

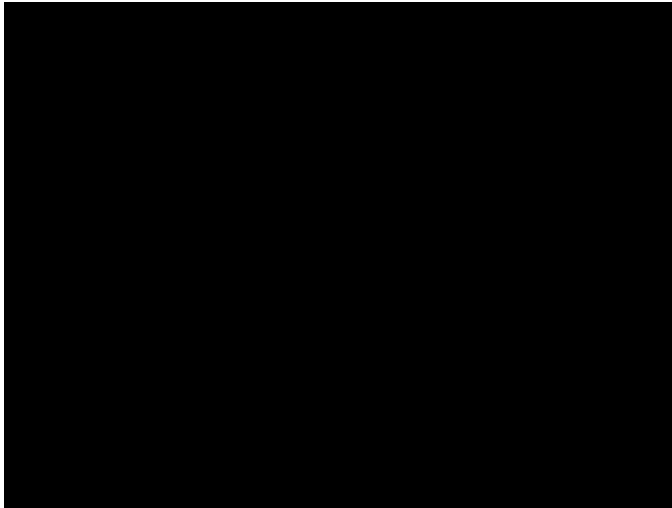


Kate Gilmore

By Lyra Kiloton

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Hearts, stars, chocolate, and even the color pink are forces to be reckoned with in this artist's physically demanding videos.




Amid all the vicious mudslinging and claims for history-making during last year's American presidential campaign, one of the rallying cries that continue to resonate is **Hillary Clinton's** assertion that the glass ceiling now has 18 million cracks. No one can deny that it was a watershed year for women in American politics, yet despite all the wolf shooting and warmongering, broken ceilings remained merely in the realm of metaphor.

For **Kate Gilmore**, however, to break a ceiling is an instruction to be followed literally. Fiercely swinging a sledgehammer or powerfully kicking through drywall, in her videos the 32-year-old New York-based artist sweats, pants, and is covered in white dust, all the while wearing a pretty frock and high heels. Her actions are focused and simple, as though she were following a one-sentence script: roller-skate up a wooden platform drizzled with chocolate syrup; hack apart a giant wooden heart with an ax; force face through a star shape cut into bright orange plywood. The bluntness of her acts seems appropriate for the female stereotypes Gilmore parodies, yet this is not your mother's feminist video art: lipstick, color-coordinated hair ribbons, and an eagerto-please smile usurp 1970s scraggly underarm hair and vaginal scrolls.

With a background in sculpture, Gilmore moved toward performative actions when she noticed that people visiting her studio were drawn as much to the wild fringes of the room, stacked and overflowing with her stuff, as to her artwork. The self-described pack rat explains that "my humor, my messiness, and my disasters weren't coming out in the work." She decided to cast her chaotic self as a character in photographs interacting with objects or sculpture. Her first attempt was in 2001 — with none other than Hillary Clinton in mind, she donned a royal-blue suit and posed as though she were engaging in bizarre pursuits, like building a mud hut or trying to hang a fancy chandelier while standing on a lurching platform. Stubborn perseverance in the face of futility emerged as her leitmotif, an indirect homage to the battles that women of Hillary's generation, like the artist's own mother, had to fight. Gilmore describes this generation as "very successful, yet conflicted; they were composed but full of inner rage."

From these initial experiments, Gilmore began to dilute specific characters (she also played **Martha Stewart** and a prom queen) into more of an everywoman, and found the medium of video an ideal way to combine action and sculpture. Her videos are single-channel, short, and filmed with a stationary camera in one take. However, despite the switch in media, the physicality of sculpture remains primary. In *Between a Hard Place* (2008), she is shown kicking and punching through several layers of gray drywall and plywood until she arrives at the final wall, painted canary yellow to match her heels. And in *Every Girl Loves Pink* (2006), a ceiling-mounted camera captures the artist wedged uncomfortably into a triangular space, nearly drowning in crumpled pieces of cotton-candycolor paper. She struggles to get out or even attain enough leverage to move, to no avail. Her works sometimes include crudely made hearts and stars in the background, which function as cuddly witnesses to her unwieldy acts, and regarding her sugary palette, she explains, "I like doing brutal things with hyperfeminine colors."



Much like **Bruce Nauman**, who has turned many a cliché on its head simply by acting it out, Gilmore subverts stereotypes by exploiting themes used in early video art, such as physical endurance and limitation. And yet, while her works are as psychologically rife as those of precursors such as Nauman, **Vito Acconci**, and **Marina Abramovic**, they possess a tragicomic aspect quite their own. Watching her videos, one vacillates between anxiety at the threat of danger, and the funny-sad discomfort that occurs when confronted with Beckettian absurdity. Gilmore's trials thwart victorious resolution — if she achieves said goal (like finally shoving her face through the plywood), we see a vaguely confused expression that seems to question why she was engaged in the senseless action to begin with.

What is clear, though, is that Gilmore is wryly commenting on the classic third-wave feminist conundrum: Do we reject a constricting, male-defined femininity, or have we now arrived at a point where we are empowered enough to "have it all" and can welcome back our dainty accessories? Gilmore herself asserts that her intentions are not limited to the experience of being female. Like Sisyphus, or the female protagonist in **Kobo Abe's** novel *Woman of the Dunes*, who must shovel sand all day long in order to survive, senseless struggle becomes a metaphor for existence (notably, Gilmore's upcoming project in Miami will involve sand). And while Gilmore's videos may seem to read as exercises in pure futility, she sees them as expressions of defiance. Indeed, because of her enlivening dismissal of complacency or defeat, the sense of revolt in her works is contagious. In the cringeinducing video *With Open Arms* (2005), Gilmore is dressed in a strappy lavender dress with a matching flower in her hair. Behind her, the backdrop is frosted with awkward silver stars. She spreads her arms outward in a "ta-da!" gesture, smiling broadly. An overripe tomato is hurled toward her and hits the backdrop with a smack. This repeats: "ta-da!" smack "ta-da!" smack. Soon covered with dripping red pulp, she continues to present herself with effusive confidence, despite an invisible public of detractors.

Kate Gilmore's work is on view at Franco Soffiantino Arte Contemporanea, Turin, through Apr. 18 and will be on view at Locust Projects, Miami, in May.

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