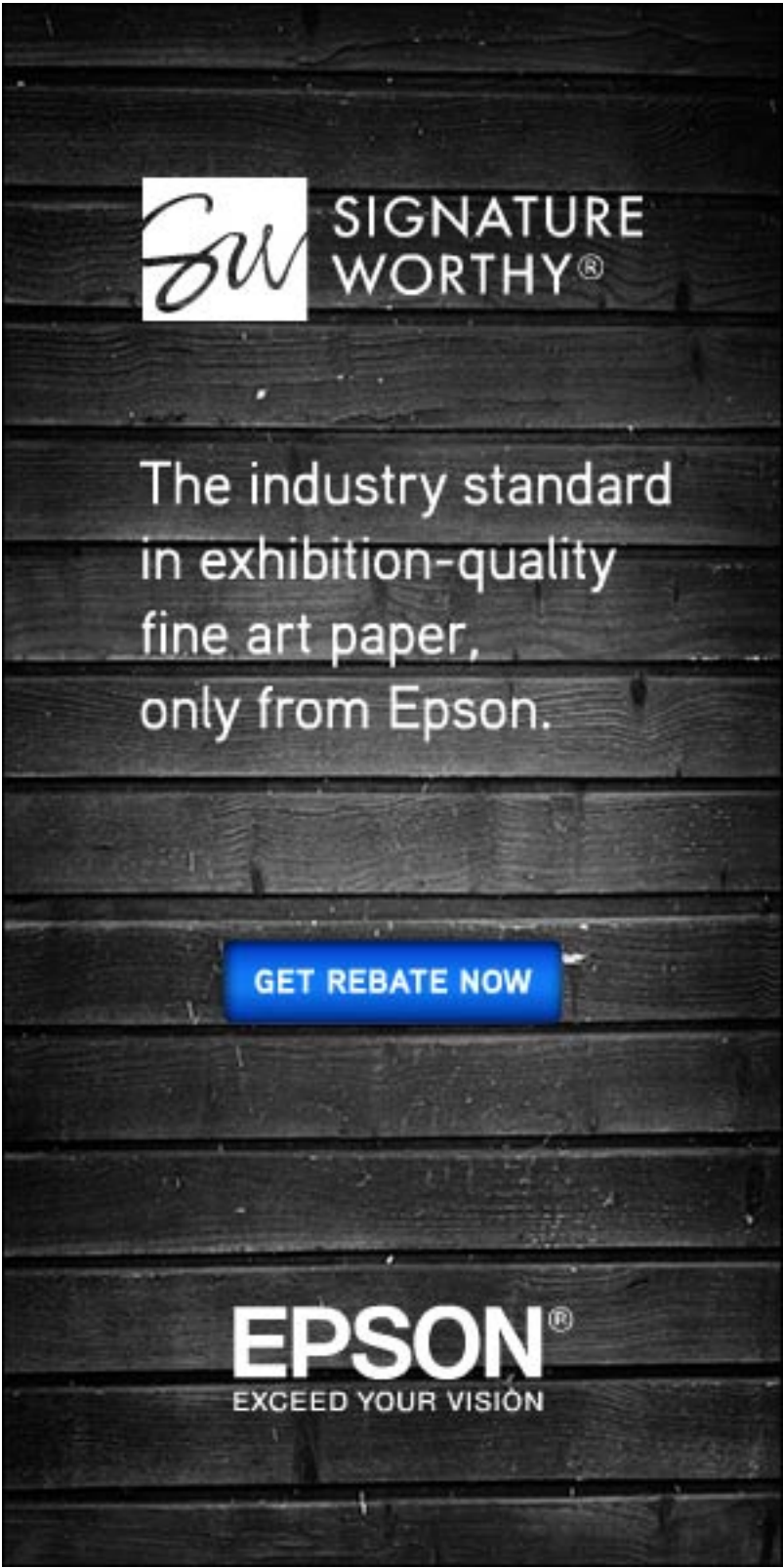
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