

Jane Gilmor
BLIND an Installation
By Matt Freedman

Let us first consider the objective facts of *Blind*, Jane Gilmor's installation at the AIR Gallery, for it is usually advisable to begin with reliable baseline data the better to appreciate the pandemonium set off by this artist's slyly fantastical imagination. The facts are simple enough; Gilmor has created a room-sized installation of fabric and fabricated metal sculptures who trace their ancestry to a peculiarly designed hunting blind. A three-quarter scale recreation of that blind is actually in the room, surrounded by an extraordinary armature of copper and scrim. More on that later. A six minute film of the original blind (with the artist inside) insinuating itself into highly charged religious sites in Portugal – Druidic stone circles, 5000 year-old dolmens and Catholic convents – is playing on a small flat screen monitor on one wall. Circulating helpfully around the room dispensing Kleenex, vacuuming up and even responding to remote control demands from visitors are three smaller motorized versions of the hunting blind. Shining through a slit in the large blind and projected on a nearby column is a video loop of Gilmor's hand endlessly unzipping a zipper in the blind that contains the projector.

As she has over the past thirty years of work, Gilmor has plinked a number of nerves, some raw, some ticklish, and has gently woven our conflicted strands of amusement and discomfort into something strangely moving and profound. The literal meanings of the object begin to give way under the weight of the overburden of information Gilmor has built into the installation. We might notice, for example, that the big blind looks like a big penis, and the smaller mobile blinds look like smaller big penises dwarfed by the grand central blind/penis, which somehow adds poignance to the absurdity of their determined putt-putting about. The visual and verbal punning of the blind penises is characteristic of Gilmor's work, as is her restraint, if that is the right word, in exploiting the issue. Her observation that it is amusing when hunters disguise themselves as fabric penises to blast away at wildlife with their big shotguns is offered to the viewer without an intervening and enervating polemic. The joke is implicit, latent and all the funnier for that.

Her restraint holds, even in regard to another surreal aspect of the blind's history. The duck blind's manufacturer had a specific reason for its product's appearance; the duck blind is designed to be handicap accessible. This information, and the grotesque hilarity of building a contraption that

allows the physically challenged to indulge in the maiming and crippling of the odd passing duck is once again acknowledged, but not commented upon. A political critique may be read into the military adventurism and the asymmetrical projection of power implied by these mobile bunkers. Gilmor refuses as always to be trapped by specificity, though, and the satire is entirely latent in its obviousness; present, but not accounted for. It is the viewers' privilege and responsibility to draw their own conclusions.

Gilmor in fact, has no interest in condemning the hunters at all or in encouraging us to laugh at them. She is far too sophisticated and generous a spirit for such smallness of vision and such strategic predictability. It must be said in fact that the whole scene is rather jaunty, and we cannot help but be swept up in the slapstick spirit of the thing, checked by the note of dread and caution supplied by the videotape of the hand in its endless Sisyphusian pursuit of a completed zip. That systemic failure of the hand to complete its journey condemns the entire endeavor to an endless limbo. Everything, and everyone (including, crucially, the artist herself) is caught in a permanent vicious cycle, a perverse closed loop of good will, bloodlust, vanity and pure brilliant stupidity that seems close to the core of Gilmor's take on the human condition.

The animating principles behind this project, as they have been for so much of Gilmor's work, are the artist's purity of intent and her complete lack of condescension in approaching her loaded, sometimes politically combustible subjects. The authentically ingenuous character of Gilmor's work distinguishes her from so much contemporary discourse in art. She is that rare artist who is not content to merely adopt a facile political position and is not content to rely purely on irony and bile to ingratiate herself with her audience. She manages to celebrate the strange expression of humanity inherent in the handicapped hunter's blind and she even shares in it.

This inherent decency peppered by a mischievous and subversive streak a mile wide is key to Gilmor's nature as an artist, both conceptually and esthetically. The project itself embodies the spirit of true collaborative art. Gilmor was reluctant to cover up the armature her collaborator Rick Edleman built to her somewhat vague specifications for an entirely different project. "It was so beautiful..." Gilmor writes, "...he was supposed to make something I could cover with fabric though not transparent – but I couldn't bear to cover it because it was gorgeous and not at all my usual awkward eccentric form – eventually I invented the interior and the small ones and the whole little scenario."

Gilmor puts herself where her art is, and her art as a consequence goes far beyond mere diatribe and becomes the stuff of a life. In 1976, for example,

she entered her cat in the Eleventh Annual All-American Glamour Kitty Pageant, a cat beauty contest sponsored by a kitty litter company and modeled on the Miss America Pageant. Her good faith efforts were rewarded with a trip to Miami Beach as a national finalist. Once there, she created a video that documented the bizarre but touching parades, cabaret performances and competitions that preoccupied the subculture of which she was a somewhat marginal member: people who really really love their cats. Gilmor continued to travel back and forth along the human-cat continuum for years following. She appeared in costume as an archetypal cat goddess in ancient and modern ruin sites ripe with historic associations (the Temple of Olympian Zeus in Athens, Luxor's Temple of Karnak, The Manhattan Bridge), reclaiming them for the female psyche in us all.

The film of Gilmor and the blind also touches on the physical interaction of the artist and her work: In recent years the artist has begun to literally put herself where her art is. She has created work that she can inhabit, such as the current hunting blind, or wear, such as in *The Architecture of Fatigue*, a 2002 piece in which the artist, encased in a slumping obelisk, reached out and touched unsuspecting gallery visitors.

Even more to the point, she has created an ongoing body of collaborative work with underprivileged adults and children over the course of many years using a variety of drawing, writing, performative and installation techniques to help bring suppressed stories and opinions to a wider audience. She is actually giving voice to the disenfranchised, instead of simply arguing that the disenfranchised should have a voice.

The seamless connection between Jane Gilmor's life as a teacher and activist and her artistic practice nourishes both and enriches us all.

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