

DiverseWorks premieres subtly political 'Only in Your Way'

By [Molly Glentzer](#), Houston Chronicle
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A few big-name American artists have quit projects as a protest of the Trump presidency - witness Christo's decision last week to abandon his controversial plan to drape reflective fabric across an Arkansas River canyon in Colorado because he no longer wants to work with its landlord, the federal government.

But the new administration could also inspire an outpouring of activist art.

In Houston, the stirrings began during the evening of the inauguration, when DiverseWorks premiered "Only in Your Way" - although this newly commissioned project by New York artists Kate Gilmore and Heather Rowe doesn't look or sound overtly political.

A slightly elevated, bright-red runway follows the walls of the L-shaped gallery, passing through several pergol-alike structures with metal posts that also support smallish assemblages of architectural remnants, mirrors and mesh screens. Might those assemblages be wordless transit signs? Or are we looking at the ruins of a landscape that has been stripped bare? And what do we have to do with it, since we can't escape our own reflections in the mirrors?

A lone performer - a woman - paces the runway in red sweatpants, a baseball cap and hiking boots. She's gripping an elegant but heavy-looking sculptural object with both hands. The thing looks like it might be a futuristic lyre, and it has an embedded speaker that projects a snippet of a lyric from the ballad "I Will Always Love You."

You remember this song. Maybe you once belted it out in your car after somebody broke your heart, or just belted it out because it made you feel good. You keep expecting the big refrain to come, but only that one line keeps repeating, in between pregnant pauses, like a broken record.

And it's not exactly right. The original line is "I would only be in your way." Gilmore and Rowe have sampled it a bit so it's more aggressive: "I will only be in your way."

The woman in red repeats, too: She walks back and forth, forth and back, the length of the runway, for longer than you will probably stick with her. She's working a three-hour shift.

Or at least that's the plan.

"We'll see how things go in terms of endurance," DiverseWorks director Xandra Eden said.

Fourteen Houston dancers have signed up to take turns giving Gilmore and Rowe's "durational performance" on Fridays and Saturdays through mid-March. They get to choose which of three props they'll carry, each with speakers playing the same song fragment.

Gilmore and Rowe, who have both appeared in the prestigious Whitney Biennial, are separately renowned for sculptural art that addresses gender issues. They first paired up last fall to create stage sets for "Virtually There," a New York performance with choreography by the great Karole Armitage, inspired by Oscar Schlemmer's avant-garde 1922 "Triadic Ballet."

DiverseWorks' site-specific piece, curated by Rachel Cook, is the artists' first gallery collaboration.

Gilmore and Rowe were there opening night, looking calm but feeling a little unsettled. It didn't help that a severe thunderstorm raged outside, filling the streets with water just a few days after a Houston flood.

Rowe, who seemed to be the more pragmatic, process-oriented of the two, created the speaker-sculptures and the pergolas. "I'd been making wall pieces similar to this and knew I wanted to pull them out into space," she said.

Gilmore, who devised the runway and performance, said she tends to work "emotionally." She initially envisioned her part of the project as something more joyful. She had intended to explore the complexity of love, using a cheesy pop song as a vehicle - "making it bleed in a way, so it has some sort of real human element," she said. "Then November happened."

So the performer evolved into a more militaristic character committed to serious labor (thus, the sweatpants and boots), and the song became a political mantra.

"I'm interested in this idea of this action that has to happen over and over again in order to achieve something," Gilmore said. She was painfully aware that Donald Trump was on a dais in Washington, D.C., waving to crowds that day.

"It's important that we're here," she said.

Rowe said her art has always involved fragmentation and ripping things apart. "I don't know if the work necessarily changed, but the ways of thinking about it have. The representation of fragmentation can be a lot of things."

"Only in Your Way" succeeds for that reason.

The piece provokes without telling viewers what to think. The woman in red could just be heartsick about a romantic partner. The performer's attitude will greatly influence how viewers interpret her: She could be a zombie or a warrior.

And though Gilmore may see her from a feminist perspective, she hasn't dressed the character in anything so obvious as a pink hat.

From any side of the political divide, you can see her your way.