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## Life



# Captivating Art

**Mount Mercy Emeritus Professor Jane Gilmor**

# 'I'll Be Back For The Cat' Quite a Book

The book chronicles the work of Mount Mercy professor and artist Jane Gilmor.

by Michael Beirne  
magazine editor

Mount Mercy Professor Emeritus Jane Gilmor's new book "I'll Be Back For The Cat," a career monograph of her work as an Iowan artist, is very interesting and, oftentimes, extremely moving.

Gilmor satirizes the search for meaning in metal repoussé sculptures using an imagery of exaggerated body parts, animals and architectural components. Check out her unique work on these pages. The foreward of "I'll Be Back For the Cat" by Lesley Wright, the director of the Grinnell College Gallery, best describes her work:

*"... In reviewing her work, we are caught up by the absurdity of goddesses in plastic cat masks, by the cheekiness of camouflage hunting blinds for the disabled peeking out from behind ancient stones in Portugal, or by the inaccessibility of the artist herself encased in structure representing fatigue or migration. While we don't see Jane, we are captivated by her creations. They transcend persona and draw us with their interactivity, their playfulness, and their layering care ..."*

The book takes you through Gilmor's career, charting her path from a chapter entitled "1970s: Feminist Performances," through to "2010s: Architectures and Operations." Along the way the reader is stopped cold by the images. For instance, in the photo of "Terrorist Kitty at the Manhattan Bridge," from 1986, the subject is chillingly framed by the World Trade Center towers in the background.

Even more moving are the selections from "Windows '95," where Gilmor was awarded an Iowa Arts Council and University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics grant to basically take the words of the pediatric and long-term patients and turn them into metal sheets of art. One profoundly moving piece was accompanied with a drawing of a rabbit beneath this text:

*"My name is Holly, I had brain surgery. I was very scared. I have been brave. I want to go home. I am a farm girl, I love animals."*

This was included in a large structure (6 1/2 feet tall with a 5 1/2 circumference) with repoussé sheets of notes and images



Jane Gilmor's "Windows '95," a year-long, community-based project in 1995 with the Children's Hospital of the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. All notes and the video's in windows are by the seriously ill children done in workshops. Inside was also covered with notes and had desks and notebooks where viewers could add their stories of illness or hospital stays.

Courtesy of Jane Gilmor

made by the seriously ill patients, one more touching than the next.

This method also makes up a fascinating chapter in the book that examines the relative invisibility of low-wage manual and service industry labor in American society. Gilmor interviewed 50 Grinnell residents and turned the spoken word into a gallery of objects, photographs and repoussé metal books that touched on the subjects' disenfranchised state, while all the while quoting the participants with kindness, generosity, gentle humor and empathy.

The book is beautifully written and even more brilliantly presented, and Gilmor is very happy with it. She thinks all its authors and designers were incredible in communicating insights into her, and adds it is a valuable document of a life's work.

"The way it is discussed and organized connects the work in meaningful ways for me and I hope for a larger audience," said Gilmor. "It gives me a fresh view and overview of my life's work and, for that reason, gives me ideas for future work."





### Gilmor at Mount Mercy

Gilmor became professor of art at Mount Mercy in 1974 and received the prestigious professor emeritus title upon her retirement in May 2012. She holds her B.S. from Iowa State University, an M.A. and M.F.A. from The University Iowa, and has done graduate work at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

"As a result of small classes I got to know students and their work very well," said Gilmor. "Many were very gifted but also came from very sheltered/isolated backgrounds. I always really felt that my students appreciated my attempts to expose them to a broader level of experience."

For 25 years she helped take groups of eight to 12 students to Mexico to study art and culture. She also accompanied Mount Mercy students to New York and Chicago and involved them in many of her community-based projects.

"I learned a great deal from my students and their unaffected insights into the artwork," she added. "Sometimes they had such refreshing perspectives on what art might be to them. Sometimes just learning to teach and taking on a philosophical approach to teaching was a life's work. I wanted students to find their own voices, not just imitate what was going on in art journals or museum shows or Internet sites. That meant having to step back often and let them use me as a resource."

"When they ask 'how do I paint a this or that,' I sometimes frustrated them by saying there isn't one way to do anything in art. Part of your job is to use your own experiences to find your own way."

She often collaborated with Mount Mercy students to give them a model for non-traditional forms such as installation and performance art. For the past 10 years one of her classes, New Genres, was active in creating artworks in abandoned Cedar Rapids buildings that mirror the history of manufacturing in the Czech Village prior to the Flood of 2008.

### Cedar Rapids is Home

She has received two National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist's Fellowships, as well as a McKnight Fellowship and an Arts Midwest Fellowship. She has been awarded residency fellowships in Ireland, Italy, Portugal and the United Kingdom. Two films have been made regarding her work, one by Iowa Public Television in 2007, the other by the McKnight Foundation in Minneapolis in 1996.

Though she has exhibited nationally and internationally for the past 40 years, it is still Cedar Rapids and Mount Mercy that has shaped her unique work in many ways.

***"As a result of small classes (at Mount Mercy) I got to know students and their work very well. Many were very gifted but also came from very sheltered/isolated backgrounds. I always really felt that my students appreciated my attempts to expose them to a broader level of experience."***

"I realized long ago that I couldn't just suit my work to a particular geographic location," said Gilmor. "My work is an intuitive response to my own experiences as well as a cultural critique. I live here and work here and that does shape my view of things. I think my interest in reaching an audience beyond the academic/museum world is the result of living here. I can't say I always succeed at that but communicating on the level of broad, everyday-shared experience has become more important to me over the years."

### A 'Cedar Rapids Production'

Gilmor said she can thank Mount Mercy University for the original idea of doing a career retrospective book, giving her faculty scholarships to do so. And Cedar Rapids played a big part in getting it together as local designer Bill Basler coordinated the actual printing of the book at Cedar Graphics and Mount Mercy students helped scan 2,000 slides. After a bit of nudging, she got the New York designer to let them print in Cedar Rapids, and once they did they agreed the quality was excellent and comparable to the best New York City art printers.

*Continued on next page*



Jane Gilmor and her work, from top left and in order:

- 1- The multi-media artist's *Blind Series*, film and performance tableau from 2003.
- 2- *Beds* (1993)
- 3- The writing (titled *Jack's Weeds*) features an elderly man that some friends found in a drawer after they bought the house.
- 4 *The Architecture of Migration: I'll Be back for the Cat* (2009)
- 5- The artist Jane Gilmor
- 6- *The Architecture of Fatigue* (2002)
- 7- *Picture/Pillow/Story* (1998)

All photos courtesy of Jane Gilmor

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Also, all of the writers in the book have been Iowa residents at one time or another in the '80s or '90s.

She's a big booster of the local art scene.

"In Cedar Rapids and Iowa there is a substantial art community and lots of big cheap spaces to work in," she said. "There is a terrific community of like-minded artists and writers here because of The University of Iowa's large Art School and The Writers Workshop. There's also the University of Northern Iowa's strong art faculty and several area liberals colleges.

"There are some excellent museums as well – The Des Moines Art Center enjoys a national reputation as a cutting-edge exhibitor/collector of contemporary art and the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art and the area University Art Museums bring in major contemporary artists as well as showing regional artists.

"CSPS is probably the most exciting link to both community-based arts and the international avant-garde. It has an international reputation these days, but for the past 20 years it has probably been better known in New York and other art communities outside the Cedar Rapids region."

### **The Future**

An emeritus professor, Gilmor continues her work at Mount Mercy and has faculty status in terms of facilities. A \$25,000 endowed chair was started in her name to give scholarships to art majors with exceptional ability.

She also continues her service to Mount Mercy as volunteer project director for a \$30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts' ARTWORKS to restore an amazing visionary art site on the campus, the William Lightner's Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto, built between 1929 and 1941.

"In general I would credit teaching and the Women's Art Movement of the 1970s with leading me to my many collaborative works – with colleagues, with students, with the community. This work seemed a natural extension of teaching and thus of my life."

And what's churning in Jane Gilmor's head right now?

"Sometimes I wait for something to pounce on me but just as often I just go to the studio to work and hope something good will happen," she said. "One can have lots of ideas that just don't work out; in fact, that's a good thing."

For more information on Gilmor's work and the book, visit [www.janegilmor.com](http://www.janegilmor.com) and [www.prairielightsbooks.com](http://www.prairielightsbooks.com).







I am so sorry  
to leave so many  
weekends  
I had a stroke  
right the wrong  
time I wanted  
to leave it nice  
Jack

