

Messages in Metal by Gilmor

By: Eliot Nusbaum

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Image: "Wall of Found Notes"

Waterloo, IA- Jane Gilmor's work is so entertaining and so amusing in a giddy sort of way, that it's easy to lose sight of its underlying purposes.

If you look long enough at the cat goddesses, derelict toys and crusty metal surfaces that characterize her work, which has been chronicized several times in this column, you come to realize that Jane Gilmor has a lot to say about our beliefs and how we express them.

Crammed-and I do mean-"crammed"- into the two rooms of the Waterloo Municipal Galleries through March 25 is a compilation of Gilmor's two and three-dimensional work, loosely organized around the theme of "Women and Myth" and tied into the two-month long community wide "Celebrating Women: A Community Legacy."

In her work of the past few years, Gilmor, a native of Waterloo, has portrayed women photographically in a number of guises, but most often a goddesses and/or sex objects in cat masks, usually posing among classical or quasi-classical ruins. Lately, the "Great Goddess" has been replaced by a rather scattered-looking woman named Erma. Gilmor defines her as the archetypal "modern" woman.

Images of both the "Great Goddess" and Erma are presented here in a number of ways, but most typically in a traditional, framed, two-dimensional format or imbedded in heavily worked repousse sheet metal that has been wrapped around small temple like sculptures.

Of these characters, Gilmor writes:

"Using feline images as representations of the female psyche, I parody contemporary sex roles and stereotypes. At the same time, the work evokes ancient goddess imagery, which represents the female psyche as a strong creative force...(Erma's) constant state of confusion and skepticism is intended to raise questions about the nature of the myths (and meanings) being 'constructed' and 'deconstructed' within these images."

Several of the three-dimensional temples include small television screens that show continuous loops of videotaped performances. The tapes show anonymous or cat-masked figures that tap-dance or that clap hands patty-cake fashion, but always with the structured activity lapsing into chaos."

The relationship between order and chaos came back to me while reading a new York Times review of a John Marin show that included a quotation from Marin talking about his work. He wanted, he said, to “paint disorder under a big order.”

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This comes mighty close to describing at least one segment of Gilmor’s work, obviously in the case of the tape, but more subtly in terms of what might be described as the over-all texture of her work. The temple sculptures, for example, offer superficial form. Stretched across their surfaces, however, are sheets of wildly worked metal crawling with images of human bodies, body parts, unidentifiable blobs and scrawled handwriting.

Hidden among the scrawled messages on one of the later temples is a subtle shift in emphasis that points to a new, engaging direction in Gilmor’s work. Written above the television screen are the words, “sit down, sit down.”

No great message, obviously, but this represents direct communication with her audience, and direct communication takes a role of ever-increasing importance in Gilmor’s latest work.

The beginnings of this phase go back quite a few years, to a group of notes left in her house by the previous owner, Jack. These notes were simple messages, but both pleasure and pain form their subtext. Here’s an example:
“I am sorry to leave so many weeds. I had a stroke right at the wrong time. I wanted to leave it nice.”

That kind of communication is the basis for a series of wall sculptures and is at the heart of the show’s centerpiece. “Wall of Found Notes” is, literally, a wall-sized work layered with copies of notes from Jack, pages from a young girl’s diary, leaflets, handouts, handbills, kids school papers and other found communications, all scratched into sheets of copper and aluminum. Together they are an album of the most honest kinds of communication.

The metal notes form a patchwork but with hard outer edges (again containing chaos) that lead to a metal “T” shape that extends out from the wall along the floor. Sitting atop the “T” is a small temple structure with a magnified photo of Erma showing through the front “door.”

Both in content and concept, this is a wonderful piece of work. Its texture, color and form please us, while its words engage, touch and inform us, in fact, that could be said about most of Gilmor’s work. It leads us, gently to new understanding.