

What's up at the Boston-area art galleries

By Cate McQuaid
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“Absent/Present,” the two-person show featuring Kate Gilmore and Zsuzsanna Szegedi at Montserrat College of Art Gallery, started out with a fairly obvious concept. Gilmore is always present in her performance-based videos and Szegedi tends to vanish from hers. But as the exhibit developed, curator and gallery director Leonie Bradbury writes in her catalog essay, the theme played out in deeper ways.

The question of absence or presence applies as easily to the art as to the artists. Szegedi's smart, enveloping, and elusive “A Proper Erasure” happens over time, in two spaces. She created a massive, operatic wall drawing in another gallery on campus. Three white-garbed dancers proceeded to erase the drawing with their bodies, sponges, and a damp broom.

The artist captured the performance with stop-motion photography. She projects that in a video here, and makes another wall drawing around it, which she has invited gallery visitors to erase. A separate video of that ongoing erasure runs on a monitor to one side of the drawing.

The work poignantly drives home the sheer transience of the creative process, and plays against the attachment we have to art as commodity. We witness the drawings coming to be, and fading away. Gilmore has said she considers herself a sculptor. Her labor-intensive performances, acted out in front of a camera but not spectators, result in objects or altered environments that can be viewed as sculptures. But her videos are more than merely documents: They are works of art in themselves. Three are on view here (and no art objects — although you can see one in “PAINT THINGS: beyond the stretcher” at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum).

In “Between a Hard Place,” Gilmore, dressed in a black silk cocktail dress, black gloves, and gaudy yellow pumps, kicks and elbows her way through five gray sheetrock walls. The pretty clothes contrast with the gritty work, which would be better accomplished with the swing of a sledgehammer than a high kick with a high heel.

For Gilmore, art does not begin and end with a single object or action. So where is the art? It's dispersed over time and space — a video here, a photograph there, a sculpture and video elsewhere, and in snippets on the Internet. That makes it harder to pin down. With Szegedi, it's not a simple drawing, but a participatory experience of drawing and erasure. If you're not there to experience it, you can catch it on Vimeo, where her virtual drawings may be less tangible, but they capture the swell and ebb of a drawing's life more effectively than the object itself could.