

Working Habits

For Whom the Belles Toil

The beleaguered heroines of Kate Gilmore's videos navigate elaborate obstacle courses that veer between the sadistic and the slapstick

BY WILLIAM HANLEY

A woman dressed for a cocktail party wields a hammer, frantically trying to free her left leg from a bucket of hardened concrete. A girl in a purple prom dress, a matching flower in her hair, is pelted with tomatoes hurled by an unseen assailant. A woman builds a mountain from old furniture and strains to reach a shelf supporting a pair of gilded shoes. These and other beleaguered heroines are all played by New York artist Kate Gilmore in her performance-based video works. The first few slapstick minutes usually elicit laughter, but that initial response mutates into wincing empathy as the characters become increasingly desperate.

"The pain she's in during the physical process and the struggle of making the work are really evident in the video," says curator Clare Norwood of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, who recently included Gilmore in a two-person exhibition (with Angie Reed). With their solitary protagonists and extreme bodily exertions, Gilmore's videos evoke the work of performance-art standard-bearers Marina Abramovic and Vito Acconci—leavened with the contemporary wit of John Bock—but above all they reflect the toil of the artist in the studio, because they largely grow out of a sculptural practice.

"I'm not a performance artist," says Gilmore, 31. "I consider myself a sculptor more than anything else." She begins each project with an installation, constructing a set in her studio, then develops costumes and physical ordeals for her characters to contend with. The artist—

who completed her M.F.A. in sculpture at New York's School of Visual Arts in 2002—takes a painterly approach to color and composition in her installations, and sometimes exhibits them alongside the finished videos. Her 2006 video *Every Girl Loves Pink*, for example, buries the artist in a bright crumple of pink cloth positioned at the center of the frame. The source of her struggle, the color also anchors the composition.

Gilmore takes care to soften her appearance for the performances, striving to come across as delicate and self-



Kate Gilmore makes a breakthrough in her video *Star Bright, Star Might*, 2007.

consciously feminine. Not only does she always color-coordinate shoes, dresses, and makeup, she also matches her outfits to her backdrops. *Baby, Belong to Me* (2006–7) ensnares the artist's ankle in a black cord and suspends it against a graphic background of crudely painted candy-red hearts that echo the color of her red ballet flats.

Although her videos emerge as a final product, they are the result of many variables in the

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The artist encased her foot in concrete—and smashed her way out—for *My Love Is An Anchor*, 2004.

creation of a work in the studio. She records the performances alone or with a small crew and edits the footage minimally, cutting just enough to tease a narrative from the action while retaining a sense of real time.

Her protagonists are always powerful women—Gilmore, who was born in Washington, D.C., repeatedly cites Hillary Clinton as an inspiration—who lose their composure, devolving into archetypes of hyperfemininity: the housewife, the homecoming queen, the southern belle. “They’re roles that we all know how to play,” says Gilmore, “but it’s almost harder to resign yourself to playing them than it is to climb a 20-

foot wall.” Stuck in states of weakness or vulnerability, her protagonists struggle through gender-specific obstacle courses or build laborious structures to overcome.

Gilmore describes the videos as very personal psychodramas. “They all come from me and my reactions to the world,” she says, explaining that real women in her life, including her mother, form the basis for many of her characters.

Thanks to the intimacy of her single-actor videos, Gilmore’s work sometimes has more in common with a YouTube confessional than traditional performance art. This strategy is based, she says, on the premise that people who would flinch from a confrontational live performance are perfectly comfortable watching a video of embarrassment and suffering.

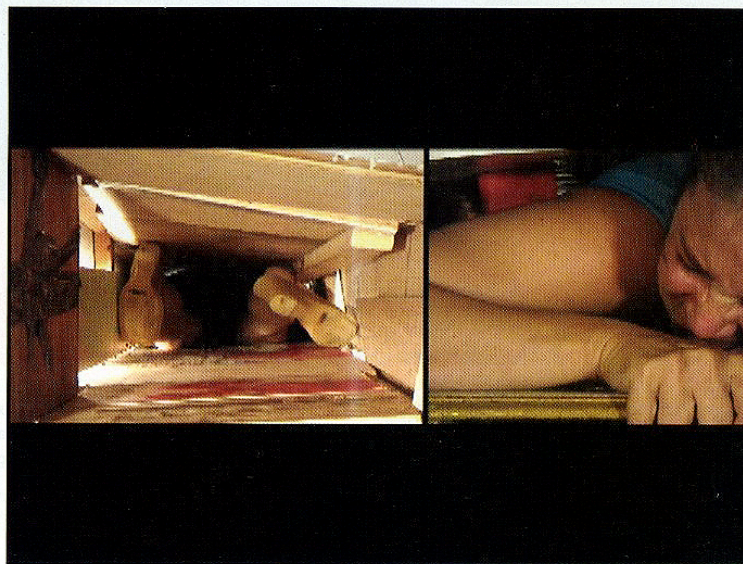
Her most recent solo show at Pierogi, the Brooklyn, New York, gallery that represents her, introduced a new level of ambiguity into her work. While her early videos tended to end with some narrative closure, in the new works the ordeals are left unfinished, eliciting a more complex emotional response from her audience. The dual-channel video *Main Squeeze* (2006) abandons the

artist, struggling in a satin top, as she tries to pull herself through a narrow tunnel.

Gilmore was recently awarded a Rome Prize by the American Academy in Rome for the 2007–8 fellowship year. In January she will create a combination video and installation

in San Antonio, Texas. She also has concurrent shows at Pierogi and at Manhattan’s Smith-Stewart gallery slated for November of next year.

Gilmore is “one of a few people who grapple with feminine identity and violence without fear of being pinned down as feminist artists,” says Norwood. “She does that very brashly and with a lot of humor.” ■



Gilmore forces herself through a tiny tunnel in *Main Squeeze*, 2006.