

## Love, Terror, and Happy Accidents: Kate Gilmore at MOCA Cleveland

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Kate Gilmore's Love 'em, Leave 'em, at MOCA

The nascent years of the 21st century have been shaped by subjectivity, identity politics, and social media, wherein identity is not only self-branded as subjective, but carefully crafted for public consumption. In that context it's rare to find art that has the potential to resonate broadly. Many of Kate Gilmore's works, however, are exceptional representations of (dare I say) "universal" human struggle and suffering.

Gilmore's exhibition at MOCA Cleveland features performance art created over the span of nearly ten years. It documents her aesthetic and conceptual development, as well as her lineage in the canon of contemporary art, post-1945. Gilmore simultaneously appropriates and subverts visual and conceptual referents from the largely white, masculine American art historical canon.

One of her most conceptually compelling performances is *My Love is an Anchor* (2004). In it she encases her foot in a bucket of plaster that hardens as she struggles to extricate herself from it. The performance is akin to Chris Burden's 1971 *Shoot* (in which the artist had an assistant shoot him in the arm at close range) in that she places herself in physical danger, documenting the action for future consumption. In some ways, *My Love is an Anchor* is more risky than Burden's performance, as Gilmore performed and documented the piece in the solitude of her studio.

In it she moves from a space of control to one of panic as the pressure of the hardening plaster becomes more and more painful and she realizes that she is unable to free herself. Each hammer blow she inflicts on the plaster and bucket reverberates in her bones, making attempts at freedom all the more agonizing. At the end of the 7:05 minute video, her terror is palpable. The documentation ends and the viewer is left assuming that she called someone to help her out of the perilous predicament. MOCA staff members explained that this was a learning experience for Gilmore: she realized that she should not conduct such actions alone. But the outcome of her lack of foresight is simultaneously compelling and problematic.

As allegory, this aspect of *My Love is an Anchor* illustrates a universally human reality—namely, that the struggles and existential crises that overtake us are often best remedied by interactions with others. Yet Gilmore's imprudence and lack of attention to detail also weakens the conceptual content. The title of the piece is underscored by a crudely painted heart with a sash of red fabric spewing from it. One is left wondering if the cartoon-like image is meant to serve as a foil to her corporeal struggle and suffering. Moreover, the title of the piece becomes cynically ironic in context. Perhaps, in the end, the joke is on the artist: her love, or *a love*, becomes not an anchor, but the liberator.

The most evocative piece in the exhibition is *Standing Here* (2010), a video of the artist climbing out of a square column of drywall. Shot from above, Gilmore dons a red polka-dot dress, black pumps, and sturdy black gloves. She punches and kicks holes in the drywall, creating a ladder of sorts that will free her from the confines of the deep, narrow space. While there is a general theme of struggle and clawing one's way out of the mire, the piece also has gender implications, as it is made by a young woman navigating the historically white, masculine art world. Her physical strength and vulnerability are simultaneously displayed, and her body is shown as a power force, but the feminine accoutrements—the dress, the pumps, the black stockings with runs in them—remind us that the role of women in art has historically been as object, and only recently as empowered agent-creator.

Beyond the art historical connotations, *Standing Here* resonates with this moment in American history, as Gilmore's performance is also akin to the day-to-day struggles of people attempting to survive from day-to-day in the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse.

Gilmore created one piece—*Love ‘em, Leave ‘em*—specifically for MOCA Cleveland. As performance it is impressive, yet the detritus left behind—an enormous white pyramid structure with stairs on either side with a television-screen-shaped hole that reveals broken pots and black, white, and pink tempera paint—abounds with ambiguity. The performance involved Gilmore carrying hundreds of vases filled with paint up each side of the structure and dropping them through a hole at the top, resulting in a three-dimensional “painting” referencing Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionist action paintings. And, like the polka dot dress in *Standing Here*, the ceramic pots (which shatter as she drops them from above) reference femininity and, in this piece, the historical vision of the female body as a container and reproductive vessel.

*Body of Work* is a representative sample of pieces by an artist who is interested in process and in critiquing and referencing the history of American art. The exhibition is laudable for a number of reasons, namely that Gilmore does not shy away from the accidents that occur in the creative process—“happy” accidents that lead her down new, thought-provoking paths.

Kate Gilmore: *Body of Work*

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