

Josephine Taylor

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Kenneth Baker | Galleries

Hacking at a 'Heart' in a little yellow dress

All six of New York artist Kate Gilmore's videos at Catharine Clark, in which she performs, put her at risk of serious physical injury, and possibly of ridicule also. With them, she bravely positions herself in a line of masochistic performance art that connects the Viennese Actionists with Carolee Schneeman, Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci and the young Chris Burden.

Consider "Cake Walk" (2005). Here Gilmore glides into the fixed camera's view wearing laced-up yellow roller skates and begins trying to climb a steep platform cobbled together from scraps of plywood. At its top hangs the nominal prize: a Bundt cake beneath a floral festoon.

Wearing a yellow sweater and lavender skirt — "feminine" colors that reappear frequently in her work — she makes one assault on the slope after another, heedless of so-called dignity, banging knees and elbows as she repeatedly loses her tenuous hold on the ramp and rumbles to the floor.

A flow of "blood" — some red fluid or other — begins to issue from high on the ramp, smearing her limbs and clothes, making it impossible to tell whether we see her getting bloodied or just messy. (The red flow also insinuates an old canard: menstrual blood's symbolism of womanhood as an existential curse.)

Either way, the effect is gripping, absurd and occasionally hilarious, in a guilt-inducing sort of way.

The piece ends after almost 10 minutes, when Gilmore finally reaches the cake and clatters down the slope with it, only to toss it aside indifferently.

Much of Gilmore's work pertains to feminist cultural politics. And "Cake Walk" has an aspect of slapstick feminist critique in the artist's girly getup and the indig-

Kate Gilmore: Projected videos; **Josephine Taylor:** Bomb Landscapes: Drawings. Through Jan. 24. Catharine Clark Gallery, 150 Minna St., San Francisco. (415) 399-1439, www.cclarkgallery.com.

nities her insistent quest for the cake visit upon her.

But the work's title and content doubtless also refer acidly to the infamous 2002 remark of Pentagon advisory board member Kenneth Adelman to the effect that an American takeover of Iraq would be "a cakewalk."

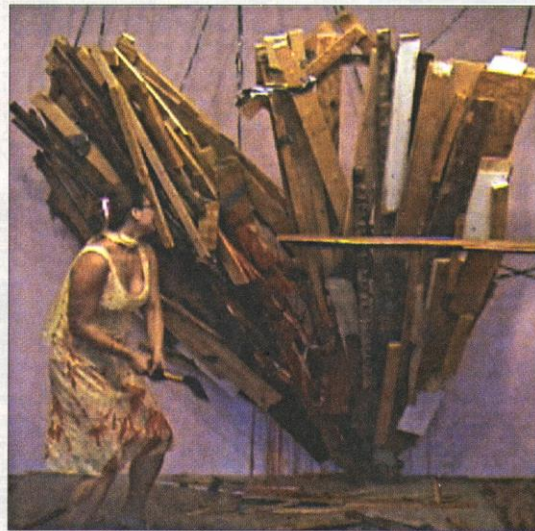
In "With Open Arms" (2005), Gilmore appears in a spaghetti-strap lavender dress tight against a panel pasted with stars seemingly made from the same fabric.

As she repeatedly throws open her arms and smiles, as if to accept a jubilant ovation, tomatoes from off camera begin to pelt her with the speed of major-league fastballs. She continues to throw herself open to abuse for five minutes.

Here she seems to allude deliberately to Vito Acconci's famous 1970 video "Blindfold Catching," in which the blindfolded artist copes with balls thrown at him without warning from outside the frame. Gilmore shifts Acconci's burlesque of macho victimhood into a caricature of pluckiness pounded into pure denial.

Mindless desire gets another satirical roughing-up in Gilmore's "Anything" (2006), in which the fixed camera shoots straight down at a patch of lawn. Straining to reach it — apparently just because it's there — the artist builds herself a rickety tower of chairs, stringing them together with lavender ribbon.

As the risk of a bone-breaking fall increases chair by chair, "Anything" turns into a sort of suspense film that ends... well, see it.



"Heart Breaker" (2004), a single-channel video by New York artist Kate Gilmore.

In "Double Dutch" (2005), Gilmore attempts to jump rope — the rope a loose tangle of ribbons — in stiletto heels on a none-too-solid surface that appears perforated with bullet holes. An allegory of fashion-victimhood? Ask a woman.

The violence implicit in Gilmore's work bursts loose in "Heart Breaker" (2004). In it, wearing high heels and a little yellow dress, she dismantles with a hatchet a giant

"heart" roughly nailed together out of scrap lumber, hung from the ceiling by a few metal bands and evidently implanted with squibs of stage blood.

Taking the thing apart, plainly risking injury yet again, required such exertion on Gilmore's part as to blur all sense of distinction between herself and a character, and between our positions as spectators of an event, of a performance and of a documentary. Never mind gender roles, all roles come in for deconstruction here with hair-raising artistic — if that's the word — economy.

Yet even at this extreme, Gilmore may have intended a reference to an artistic predecessor: the famous performance in which Nam June Paik (1932-2006) hacked an old upright piano to pieces, producing a Cagean musi-

cal spectacle that ironically took to a logical conclusion Romanticism's fascination with violence.

Taylor looking bleak: It takes a lot to upstage the work of San Francisco artist Josephine Taylor, but at Clark, Gilmore manages it, even though Taylor takes up most of the space.

Taylor makes big drawings on paper in a manner descriptively vivid, but distorted in proportions. The logic of her imagery eludes decoding in the way that a fable or legend from a distant tradition might. Her pictures, however, evoke a sense of the distance of her personal obsessions from common — or as people used to say, polite — discourse.

We do not need to know specifically what preoccupies her to sense the urgent tenor of her work. The overall title "Bomb Landscapes" encourages thoughts of nuclear fear and a reading of the works as postapocalyptic dreams of humans and other animals forced into unaccustomed interdependence, reminiscent at points of the myth of Romulus and Remus.

Possibly the drawings will gain immediacy from viewers' mindfulness of the current air assault on the Gaza Strip.

For those who already know Taylor's work, the surprise here will be a series of new pieces she calls "light prints." The imagery in them, consistent with the vision of the large drawings, was made by setting sheets of construction paper to fade in the sun, allowing fastidiously cut and positioned stencils to create shadowy figures by impeding the fading. Taylor has an impressive degree of control over this process, which surely sounds less difficult than it is.

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