

On exhibit: Work by Kate Gilmore and Suzanne McClelland at UAlbany

In UAlbany exhibits, an artist struggles while another examines male interactions

By Steve Barnes

November 20, 2013



A view of the artwork of Kate Gilmore on display at the University Art Museum on the campus of UAlbany seen here on Thursday, Nov. 14, 2013 in Albany, NY. The title of her show is "A Tisket, A Tasket". (Paul Buckowski / Times Union)

In Kate Gilmore's video performance work "Star Bright, Star Might," the artist struggles to push her face through a star-shaped hole cut in a large sheet of wood that obscures the rest of her body. In its original shape, the hole is too small for her head; for seven minutes and 36 seconds, she pushes at the points with chin, cheek and forehead, trying to break the wood outward and enlarge the space. She speaks no words, making a language of sorts from grunts and other audibles of exertion. The effort and resultant abrasions on her face become a metaphor for the lengths to which people are willing to go for celebrity.

In another video, shot from above, Gilmore first breaks through the bottom of a drywall panel into a tall box the size of a telephone booth. Clad in a red dress with white polka dots and high-heeled buckle shoes, she punches and kicks holes in the four walls to give herself purchase to climb up to turn off the camera. The task takes 10 minutes, 47 seconds.

The title work of "A Tisket, A Tasket," Gilmore's current show at the University Art Museum on the University at Albany's uptown campus, was created in the museum last month. Taking advantage of the soaring ceilings in the center of the exhibit space, Gilmore placed a camera at the top of a scissor lift. In the resulting video, the stationary lens looks down at her as, for 32 minutes and 14 seconds, she pushes dozens of woven baskets full of pale-green paint up ramps that encircle a 9-foot-high wooden rectangle. The baskets leak and slosh paint, covering the wooden structure and Gilmore as she slides down the slippery ramps, often on her backside. In the exhibit, the splattered structure stands near the flat-screen TV on which the video plays in an endless repeat.

Called one of the "10 women artists of the new millennium you should know" by the Huffington Post earlier this month, Gilmore continues in the tradition of feminist performance and video artists from the 1970s to the 1990s, such as Marina Abramovic and Karen Finley. In the eight videos in the UAlbany show, each lasting from seven minutes to more than half an hour, Gilmore sets herself a task to accomplish; shot in single takes, the videos follow Gilmore, usually wearing a dress and heels, as she smashes through walls, places about 80 flowerpots filled with black paint onto a pair of bookcases, attempts to break her leg and foot free from a bucket of hardened concrete and piles up chairs and other furniture to try to reach an overhead camera. Unlike in the video with the drywall box, Gilmore doesn't succeed; the video ends with the camera still beyond her reach.

"I didn't show that ... for a while after I made it because I was disappointed," says Gilmore, speaking on the phone from New York City, where she lives. "But then I realized failure is a part of it." She imagines the characters she plays in the videos to be efficient, accomplished women, dressed for a professional office or a night out; the work gains power, resonance and universality from the juxtaposition of their appearance and the messy, physical, often destructive tasks in which they're engaged.

Writing about Gilmore's appearance in the videos as both creator and character, the artist Suzanne McClelland, who has a concurrent exhibit on the second floor of the UAlbany museum, says, "(Her role) changes in a seamless way so that the focus for a viewer can never be solely on Kate but on what we all do and how we all do it."

The centerpiece of McClelland's show is "Furtive Gesture," a work with a ribbon of thousands of images and words on a variety of media that, affixed with brass tacks, encircle the University Art Museum's upper gallery. Known for abstract paintings that incorporate text, McClelland is here exploring male interaction, particularly the handshake and the hug.

Taken from news coverage of politicians, celebrities and other public figures, iconic photos, manipulated images and photocopies from a published primer on hugging, "Furtive Gesture" suggests an unbound book, a timeline, the bulletin board of an obsessive. Corinna Ripps Schaming, the museum's associate director and curator of the two exhibits, writes, "McClelland deftly combines these unlikely pairings into singular images that zero in on shared hand gestures, rather than on individual facial features, to thwart both the power of recognition and the recognition of power."

Although the shows aren't meant to be seen as companion exhibits, the artists — longtime friends who share teaching responsibilities for a class at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan — have some common themes and sensibilities, says Janet Riker, the museum's director. Central among them is the portrayal and interpretation of the human body. McClelland looks at the way it's used in relation to other people; Gilmore uses hers to make art.

Says Riker, "They're separate shows, intended to stand independently. They're connected by the way both (artists) are concerned with the body, the gesture. That's enough for them to be comfortable together."

sbarnes@timesunion.com • 518-454-5489

If you go

"A Tisket, A Tasket" by Kate Gilmore and "Furtive Gesture_CEDEpart2" by Suzanne McClelland

Where: University Art Museum, University at Albany uptown campus, 1400 Washington Ave., Albany

Hours: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, noon to 4 p.m.

Saturday

Admission: Free

Info: 442-4035 or <http://albany.edu/museum>