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Kate Gilmore's videos bring humorous approach to female struggle

By Alice Thorson, 11/23/2014



"Star Bright, Star Might" video still (2007), by Kate Gilmore

There's a lot of dropping, throwing, punching, kicking and breaking in the videos of Kate Gilmore. As the 39-year-old New York artist characterized her approach in a recent interview at Block Artspace, "I'm going to do some damage."

But as seen in a career overview of nine videos at the Artspace, Gilmore turns these acts, usually associated with anger, into expressions of creativity.

The goal, she says, is "transformation," rather than destruction, in works that explore age-old female struggles with relationships, self-esteem and the obstacles presented by a male-dominated world.

Feminist? Yes. But Gilmore makes it lots of fun, often donning quintessentially feminine attire — party dresses and pumps, evening gloves — in videos that document her efforts to extricate herself from traps and tight spots.

The earliest piece in the show, “My Love Is an Anchor” (2004), finds Gilmore, hammer in hand, trying to free one of her feet from a bucket of hardened plaster. This staple of “I Love Lucy”-style comedy takes on expanded meaning in the setting of the artist’s studio, where it’s clearly meant as commentary on the struggles of the female artist.

Gilmore perseveres, no matter the obstacle.

In “With Open Arms” (2005), she plays a fresh-faced ingenue making a stage appearance against a backdrop of glittering stars. Over and over, she flings her arms wide and gives a dazzling smile, only to be pelted repeatedly with tomatoes. Undeterred, she matter-of-factly wipes off the mess and resumes her performance.

Block Artspace director/curator Raechell Smith has been tracking Gilmore’s work for a while. The exhibit is an inspired choice for the Artspace’s celebration of its 15th anniversary, continuing the themes introduced in the gallery’s inaugural “Viewing Room” exhibit Smith organized in 1999, featuring videos by Janine Antoni, Lucy Gunning, Pipilotti Rist and Gillian Wearing.

Like them, Gilmore uses her own body to dramatize the realities women are up against and to counter expectations of female behavior and demeanor. Rare is the video where she does not emerge dirty and disheveled after performing any number of ungraceful and ungainly maneuvers.

In “Main Squeeze” (2006), she films herself straining and wiggling to make her way through a narrow space that resembles ductwork, capturing the process on two screens, one showing her grimacing face, the other her flailing feet.

In 2007, Gilmore created “Star Bright, Star Might,” documenting her efforts to push her face through a star-shaped cutout in a thin wall. Pushing repeatedly with her head and chin, she succeeds in bending and tearing the opening to the point where she can poke her head through it. Her expression at this accomplishment is a mix of frustration, triumph and reproach. She’s still trapped — the blasted-out star performs the function of medieval stocks.

Anyone who has weathered the end of a relationship or sought a new beginning will identify with “Wallflower” (2006), a two-screen piece capturing the artist pushing and dropping what appears to be all of her earthly possessions through a hole in the floor, yielding an unruly sculptural abstraction in the room below. Jessica Stockholder’s sprawling 3-D collages of everyday objects and materials come to mind; trained as a sculptor, Gilmore is equally mindful of the play of color and shape.

The 2010 Whitney Biennial included Gilmore’s “Standing Here” (2010) in which she climbs the interior of a column of drywall by kicking holes in it. As usual, she’s dressed to kill in party dress and heels. The column she is trapped within evokes a history of female confinement, from Rapunzel’s tower to the glass ceiling, just as the drywall functions as a metonym for the largely male domain of architecture.

The Artspace exhibit includes a related work, “Between a Hard Place” (2008). The video opens with the artist donning a pair of gloves as for an evening out, but the stars of the show are her bright yellow pumps.

In Gilmore’s hands, they are divorced entirely from their longstanding come-hither associations and employed instead as battering and punching tools enabling her to make her way through five gray-painted Sheetrock walls. The destruction she leaves in her wake, revealing snippets of bright yellow paint on the back of the gray walls, resembles nothing so much as a Clyfford Still painting.

Gilmore plays with the history of abstraction in many of her works, spoofing the macho mythology of abstract expressionism in “Love Em, Leave Em” (2013). The performance centers on a minimal white construction, with a TV-shaped opening in the center framing a kind of stage, with stairs leading up to the top on either side.

Gilmore filmed herself laboriously climbing the stairs with ceramic pots of paint, then dropping them through the top of the construction to shatter and spill on the stage below.

“I used 215 pots with birds and flowers filled with paint,” she explained to a gathering of KCAI students. “This is what happens when you’re making a Pollock out of a Martha Stewart garden pot.” Gilmore’s “Built to Burst” (2011) finds the artist standing in the well of an inverted ziggurat construction, surrounded by white pots filled with colored paints. Filmed from her favorite overhead God’s-eye view, they look like eyeballs, until the artist commences smashing them one by one, in an over-the-top demonstration of expressionist catharsis, feminized by the sounds of clattering crockery. Gilmore loves to make a mess, as if avenging centuries of dishwashing, laundry and floor scrubbing, and like generations of women artists who precede her, she takes a critical view of the male canon. The elaborate constructions she creates or destroys in her video performances are a way, she says, of “making fun of macho labor.”

All of these elements — the construction and destruction, the commentary on abstraction, making a mess — come together in a piece newly created at Block Artspace.

For “Beat It,” Jason Milford, a professional fabricator, used lumber and drywall to construct a cylindrical structure on a platform according to Gilmore’s instructions. Another team stenciled the interior and exterior with repeated iterations of the words “Beat It.” When the artist arrived, she set about destroying it and, as usual, captured the process on video.

The exhibit includes both the tattered and gutted structure and the video, which was shot from directly above, so that the first image one sees is a minimalist white-on-white circle in a square.

For this performance, in addition to the innovation of text, Gilmore bashed the piece to bits working from the outside. In the video, we watch as the interior fills up with fragments from her dismantling; midway through she joins the mess inside and starts lifting and pushing the fragments through the 41/2 - foot circular opening at the top.

The whole thing is like watching the construction of a synthetic cubist collage, but instead of French or Spanish, the torn words evoke an American pop song.

Gilmore minimized her own presence in this work; as she put it, “I become more abstracted.” Yet she is an utterly beguiling performer, and this shift away from self is a risk, albeit one she feels she needs to take to enlarge her artistic frame of reference.

Judging from the past decade, there is every reason to expect she will punch her way through.