Sisters Jennifer and Kate Gilmore get together to speak about growing up as the sole artists in their family, food, politics, Jewishness, and being an underdog—and how those things shape the work they are making today.

My sister Kate Gilmore and I grew up in the ’70s and ’80s, just outside of Washington DC. Kate is a visual artist who uses a combination of sculpture, installation, performance, and video in her work. I, for the most part, write novels. And while our mediums are entirely different, we are both telling similar tragic-comic narratives, our characters interacting with the larger world, struggling to achieve, negotiating the flip side of that: what it means to fail. These human struggles are framed, by Kate, through a woman’s perspective, often using representation from the corporate and domestic world. Her work is goal-based—she sets obstacles for herself or those who people her work that need to be overcome in real time. Similarly, my characters—be they immigrants, door-to-door salesmen who invent cleaning products, Jewish gangsters who become Broadway producers, or different generations negotiating what activism means, be it communism or protest or punk rock, are also in the process of interacting with the historical and personal past as they forge their futures. How we both ended up as artists in a town that houses government and in a family of non-artists has always interested us, as have the reasons we chose our respective genres. We try and examine some of that here.
Jennifer Gilmore  Kate, so why are you fighting me on this interview.

Kate Gilmore  I’m not!

JG  I’ll admit that I’m the older sister. We both started writing and making visual art. Why do you think you became the visual artist of the family?

KG  I would say that I am more of an abstract thinker…You have the tendency to think more narratively, while I sum things up with singular gestures. I take ideas or experiences, not necessarily specifics, and abstract them. I think this allows an audience to relate to my work on a personal level and, hopefully, they are able to bring their own experiences into the pieces.

JG  Is that why you became a video artist?

KG  It ends up being video, yes, but the work is also sculpture and performance. For me, video is the best way to reflect real life and to show a genuine experience. Its documentary and time-based nature allows for an obvious representation of daily existence.

JG  When do you think you knew you were going to be a visual artist?

KG  I didn’t know I was an artist from the beginning. I wasn’t one of those people born with a pencil in their hand, who doodled their way through life. I was a little weird, with many issues and I was always creative in the way I functioned in the world. I really thought I’d write, like you did, but that wasn’t necessarily for me. I didn’t get enough out of it. When I did start making art in college, it became clear that art was the best way for me to express myself and to get ideas out into the world. The physicality of art-making—using my body to make ideas—was really what I fell in love with.

But you always knew you were a writer. Why was that?

JG  I think that it is true. Writing was the singular way I ordered the world. It was the filter through which I saw my life, our family life. Reading also played a big part of my childhood. It was a very big escape for me, my first drug actually. And I related to characters like Jane Eyre, and Tess of the D’Urbervilles, total outsiders who finding their way in through literature and language. I kept a journal since I was a kid. I was always taking notes. And I think writing separated me from my own life, the larger life around us in Washington and the world. There’s this myth that writing brings you closer to an experience, that it can be therapeutic, but for me it has a distancing effect.
KG After reading your book, I started to realize how much growing up in Washington influenced my work and process. The power structures in DC and the constant changing climate of the city are things that I have been thinking about a lot. Growing up, it was Carter and peanuts—high liberalism—and then Reagan and his jelly beans—the actor—and then Clinton, of the people, fast food, African American culture, and sex. (These were the best years—I happen to be madly in
love with Bill Clinton). The climate changes so much with each power shift. While we were on the outskirts of the power structure, even though our mother worked in government, we still felt somewhat connected to the way things functioned, didn’t function, and how change happens and doesn’t. The potential of Washington and what it represents is always there, even though it more often than not, disappoints.

**JG** I had left DC by the Clinton years, unfortunately… But your work isn’t grounded in a particular setting, at least I don’t see it that way. For me, DC is a great subject, and was a good setting for me in the last book because you think you’re part of that structure, living in such close proximity to it, but you’re not in a part of it. There’s tension there that is tethered to both the history of the country and the history of our immediate family.

I’m fascinated by the way history affects individuals, but I’m more focused on the past. The way the past—our memories, previous generations—sits next to us, historically, personally, the way it haunts us, invigorates us. Perhaps that’s why I set the book in the landscape of our childhood.

**KG** You’ve always been more about the past. I’m all about forgetting it and moving on.

**JG** But initially, you were dressing up as women who resembled Hillary Clinton, who I think is a proxy for our mother, a career woman who went to Wellesley. Don’t you think that’s grappling with the past?

**KG** I see Hillary and that type of woman as being the future, as progress. Transformation. Hillary (and Judy) wasn’t a 1950’s housewife, that’s the past. However, there is something that has always fascinated me about that generation of women. The space between that transformation is really interesting.

**JG** That’s the country’s past, but not your past. Do you think you’re informed as an artist at all by our childhood? To be honest, I’ve watched some of your videos with our parents, and it’s really interesting to see them react. I know you don’t want to see your videos as masochistic, which I understand, but after you make a video, you’re always damaged in some way, bruised and scratched and bloodied. Can you explain this to me? It is hard as your sister to see that.

**KG** Anyone who’s an athlete takes physical risks for their profession.

**JG** You’re not an athlete.

**KG** That was a joke!!! I definitely get more sore than hurt in my work. These pieces are made for me to be successful in achieving the goal I set forth. It’s pushing my body to an extreme within my own human scale, just pumped up a little in order to make it challenging and not easily accomplished. I am not bungee jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge; I’m not climbing Mt. Everest. I’m just doing difficult tasks within my range—it’s about overcoming the obstacle. Inevitably you occasionally get hurt, but, honestly, I get hurt more just walking down the street.
The obstacles have a lot to do with space. Your work used to have a very strong theme of getting yourself out of small places, which can be physically grueling. I think I’ve always seen those small spaces as your childhood.

I never thought of it that way. I see it more as being in an uncomfortable place that I have to figure out with my own means how to make better. I’m sure there are some aspects of childhood in that, but I think it’s more societal. As an artist, experience will inevitably affect your work, but for me the social is more important than the childhood, even if they do mirror one another.

I see the family—any family—as an indication of the larger social structure. What happens inside those spaces is informed by what happens outside.

Your work deals directly with family, and with some of our family stories. How do you feel being so close personally to the work?

I see your work as so much more personal! My books are set in the far past, sometimes before we were born. But I am interested in the way things—information, ideas, myths—get passed down in families. I’m very interested in legacy. We have a lot of family myths—how our family came over here, our grandparents’ stories, our parents’ stories—that I often have used as seeds for growing fiction. But I’m more interested in what’s beneath that, the truth beneath myths and the way, frankly, people in families interact and inform each others’ lives in seemingly insignificant ways.
Do you think the form/genre of art we’ve chosen makes one more direct or personal than the other? Because I have to be so specific as a novelist—in a traditional novel there is setting, dialogue, a certain time period. I have to get that down in very concrete terms.

KG I think in much broader strokes, and more emotionally. I don’t have the attention span to deal with an entire book, to invest so much in one piece. In my work, there’s a strong emotionality, but it’s general, so it’s accessible to lots of different people. Most people can understand what it means to struggle or to be stuck whether it’s by an interior or exterior force.

JG Writing a novel does take a long time. You go under for years. You have to invest a lot in a project that doesn’t always work, ideas or characters or a plot that sometimes doesn’t stick. I’ve been envious of the way you can make different work constantly and that it can be replicated. But that also speaks to the broader strokes you were speaking about. I have to get further in for the novel to gain traction.

What’s also interesting to me is this idea of the universal. I tell my students, the more specific, the more universal. The more I see the room, the concrete images that create that room, that illuminate a character, the more I can see and therefore enter the book. You’re the guide through your videos, and because it’s visual, that concreteness is implicit. But my themes aren’t so different than yours. My characters are often stuck and struggling.

KG We’re both telling the underdog story. You’re telling the story of people who aren’t necessarily status quo, people who aren’t the part of a defined power structure. They’re people who have struggled, be it from an immigrant experience, or from what they’re dealing with psychologically. They’re not the top of the heap.

JG You mean they’re Jews.

KG Jews, immigrants, communists, women.

JG I get called a Jewish novelist a lot, which is something I’m proud of, even though the label shocked me at first. Your name is Kate Gilmore, you don’t look anywhere near as “Jewish” as I do, I’m sure you don’t have that label. Do you think any of your work has Jewish themes?

KG Probably in the humor. It’s Catskills, vaudeville, and the way of dealing with heavy themes while dismissing them with a joke feels like a Jewish American way of dealing with darkness. But I think, in general, I’m dealing with the underdog too. The outsider, those who don’t fit in, and Jews, historically, have been part of that conversation.

JG The humor is our grandmother’s humor, by the way. But why do you think you are so interested in this idea of the outsider or overcoming?

KG I have always felt like an outsider, whether it’s valid or not. Self-imposed or real, does it even matter? It’s also a good quality to always be fighting—not being too comfortable; it keeps you moving. The American dream, the capitalist ideal, the myth, the falsehood.

JG You call the people in your videos characters? I always saw them as you, which is awful. I would be horrified if anyone said that about the characters I wrote about being me. But I felt like an outsider too, and I wonder what this has to do with? Maybe this has something to do with coming from a family of strong personalities who on the surface can pass as normal/sane, but when it comes down to it, they’re
not really sane. I have always spoken about the family as science fiction. An alternative universe that must be described in those terms.

**KG** You confront the American dream in both your books. What is it about that “myth” that inspires you?

**JG** I think every American book is about that in some way, even if it’s not material gain or even if it’s the subversion of that idea. We’ve got the search for freedom and this idea of happiness embedded in our culture. But what is it? My characters aren’t always happy; they’re absolutely flawed. And some of them think they can look outward—to communism, utopia, drinking, music, religion—to find answers or to lose themselves or find themselves, not always so different. But this idea of searching in this way is an American phenomenon. That we even have the right to it is an American privilege.

**KG** Can we talk about something else, something more exciting? Jen, what do you think of *RuPaul’s Drag Race?*

**JK** I don’t. And I have no idea why you love it so much.

**KG** I love *RuPaul’s Drag Race* because it’s about a total transformation of the self, while at the same time accepting the self. These drag queens want to be men, but men who are fabulous women. It shows the malleability of identity and how there are so many possibilities and characters within one self.

**JG** This is more interesting? Okay, well, I haven’t watched that show. But, I think from the previews those men who are fabulous women are just trying so hard. How are they any different from the Real Housewives? If you want to talk about malleability, I would prefer to discuss Justin Bond. He deals with gender in a really fluid way but he’s just so talented as a singer, as a songwriter, as a speaker. I go to his shows just to watch him, but I also go to listen to him sing and tell stories. If I could be anyone, it would be Justin Bond and Zadie Smith, combined.

**KG** First of all, I am all about Justin Bond. Secondly, that’s what is so great about the drag race, that they are working so hard. It’s such a struggle.

**JG** Well, in regards to RuPaul, drag takes from musical theater, and that’s where we have a lot of common ground. Our love of musicals. My first book deals with Broadway, Broadway producers, and though you are not singing in your pieces—thank god—they’re over the top and use that same language, the same themes. Have musicals influenced you?

**KG** Definitely, certain ones. Do you remember the election of 1982, when I had to run for treasurer with a broken leg, crutches, and I had to sing a song while wearing a shirt on that said “Vote for Kate?”

**JG** I do remember that! But did you win?

**KG** No! I never won, but dad said I came very close. My theme song was “Nine to Five,” only I was like: I’ll work seven to two. Mom and dad were very proud even though I didn’t win.
JG No wonder you felt like an outsider. I find that musicals get to have that great bursting into song when there is that too-muchness of emotion. Whereas with writing, we don’t get that. You have to create it yourself. And your videos are pared down. They’re not big massive numbers.

KG Right. They’re over the top on a human scale and also on an affordability scale. It’s just like the drag queen in the basement who only has the 99 cent store down the street for her tiara.

JG So let’s just say you had all the money for all the production you could imagine. What would you do? What would you make?

KG I have no idea... Not sure if my process would change that much, but I would be able to work with more people and pump up the scale of the pieces. I would love to make enormous pieces that incorporate more performers. I did a piece recently at Bryant Park with the Public Art Fund where I was able to experiment with this and it was a transformative experience. There is something very enticing about moving "off stage"... What would you do?

JG I thought I’d like to do a movie or write for television, which is so good now. Some of my friends do this and as much as I like their lifestyles—and by lifestyle I mean living in more than two rooms—I love the novel as a form and I like working alone. The collaborative nature of television scares me. I sat in on a writing meeting, and it was so fun. People were discussing character motivation, plot points to come. I have to do that all by myself, every day. But even if no one ever reads it, and the reading of fiction in this country is a crisis, it’s still totally mine.

KG I thought the same way before I did the piece at Bryant Park. It changed how I wanted to work. There were definitely problems, but it ended up being a great
artistic moment for me that allowed me to open up and try new things. I realized that I don’t have to be the central character in everything, I can move in and out of the work, I can make big sculpture, there can be live performances, etc. There are tons of possibilities that, for some reason, I was unable to see until this piece. It is easy to get stuck in a process. You know how to do something well and you become known for a certain type of work. It is scary to try something else, but it was one of the most exciting artistic experiences of my art life.

You as a writer seem like you can do anything—you are expected to create new narratives in every book. Do you feel like you always have to write a "Jewish" book?

**JG** I thought I had something to prove more as a woman writer. I thought I had to write with a big scope and take on big ideas to be taken seriously. Someone in graduate school, a professor, once told me that women don’t write big books, and I’ve been writing against that almost every day of my writing life. But a woman can write about a family and it can have larger implications, big meaty themes, just as when a man writers about a family it has larger implications and big meaty themes. I don’t think I have to write with Jewish themes, but they inevitably and organically emerge.

**KG** Speaking of Jews (my mind immediately goes to food), I am making the Ina Garten chicken tonight. The best roasted chicken ever. Your last book was all about food. Food as politics, food as a symbol of family, and food as sickness. What’s the obsession about?

**JG** Seriously? Come on! Food is an important aspect of family—and certainly our family. How we eat, what we eat, when we eat is indicative of class, race, and identity in our country. And the way food wields power in a family as well as power in the world. In the last book, the mother is a caterer; the daughter has, what is now called an eating disorder (we did not call it that in 1979). And the mother, while feeding the elite of Washington, is missing everything that is going on with her daughter. Food can be the source of such comfort and also such hurt.

**KG** It’s really interesting that despite the similar themes, we work so differently. Transformation, identity, the underdog, struggle, failure, success... Maybe I should write a novel and you can beat yourself up on video?

**JG** But you said you don’t beat yourself up! In any case, the themes come from somewhere in our shared past. But you know what? I think we should stay away from collaboration...


**Kate Gilmore** is an installation, video, and performance based artist working in New York City. Her work has been exhibited at the 2010 Whitney Biennial; the Brooklyn Museum; The Kitchen; Indianapolis Museum of Art; Bryant Park (Public Art Fund); Locust Projects; White Columns; Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati; Artspace; The J. Paul Getty Museum; The Rose Art Museum; and PS1/MoMA Contemporary Art Center. Her work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art; the Brooklyn Museum; Whitney Museum of American Art; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston; and Museum of
Contemporary Art, Chicago.

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