

HEAD-ON COLLISION FEARLESS KATE GILMORE TURNS ACCIDENTAL CHAOS INTO SERIOUSLY FUN ART.

BY AMY LAROCCA

IT IS SOMETIMES terrifying to be Kate Gilmore, the 32-year-old video artist who spends her time constructing obstacles—plaster walls, piles of rocks—that she then demolishes: kicking, hacking, clawing, and hurling her weight. Once, she stepped in a bucket of wet plaster with plans to bang her leg free. It didn't work. She could not, in fact, move at all. "That," she says, "was bad."

Currently, you can see Gilmore using her head to break through a too-small star cut in a sheet of plywood in *Star Bright, Star Might*, part of a group installation projected in Times Square. Were there splinters? "No," she says, laughing, "but it wasn't pleasant. And my lipstick got smeared." You'll find another piece in the Brooklyn Museum's "Reflections on the Electric Mirror: New Feminist Video" show. In that, she struggles to place 75-pound objects onto shelves dripping with goopy paint.

Struggle is Gilmore's primary subject, which is perhaps partly why she's enjoying a star moment in these extra-struggly times. She plays fierce women undergoing messy, Sisyphean tasks, as if they were in a high-concept *Fear Factor*. "I've always been obsessed with the idea of the underdog, and the idea that what is assumed of you isn't necessarily what you are," says Gilmore, who in the past year has had solo shows everywhere from Texas to Turin. "It's in that transformation from what is expected to what you really are that struggle happens."

Gilmore works in a Long Island City building covered with graffiti across the road from P.S. 1. Plans for the former factory to be granite-countertop-condominiumed were shelved when the market slumped, and she and her fellow artist-tenants continue to tinker happily away in their somewhat decrepit rooms. Gilmore started making videos about seven years ago, during her final year of graduate school at the School of Visual Arts. She was studying sculpture but found the medium too static and impersonal. She tried live performance but found that too distracting (*Is everyone enjoying themselves?* she'd wonder. *Are they laughing?*). And so she turned to performance-process videos, producing manufactured challenges that are curiously moving, as well as refreshingly nondidactic. "If you don't fit into a specific way of being, you just have to find your own

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way," she explains. "My way, I guess, just happens to be a bit on the brutal side."

Gilmore plays the central character in all of her works, and she takes on her missions while (her word) "appropriately" dressed, in shifts and pumps and tidy straight hair. "It's important that it's clearly a woman doing these things," she says of her wardrobe choices. "I don't have a huge feminist agenda per se," she adds, "but it's also important that the women are macho and tough and can accomplish Herculean tasks while being nicely dressed." (The clothes, it should be noted, come from Loehmann's or Filene's. "I hate the idea of waste," she says, "and they get ruined.")

Reflecting real-life situations in abstract ways used to involve Gilmore channeling cultural icons—women whose femininity was under popular discussion: Martha Stewart, or Hillary Clinton during her big-headband, cookie-baking days. "You could tell she was trying to be this person she was not," says Gilmore of her fascination with Clinton. (The characterizations were never explicit; she used them to help herself focus.) These days, though, her characters are based on anonymous career women. In *Higher Horse*, for example, Gilmore, dressed to the nines, stands atop a pile of rubble while two strapping men take sledgehammers to her pedestal. She repeatedly tries to scramble to the top, her expression flickering between confidence and frustration. In the end, she doesn't make it.

Lauren Ross, who curated the Brooklyn Museum show, admires the way Gilmore represents women's limitations—"both self-imposed and imposed on us by others." While feminism is present, it's not heavy-handed. "I really enjoy being a woman, and I wouldn't want it any other way," Gilmore says, "though it can be hard getting through the day and going against the machine all the time. But I see my work as hopeful because these women are so committed to getting out of a predicament regardless of the pain and struggle. Their determination is wonderful."

Later this month, the artist will decamp to Miami, where she plans to hurl herself to the bottom of a very deep ditch, then try to get out. "I'm nervous about that one," says Gilmore, who's been lifting weights and bulking up in preparation. "I'll get out. It may not be the way I want to get out, it may not be pretty, but I'll get out. Hopefully." ■

A still from *Star Bright, Star Might*, playing in Times Square.



Photograph by The Selby