

PROJECT SPACE: SEPTEMBER 5 – DECEMBER 7, 2008

Kate Gilmore

ICA



Becoming Sculpture: The Work of Kate Gilmore

The swirl of a black skirt, the tugging on of gloves. A punch into a flat, gray wall, followed by another, and another. A patch falls away to reveal an identical wall behind it; a kick from a bright yellow high-heeled shoe reveals more. She steps through the space she has created and moves on to the next wall, continuing her assault.

In *Between a Hard Place* (2008), Kate Gilmore interacts with a succession of sheetrock slabs which she must batter her way through. With her back to the camera, her body nearly filling the frame, she punches a uniform oval into the first wall, and steps through it. The remaining rounded aperture frames the rest of the video. Over the course of twelve minutes, she makes her way to the back wall of the gallery, painted a bright yellow to match her shoes. Although her goal is nothing but a dead end, upon obtaining it, she reaches out to the last wall in a tender embrace.

Exhibited in ICA's Project Space are the remains of the artist's interaction: a six-foot-tall, open-topped structure, sheathed in plywood and divided internally by several sheets of drywall, all painted gray. Peering into it reveals the tunnel Gilmore created by forcing her way through the sheetrock in order to reach the bright yellow gallery wall at the far end. Fragments of yellow are visible amid the wreckage that litters the interior of the structure; the back of each battered wall bears the same yellow paint. Documentation of the assault, carried out in elegant dress, plays on a video monitor directly opposite. All of Gilmore's videos document a situation, dilemma, or obstacle that she

has constructed to overcome, or to simply attempt; all while wearing dresses, heels, and makeup perfectly coordinated to her surroundings, but incongruous with her circumstances.

Between a Hard Place is accompanied by several earlier works. In *Anything* (2006) she constructs a tower out of furniture and brightly colored string in an attempt to climb up and reach a camera installed high above. Following each failed attempt, she descends the pile of chairs and tables in order to add another tier and try again. In *Main Squeeze* (2006) cameras positioned at either end of a narrow tunnel record her frustrated, occasionally panicked attempt to squeeze through. She also confines herself in *Every Girl Loves Pink* (2006) in which she is awkwardly splayed inside a triangular pit formed by the corner of a gallery and a wall of plywood. Lacking any sort of leverage, and buried in crumpled construction paper with only her head, arms, and legs exposed, she flails and kicks until the confining wall is brought down. Her pink dress perfectly matches her nest of paper, complemented by her shoes and pale, patterned tights.

Identifying an overarching narrative in Gilmore's work might seem simple. Even in the twenty-first century, women struggle to meet professional, personal and social expectations while hewing to evolving (but still extant) preconceptions of femininity—an absurd condition that persists despite extensive political, historical, and artistic analysis. Her work abstracts and recapitulates culture, simplifying and skewering it in a kind of theater of the absurd. The recurring color pink appears as an iconographic prop of femininity, as do her skirts and dresses. All are archetypically pretty and dress-like—polished but undistinguished. So, too, are her struggles archetypically physical: repetitive, sometimes fruitful, but often pointless. Even her materials—plywood, drywall,

housepaint, and construction paper—are the stuff of theater sets.

However, her work—never rehearsed or publicly performed, and only attempted a single time—is emphatically untheatrical. In creating a carefully constructed set (formally considered, structurally delimited, and with a clear goal) she creates a space for a range of possible experiences. Failure, injury, embarrassment, frustration, or elation might result from her physical encounter with sculpture. The equally careful construction of her persona codes her as an integral part of the set, and the explicitly physical nature of her interactions with her materials, such as stacking, climbing, or demolishing, is accentuated when she sweats through a dress, or destroys her shoes. This incongruity—or, rather, productive tension—between the constructed quality of her sets and the authenticity of her experiences inside them, and between attire and action, is at the heart of her work.

Gilmore's work emerges from a history of body art and endurance art practices, which began in the 1950s and developed in the 1960s and 1970s as artists increasingly explored the personal, social, and political dimensions of physicality, in works created for, or (sometimes) documented by, photography and video. Vito Acconci's *Three Adaptation Studies* (1970), in which his humorous reactions to self-imposed physical trials is recorded on film, is a clear predecessor. (Acconci's reaction to having balls thrown at him while blindfolded is evoked by Gilmore's *With Open Arms* (2005) in which she is pelted with tomatoes while attempting to maintain smiling poise.) Carolee Schneeman's work opened body art to feminist concerns and art historical critique, and her *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–76), in which she swung from ropes and made gestural scribbles on a variety of surfaces, incorporates both the physical limitations and formal concerns found in Gilmore's projects. In

its complex interaction with physical constraints, Gilmore's work also shares affinities with the early work of video and performance artist Patty Chang. In Chang's *Alter Ergo* series (1997) the artist balanced her body in a series of uncomfortable poses as a critique of female passivity. In one performance, entitled *Candies*, she is bound in a business suit, sleeves sewn to her sides, with a dental device both forcing her mouth open and pulling her toward a wall, calling attention to her strained corporeality. While Chang performs passivity (as opposed to Gilmore's dogged activity), both artists represent a struggle with their surrounding material.

Trained as a sculptor, and weighing formal concerns equally with performative ones, Gilmore's work also bears comparison to that of Japan's Gutai group, whose performative interactions with painting and sculpture began half a century earlier, and which have been recently reexamined in the West. In a response to the explosion of Abstract Expressionism, Gutai artists wore, slashed, and performed the creation of art in real time. In a 1957 performance, Atsuko Tanaka wore her *Electric Dress*. Composed of multicolored light bulbs and a plethora of electrical cords, her outfit looked stunning, but inflicted limited motion and mortal danger to the wearer. In Saburo Murakami's 1955 performance, *Laceration of Paper*, the artist ran through a series of paper screens, inserting his body into the sculpture as a means of fully embodying and experiencing the “gesture” of art making, and formally making his body an essential element.

A similar balance is achieved in Gilmore's work between her physical struggle with sculptural material, and the material giving way to her efforts to shape it. In *Down the House* (2008), we see her from above, holding a mallet and perched atop a jumbled pile of discarded office furniture and plaster blocks, tenuously held together with pink ribbon

and splashed with pink paint (matching the ribbon in her hair). She repeatedly swings at the rickety structure, readjusting her footing as the blocks crumble, the paint flows, and the furniture breaks apart. Over time, she stands on a crushed, fragmented, colored ground, the camera framing what appears to be the surface of a painting.

Gilmore's desired objectives are occasionally straightforward (*Main Squeeze*), unreachable (*Anything*), or even irrelevant (*Cake Walk*, 2005, in which, after a long struggle to reach a chocolate cake at the top of a slippery ramp, she unceremoniously tosses it away). Here, however, her desired object is a formal transformation of her medium—a transformation present in all her work, but now brought into sharper focus. But in finally, and briefly, shifting from formal to affective concerns, it is apt to compare her series of relationships with shifting objects to French psychoanalyst and theorist Jacques Lacan's torturously complex diagrams of desire. In these diagrams, Lacan traces the path of the subject driven by a desire for recognition and acknowledgement from the other. This desire is expressed through attempts to possess the other as an object, and to substitute a variety of other objects for this acknowledgement. For Lacan, these temporary substitutions are interchangeable and irrelevant (ultimately, all goals of desire are unattainable) and in his diagrams, the path of the subject is suspended before its completion. In Gilmore's ongoing series of challenges, objects are won, lost, or disregarded, but the rich path through them constitutes her—and our—experience.

—Stamatina Gregory, Whitney Lauder Curatorial Fellow

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kate Gilmore was born in Washington, DC in 1975. She received a BFA from Bates College, and an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in 2002. She has had solo exhibitions at venues including Artpace, San Antonio; Maisterravalbuena Galeria, Madrid; White Columns, New York; and Real Art Ways, Hartford. Upcoming solo exhibitions will be held at Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco; Franco Soffiantino Arte Contemporanea, Turin; and Smith-Stewart Gallery, New York. Selected group exhibitions include "Perverted by Theater," Apex Art, New York (2008); "Environments and Empires", Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Waltham; "Reckless Behavior," J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (2006); and *Greater New York 2005*, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center/MoMA, Long Island City. Gilmore was recently awarded the Rome Prize, American Academy in Rome, Italy (2007). She lives and works in New York.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Anything..., 2006
video, 12:24 minutes

Every Girl Loves Pink, 2006
video, 6:06 minutes

Main Squeeze, 2006
video, 4:59 minutes

Between a Hard Place, 2008
installation and video, 9:42 minutes

Down the House, 2008
video, 17:06 minutes

All works courtesy of the artist and Smith-Stewart Gallery, New York

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