



## THE WORKING BODY

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Exhausting. That word keeps returning to my mind when thinking about Kate Gilmore's works. Exhausting in their repetition, their doggedness, their excessiveness. Exhausting in the way that word might be *sighed* after a satisfying challenge.

The body—the artist's own, or those of other women—is the central element of Gilmore's practice. This is obvious. What is less clear, what is more confusing, is the body itself. Gilmore works the body, throwing it up against absurd physical tasks, constructions of gender, and art historical narratives. In these confrontations, the body projects and accepts, activates and submits, and is constantly in the midst of experience. Gilmore's works are a sensory overload; you can hear the scraping, smashing, crashing, heaving, grunting; you can smell the hay, chocolate sauce, or gallons of freshly spilled paint; you feel the slippery wetness, aching muscles. This coarse physicality makes it difficult for viewers to fully abstract what they are watching, as mediated and stylized as it can be.

In many of Gilmore's earliest video works, her strength is tested as she exposes herself to risk and harsh treatment. In *My Love is an Anchor* (2004), her leg is encased in a bucket of hardening plaster, which painfully expands. Viewers watch as Gilmore becomes increasingly desperate, writhing on the floor, covered in debris, stockings ripped. Gilmore's recorded duress is reminiscent of the private in-studio works of Gina Pane, such as *Escalade non-anesthésiée* (*Unaestheticized climb*, 1971), a set of photographs which depict Pane climbing, barefoot, up a ladder-like structure covered with sharp protrusions. Pane's bodily risk is still palpable today; as in Gilmore's works, the lens provides for a fresh encounter with the infliction. In *With Open Arms* (2005)

*A Construction for Disaster*, 2003, video stills, video with sound, 13:08 minutes.  
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.

Gilmore appears as an enthusiastic performer, a soft purple flower tucked behind her ear. Presenting herself with triumphant pride, she meets a galley of harsh critics, who ruthlessly pelt her face with tomatoes. With the throwers stationed off-screen, the focus is solely on the physical impact; as with *My Love is an Anchor* the body is learning (the hard way), gaining some absurd knowledge of these materials. In turn, the body's own integrity, its limits and strengths, are tested.

In these and other video works, Gilmore uses her body in a way that recalls the havoc of silent film star Buster Keaton's physical comedy (indeed, Keaton is a figure that Gilmore cites, and has named work after).<sup>1</sup> Works like *A Construction for Disaster* (2003), where Gilmore attempts to stack papers in a tall pile, while they are continually blown away by a fan, or *Cake Walk* (2005), where the artist, in roller skates, attempts to climb a precarious plywood structure dripping with chocolate sauce, play up the comical element. Other more constrained situations, such as in *Every Girl Loves Pink* (2006), where Gilmore struggles to pull her contorted body out of a pile of crumpled pink paper, emphasize physical duress. Film theorist Noël Carroll has proposed that physical comprehension, rather than narrative analysis, is essential in interpreting Keaton's work; in this, Carroll looks towards to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of bodily intelligence, "a uniquely bodily species of understanding involved in the process of our dealing with physical objects—in our manipulation of things and other concrete operations."<sup>2</sup> Like Keaton, Gilmore encounters a series of problems to be faced or solved, exhibiting both a lack and excess of bodily intelligence, at times failing spectacularly, at others emerging as resilient and successful.<sup>3</sup>

It is productive to keep this concept in mind when considering Gilmore's work: the body as a sensory nexus and physical force. While narratives and characters crop up in Gilmore's performances (the jilted lover, the over achiever, the repressed working woman), they never quite gel; the physicality of her presence overwhelms. Likewise, the highly visual aspects of Gilmore's videos (both their flattened, colorful compositions and the fact that she utilizes a medium of observation), never supercede the bodily presence; rather, they are integrated, interdependent. As Merleau-Ponty wrote: "I do not translate the 'data of touch' 'into the language of seeing' or vice versa—I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body itself."<sup>4</sup> As a performer, Gilmore is constantly aware of the movement and experience of her body as well as its visibility; the body as a tool is inseparable from the body as a sign.

As Gilmore's resources grew, and she started producing work in gallery settings as opposed to the studio, she began to meet materials in a more assertive way, taking them on. In *Between a Hard Place* (2008), the artist, wearing a black dress and yellow heels, tears her way through a series of grey walls, tunneling into the centre of the frame. Reaching the final wall (the same yellow shade as her shoes) at last, she greets it resignedly, walking off screen to leave a full-frame, shredded composition. *Standing Here* (2010) shows Gilmore emerging at the bottom of a 15-foot shaft made from sheet rock, proceeding to punch and kick footholds in order to climb to the top. Here again, the torn strips reveal a yellow-painted interior; clad in a bright red, polka dot dress, Gilmore's body becomes the central compositional element, moving around the structure like a morphing, abstract shape. In these works, Gilmore constructs the situation, but as soon as she enters it, it ceases to be something of her doing, and becomes instead something she must do.

Works such as *Buster* (2011) and *Love 'Em, Leave 'Em* (2013) take the compositional thrust of the in-gallery productions even further, creating highly visual, frame-conscious structures that become fields for paint.<sup>5</sup> In *Buster*, Gilmore descends a shallow set of stairs, upon which over 150 plain ceramic vessels are lined up in rows, filled with white and lavender paint. Stomping and throwing the vessels as she works her way down, Gilmore releases a torrent of color; at the end, the tightly cropped frame is filled to its borders. For *Love 'Em, Leave 'Em*, Gilmore designed a steeply stepped monolithic form, which she repeatedly climbs, hoisting paint-filled vases and pots, which are then tipped over or dropped from the upper platform, exploding wildly below. Colorful and decorative, here the ceramics are tied to the domestic, and symbolize gendered notions of labor, creativity, and value. The items play an ambivalent role in the work; on the one hand, Gilmore is tasked with them, and they are demanding of her body (the performance took almost an hour, Gilmore's longest and most strenuous paint work to date). On the other hand, they are nonchalantly destroyed, and as they shatter, flatten out; their unique patterns coated and obscured, they become secondary to the vibrant array of splashes.

In *Buster* and *Love 'Em, Leave 'Em*, the active fields of color echo Abstract Expressionist drip paintings—a highly gendered reference.<sup>6</sup> In opposition to the notions of freedom, passion, and genius that surround iconic Modernist painters, we see Gilmore's figure struggling, moving through awkwardly arranged spaces. While much has been written about Jackson Pollock's relationship to the prone canvas, Gilmore's body is itself set in the composition, inside the frame, trapped, but kicking, fighting, and figuring its way out.



Artist and critic Mira Schor has posited that the male-dominated discourse of painting has its foundations in scopophilia and exhibits “a covertly gendered dimension: [the] language reveals fear of fluidity and bodily materiality, obsession with the control and delimitation of space, and the elimination of the narrative and the personal.”<sup>77</sup> In her highly optical and extremely fluid, uncontrolled works, Gilmore uses her body to engage with the macho tenets of this history, with equal parts aggression and reverence. Gilmore is not alone in calling out our Modernist male icons. Cheryl Donegan’s video *Head* (1993) also comes to mind; after repeatedly catching a stream of milk in her mouth, the artist spits it against the wall, a clear reference to the ejaculatory narrative of Action Painting. Minimalism is also attacked; Gilmore’s messy live performance work *Through the Claw* (2011), saw four women tear apart a large block of clay, flinging it against the gallery’s pristine walls. In *Gnaw* (1992), Janine Antoni similarly perverted the stoic cube: starting with two 600-lb blocks, one made of chocolate, one of lard, she bit into them, shaping them with consumptive marks. Lynda Benglis’s *For Carl Andre* (1970), a drooping, oozing bronze form, would surely be fodder for its namesake’s worst nightmare. All of these artists take something unfeeling, and make it hyper-sensed, using fluidity and humor to seep into discourse of purity, destabilizing it.

Beyond art history, Gilmore’s work engages with other gendered stereotypes, through color (lavender, hot pink), costume (dresses and heels), and symbols (stars and hearts). While these decidedly feminine cues are typically associated with qualities such as empathy, passivity, and the domestic, Gilmore uses them in such a flippant way that they become strange. In contrast to many of her forerunners in performance art, including Carolee Schneemann and Marina Abramović, Gilmore is never quite herself. Nor is she really anyone else; she dresses in a way that maximizes the potential for identification as woman, as lady. Unlike other artists, such as photographer Cindy Sherman, who use coded clothing and gestures for psychosocial role-play, Gilmore exhibits a striking lack of self-consciousness. What’s brilliant about Gilmore’s clothing is that it can read as both totally essential (as in symbolic, gendered) and totally inconsequential (the woman doesn’t care what she’s wearing). This contradictory relationship to clothing is where a lot of the humor lies: the dresses and heels make her actions more awkward, and thus comical, while also rendering the outfits themselves semi-ridiculous as dependable signifiers of anything, let alone femininity. Gilmore makes use of what might be described as clichés, yet always pushes them beyond that, into a space where they cannot function comfortably as such.

*Main Squeeze*, 2006, video stills, video with sound, 4:59 minutes.  
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.

The body's meaning, the body's statement, is much harder to analyze than speech, text, or object, because it is moving, because it is at once a biological, social, and cultural unit. Art historian Tracey Warr has posited that artists utilizing their own bodies in their art have sought to demonstrate that "the represented body has a language and that this language of the body, like other semantic systems, is unstable, [...] at once inflexible and too flexible."<sup>8</sup> This is an active component of Gilmore's work: her body is inevitably defined while, or despite, the fact that it eludes that control. As Merleau-Ponty wrote,

"The experience of our body... reveals to us an ambiguous mode of existing. ...My awareness of [my body] is not a thought, that is to say, I cannot take it to pieces and reform it to make a clear idea. Its unity is always implicit and vague. It is always something other than what it is, always sexuality and at the same time freedom, rooted in nature at the very moment when it is transformed by cultural influences, never hermetically sealed and never left behind."<sup>9</sup>

As a screen or vehicle, Gilmore uses the body's unity—implicit and vague—to subvert, confront, create, and undermine. Her working body causes viewers to cheer, gasp, recoil, and contemplate, too. How does it feel to be that body in that space? How sharp is the pain, and how dull is the ache, of hammering your own leg free from setting plaster? When you smash a vase underfoot, how do the vibrations feel, making their way up through your bones? This physicality calls us out, almost embarrassingly, for not being in the world with as much force, as forcefully, for never using our bodies in ways that aren't expected. In Gilmore's work, the body is a site of resistance and an agent of wreck, a tool for composition via destruction. Always moving, always in itself, constant, restless, sharp.

<sup>1</sup> Gilmore's *Buster* (2011), in which Gilmore descends a set of stairs, is a particularly witty reference, as Keaton often told others that he got his name from Harry Houdini, who observed him fall down a flight of stairs as a toddler, without injury.

<sup>2</sup> Noël Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 5. Carroll also appeals to Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Against Interpretation," and her assertion that "Instead of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art," an idea which also productively applies to Gilmore's work.

<sup>3</sup> This parallel is drawn from Carroll's descriptions of Keaton's works.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962), 150.

<sup>5</sup> Gilmore started making works in which paint played a primary role in 2009 with *Come Around and Blood from a Stone*. Precursors to this include the aforementioned *Cake Walk* and *Heartbreaker* (2004), in which Gilmore hacks at a large wooden heart with an axe, releasing sprays of a juicy red liquid.

<sup>6</sup> These painterly videos also reflect back onto the torn drywall works; the layers of *Standing Here* and *Between a Hard Place* are reminiscent of more concentric Clyfford Still canvases.

<sup>7</sup> Schor explicitly names Benjamin Buchloh and Yve-Alain Bois, in her 1992 essay "Erotics of Visuality," republished in *WET: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 166.

<sup>8</sup> Tracey Warr, "Preface," *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr (London: Pahidon Press Limited, 2000), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 198.

*Every Girl Loves Pink*, 2006, video stills, video with sound, 6:09 minutes.  
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.

