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A Found Artist - Jane Gilmor found art after wandering through "practical jobs"

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As Cedar Rapids artist Jane Gilmor looks back over her art career, she sees a haphazard, occasionally risky and largely unplanned sequence of events that, when strung together, arrives safely, if a little out of breath, in her jam-packed south-east side warehouse studio. "We didn't have art in school," she says about her early education, sounding as though she hopes this might explain something. It doesn't, of course.

Gilmor, an Iowan whose family has strong Iowa roots, comes across as something of an aw-shucks kind o' gal. She is happy to have you believe that being an artist is something that just sort of sneaked up on her while she wasn't looking. "I'm a found artist", she says, playing on the invention of found art by Marcel Duchamp. And playful she is, but after some 30-some solo and group invitational exhibits from California to Cortona, Italy; installations and performances from Omaha to Luxor, Egypt; a dozen grants and fellowships, critical approval and mention in a variety of news and art journals, as well as a presence in public and private collections across the US and Europe, it is sophisticated play indeed.

"Art can be an intuitive way of making sense of your life," Gilmor says. "Or it can be a social critique." She's familiar with both, favoring the former but finding it impossible to avoid the latter.

From art class to dental accounting

The daughter of a medical technician and a mechanical and electrical engineer, Gilmor grew up in Waterloo, where she says she became a well-organized ("compulsive, really") student who got straight A's. In her senior year she took an elective class, just to try something a little different. She risked the ridicule friends who saw art as a "dummy" class, though, to be fair, the alternative was a feared semester of trigonometry. She aced art. Her academic competitors didn't do as well with trigonometry. Gilmor maintained her pristine grade average and graduated valedictorian of her class.

At this point, the movie version of her life might show Gilmor breaking away from her family and running off to an art commune in New York City inspired by her senior year art teacher-let's call him Mr. Holland. But instead Gilmor enrolled at Iowa State University in Ames, declaring an early major in the promising field of medical technology.

"It sounded practical," Gilmor says a little apologetically; but after all, her mother had done very well in medical technology. Still, she managed to take more art classes and eventually

threw caution to the wind and changed her major to the only slightly more exciting one of textile design and fashion merchandising. A little shamefully Gilmor shrugs and says one more time, "I was trying to be practical."

With a degree in fashion merchandising, Gilmor left for Chicago and a job at Marshall Fields that the campus recruiter promised would get her started on an exciting career in the field for which she had prepared. It didn't take long to figure out that selling pots and pans wasn't going to lead anywhere soon. She quit and took a job as an accountant for two periodontists in the Chicago loop.

While dental accounting isn't a day job that often appears in the biographies of 20th-century artists, Gilmor nevertheless found several aspects of her work exciting. The first was that one of the periodontists turned out to be *the* dentist for local Mafiosi who, it seems, didn't take care of their gums. The second was that Gilmor's teeth and gums became the "good mouth" in research articles written by her employers and published in professional journals. The third, and most important, was that her office was just across the street from the Chicago Art Institute. Gilmor enrolled in evening drawing and painting classes at the Art Institute and was impressed that the instructors rarely showed up, though models usually did.

Making the transition

The early 70's was a time of race riots, anti-Vietnam war protests and politics. It was a hot time for art as well. "The Art Institute exposed me to incredible student work," Gilmor says. "Renegade artists, minimalism. It was a period of revolutionary art."

After one-and-a-half years of periodontic accounting and art instruction, Gilmor left for Europe to visit a boyfriend in Germany. The boyfriend didn't work out but the solo backpack through high and low continental culture did. In a modern version of the classic European grand tour, Gilmor joined a movement of thousands of young people out to experience all that was not US culture.

Mostly because of their convenience and lack of admission fee, Gilmor spent quite a bit of time in European churches. She admits that at first she was only looking for convenient spots to get out of the weather or take a quiet break and didn't fully understand the meanings behind their structure and liturgical symbolism. Yet she soon became fascinated with their appearance and came to appreciate their meditative restfulness-a quality that would become an important part of her art years later.

By the time she returned to the US and Iowa City in 1971, Gilmor had made the final transition from a compulsive and practical student to an unemployed hippie. She found a job as a motel receptionist and enrolled in evening classes at the University of Iowa. Unable yet to declare herself an artist in her own right and break entirely from a need to be practical, she received her teaching certification at Regis, a Catholic school in Cedar Rapids.

At a time when the term "multi-media" had radical and subversive meaning, Gilmor introduced a new art curriculum at Regis that contained a strong multi-media and

performance core. Unaware that other might have objections to her approach, Gilmor recalls a unit in which she had her students create objects and costumes of a fantasy culture. In a ritual designed especially for their classroom culture, the student paraded in costume through the Catholic school and with special rituals buried objects on school grounds.

When Cedar Rapids artist Chuck Barth took a year sabbatical from his teaching post at Mount Mercy College in 1974, he asked Gilmor to substitute for him-he had seen her work and liked it. Gilmor accepted, resigning her job at Regis. By the time Barth returned to claim his post, Mount Mercy had added a new position to its art faculty. Rather than return to teaching high school, Gilmor accepted the offer to join Barth on the faculty. At the same time she started work on a master of fine arts at the UI.

While working on her MFA, Gilmor met artist Judy Chicago and fellow student Ana Mendieta-both of whom became influential feminist artists in an increasingly politicized world. Fabrication photographer and installation artist Sandy Skoglund was a teaching assistant at Iowa when Gilmor was a graduate student. (Gilmor remembers Skoglund asking once if she had noticed that there were no women on the Iowa art faculty. Gilmor insists that until that moment she hadn't.) She also met the critic and feminist art historian Lucy Lippard (an example of Gilmor's work is included in Lippard's text *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*). There was plenty of politics, ritual and, of course, discussion. Consciousness was raised and it was due in large part to this new consciousness that Gilmor turned a silly impulse into a graduate thesis.

While enrolled in graduate art studies, Gilmor entered a beauty pageant on a lark. That is to say, she entered her cat in the Miss Glamour Kitty kitty litter beauty pageant. Sending in a photo of her dressed up cat and a 100-word poem about why her cat, Miss Kitty Glitter, should be Miss Glamour Kitty, Gilmor's lark turned into serious examination of the meanings and rituals of consumerism when she became one of 18 finalists flown to Miami for the final contest. She lugged along what then was bulky, complicated video equipment and took a friend to do the camerawork. When she tried to explain to the event coordinators that her real interest in being there was to create a video performance art work, she realized that not only did they not care, they simply lumped her in with all the other crazy finalists who they held in equally low esteem. Gilmor captured the pageant on tape, using it later for video installations and as the core of her MFA thesis. (Miss Kitty Glitter, by the way, won Miss Congeniality.)

Once, when presenting the Glamour Kitty "performance" to a local women's group, Gilmor was criticized for "perpetuating stereotypes." It was, she admits, a surprising criticism but one that forced her to carefully consider the multiple effects of her work. She continued to use the image of a cat, extending it, abstracting it and ultimately deepening the metaphor. In 1978 at the Temple of Zeus in Athens, she donned cat masks and flowing gowns to pose at the base of huge temple columns. In performance installations, wearing the mask, Gilmor created mystical, ritual dances. Miss Kitty had become a goddess.

'A new public art'

Today Gilmor is adept at questioning what she describes as “cultural myths, particularly those about women.” But she is not a feminist niche artist. Her recent work has stretched her examination of the definition and meaning of ordinary everyday ritual, allowing her to address the conditions of illness and homelessness. In a masterful piece first exhibited at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, Gilmor constructed what was in fact a cathedral of modest proportions—a small, enclosed structure shaped much like the nave from any one of the European churches in which she had paused earlier. On the inner and outer surface of the structure, she attached 30-gauge aluminum sheets on which hospitalized children and their families had written and drawn. Although in fact the aluminum is anything but sturdy in a structural sense, it appears durable and lends an enormous feeling of solidity and permanence. The drawings and poems and journal entries become metal frescoes, elevated by and in the hallowed space from their ordinariness to become the text and the symbol for a new kind of liturgy. It is not a saccharine hopefulness that Gilmor has captured or attempts to project. Rather, she has created a space in which to honor what she describes as the “extraordinary qualities of ordinary life.”

In other equally moving work, Gilmor transforms installation spaces into meditation chapels in which the drawings and words of the homeless become the walls, floor and ceiling. Again in repoussé on heavy aluminum sheets, the words and images coalesce in a text of transcending spiritual force. In poignant counterpoint to the faux permanence of the metal sheets, Gilmor rigs a small screen television behind a small circular opening in a door. On screen is a video loop of silent film that she found and spliced together. Through this peephole we peer into the front yard of a farmhouse that existed somewhere, 40 or 50 years ago or more. Adult men and women, brothers and sisters, perhaps, husbands and wives, talk and move about. They seem happy and are animated for the camera— for us now as we look out to them. They smile. The men push and shove one another in a mock fight and they laugh. It is late afternoon. It is home.

“I’m interested in a new public art,” Gilmor says, “an art that brings artists into direct contact with their audience and important issues of the time.” But giving the ill and the homeless a voice through art is risky, she says. On the one hand, the risk is that such art might simply become as ordinary and as invisible as the people and conditions it represents. On the other, it risks glamorizing the lives and words of people who are anything but glamorous.

“In an age of global communication, she says, “some voices aren’t being heard. Everybody has e-mail, but poor people don’t have e-mail.”

Gilmor remembers her mother’s mother as a feisty, odd woman who had said, “The worst thing you can be is ordinary.” Being an artist is hardly ordinary, so it can be said that Gilmor has lived up to her grandmother’s ideal. And yet, in her most effective and moving work, Gilmor addresses nothing more or less than the ordinary. Perhaps it is also true that the best you can be is something ordinary.