

Under Gilmor humor lies a spiritual quest

By: Eliot Nusbaum, The Register's art critic

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Cedar Rapids, IA. Jane Gilmor is the kind of artist who is not afraid to tap-dance poorly in public or dress up her cat in homemade outfits and enter it in a feline beauty pageant.

Nor is she afraid to combine these pursuits in a performance that might be titled, "Cat Goddess Does Awkward Buffalo Shuffle" and capture it on videotape.

In short, Jane Gilmor, professor of art at Mount Mercy College since 1974, is unafraid of being her amusing, entertaining, clucky, awkward, double-edged self.

The other side of that self reveals a serious artist searching for the meaning of spirituality in others.

Just how those two sides resolve themselves is best expressed by Gilmor's sculpture, much of which might best be described as shrines to shrines.

Typically, Gilmor begins with a distinctly altar like wooden form that she wraps with aluminum sheets that have been heavily worked with mostly human figures in relief. Applied to the aluminum surfaces are found objects and photographs of models wearing cat masks and loose-fitting classical Greek gowns. They are posing in front of classical ruins as if they were being photographed in the middle of some weird ritual performance.

Some altars are fitted with small television screens and equipped to play Gilmor's videotapes-including the tape of Gilmor tap dancing. Some altars have cutaway sections, revealing internal workings and symbolic props.

The degree to which humor dominates and even obscures the seriousness of the work has been something of a hindrance to Gilmor's career, especially in the 1970s, when feminists, among whose number she counted herself, interpreted the work as making fun of the women's movement.

"That really bothered me," said Gilmor in an interview in her small, attractively cluttered apartment-studio in northeast Cedar Rapids. "The women's movement was real important to my development. There was a real spiritual aura of working with other women. I wasn't consciously making fun of anyone."

Quite the opposite. The goddesses, as she calls her cat-masked models, are "archetypes, representing the female psyche as a strong creative force. They represent positive roles. But from the beginning they've been funny, too."

The broader reading of Gilmor's work- which has been most recently seen in Iowa at the Iowa Artists Exhibition in Des Moines and which also recently earned her second place and \$500 in the Mid-Four art competition in Kansas City- is her search for personal spiritual experiences, though not necessarily religious experiences.

Gilmor is interested in the naïve "true believer" who must find a way to express that belief in concrete terms, and her idea of the shrine reflects her interest in naive art and vernacular architecture.

The shrine influence is drawn from her experiences in Europe with the roadside shrines that dot the countryside in Mediterranean countries. She sees these as the sincere efforts of untrained people to create physical manifestations of spiritual ideas.

The repousse element in her work is drawn from her discovery of the wide spread use of votive medals. They are medals pounded in relief into the shape of a body part or a television set or an auto (or you name it) that then are pinned to the statue of a patron saint in the hope the saint will cure an ill in that body part or appliance. Gilmor's collection includes medals from Mexico, Greece, Italy and Turkey.

The cat image is drawn from her experiences-part joke, part serious pursuit of Conceptual art-with All American Glamour Kitty, a national competition for cats in the early 1970's. For her entry, Gilmor, applying the background that earned her an undergraduate degree in textiles from Iowa State University, made a wardrobe of kitschy costumes for her cat good enough to get her into the national finals in Florida.

The photos of ritual scenes and the videotapes are an outgrowth of Gilmor's interest in performance art and her reaction to ancient, classical ruins.

The subtext of Gilmor's work is the relationship between order and chaos, between the meaningful and the meaningless- what she has referred to as push and pull of spirituality and religious practice.

She expresses this relationship in a number of ways: orderly shrine forms crawling with a sea of human figures, videotaped rituals dissolving into random, spontaneous movement, photos of apparent spiritual visitations.

One can read into her work that she regards spirituality to be as much about searching as it is about finding. That the physical result of her search is humorous, satirical, cynical, melodramatic and sometimes bizarre anchors the work in the secular world Gilmor is trying to understand through her art.