

# GLADSTONE

Kate Mulleavy and Laura Mulelavy, "Karen Kilimnik," *Interview*, March 6, 2011

## Interview

### Karen Kilimnik

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In both her work and her life, Karen Kilimnik remains one of the most difficult figures to pin down in the contemporary art world. Famously reclusive, Kilimnik resides in her hometown of Philadelphia, a setting that frees her from the necessity of social maneuvering, which has become a ritual obligation for the New York creative community. Kilimnik's introversion would be unremarkable if her practice were anything but what it is. Her work, which encompasses so many disparate media, subjects, and emotional charges, practically

begs the viewer to find some guiding principle in her own psychology. Thankfully, the artist does not comply. Kilimnik began attracting attention in the late '80s, specifically for her "scatter art" productions, which involve chaotically installed material debris including photocopies and photographs, pieces of fabric, smashed mirrors, furniture, and a whole lot else. Kilimnik's sense of stage setting might be one of her greatest talents; other installation works have included a tribute to the Manson murders, where she recreated the slurs drawn on the wall in blood at the Sharon Tate house, and elegant period-piece room recreations with Victorian wallpaper, pink ribbons, and fragile bird nests lying on the floor. The trick to understanding Kilimnik's productions is not to see these two opposing installations as, in any way, oppositional. Her works find a vein where pop-cultural obsession meets a highly interiorized imagination. Her pellucid, post-impressionistic oil paintings, which have focused on grand country mansions, black cats, and Leonardo DiCaprio, have the same sense of cultural knowing and girlish dreaminess—mixed with doses of the vaguely sinister. Kilimnik is also a master of video, and, indicative of growing up in the age of home video and a rewind button, she endlessly mines certain favorite movie scenes (the locker room scene in *Heathers* [1988]) or idealized celebrities (Kate Moss and Christy Turlington from spliced 1990s fashion documentaries). In their jarring repetition, the video works have a sense of compulsive study, hagiographic fascination, and an unnerving tension with linear time and reality.

This month, Kilimnik moves forward by looping back with a solo show at New York City's 303 Gallery, in which she installs—or utterly recreates— her seminal scatter-art piece, *The Hellfire Club Episode of the Avengers*, which references the 1960s action-adventure television series, complete with photocopied shots of star Diana Rigg as Emma Peel. The artist has also become a very strident environmentalist in recent years (perhaps the recycling of a 22-year-old work could itself be read as a form of creative environmentalism). Here, friends and mutual admirers Kate and Laura Mulleavy of the fashion label Rodarte ask the artist questions by e-mail, which Kilimnik answered while traveling in Europe. They offer a window into the artist's interests, fascinations, and fears of a less-than-natural world. —CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

**KATE AND LAURA MULLEAVY:** Tell us about your reinstallation of your piece *The Hellfire Club Episode of the Avengers* in March.

**KAREN KILIMNIK:** I'm remaking a piece that I did originally in 1989—this time the way I always wanted to show it. I'm redoing the original audio to make it louder and clearer, and I'm also going to show it alongside some early drawings I made around the same time. I've never been totally happy with that piece as it's been shown before, so I'm excited to finally get to show it the way it should always have been.

**MULLEAVYS:** You've become very passionate about the environment. Please tell us what you are most passionate about—Bees? Milk? The ocean?

**KILIMNIK:** The CDC, FDA, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund are all totally evil. They are trying to make raw milk illegal by 2020. And to have all our food radiated and pasteurized, destroying all the nutrients . . . the pesticides and herbicides destroy the soil and the earth. Obama has approved genetically modified alfalfa. This will destroy organic farming. Raw milk is good for your health and pasteurized is bad.

MULLEAVYS: What is your favorite animal?

KILIMNIK: Anything in the cat family.

MULLEAVYS: What is your favorite holiday and why?

KILIMNIK: Halloween, because I love the costumes, and Christmas because of the decorations and caroling.

MULLEAVYS: What is your favorite book?

KILIMNIK: *Winnie-the-Pooh*, "When It Rains," because the book is all about rainy days; the PG Wodehouse Uncle Fred series; or *Harmony* by Prince Charles. He would make a great king because he is the only world leader with respect for the Earth. He and the royal family drink raw milk!

MULLEAVYS: Can you tell us about your Manson murder blood pieces, with PIG written in what looks like blood on the walls?

KILIMNIK: Me just wanting to be one of the Manson girls, until I read the book about them.

MULLEAVYS: What are your favorite movies?

KILIMNIK: *Once Upon a Crime* [1992]. But I originally thought you meant a ballet movie, and in that case *Dancers* [1987, with Mikhail Baryshnikov] and *Black Swan* . . . love the costumes.

MULLEAVYS: You did obsessive looping of the movie *Heathers*, repeating certain scenes over and over again. How did you decide to use this film?

KILIMNIK: They were my favorite scenes, and I thought I had to fill up the six-hour tape . . . It was only a two-hour movie.

MULLEAVYS: Who is your favorite character in *Heathers*?

KILIMNIK: Winona Ryder's, because she's the leader.

MULLEAVYS: What can you tell us about the Kate Moss film you did recently?

KILIMNIK: It's actually from a while ago, maybe 15 years old, and it's from a Christy Turlington documentary and European fashion shows, I think.

MULLEAVYS: How does the idea of repetition play into your work?

KILIMNIK: [*Left blank*]

MULLEAVYS: Your work draws references from old masters and contemporary culture. What is the relationship between history and pop culture?

KILIMNIK: In the '60s, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and everyone dressed up as the 1700s fashion icon Beau Brummell.

MULLEAVYS: You've worked with ballet productions before, even conceiving and co-creating a ballet, *Sleeping Beauty + Friends*, which was produced by the Serpentine Gallery in 2007. What do you love most about the ballet?

KILIMNIK: Music, costumes, dancing, and stories.

MULLEAVYS: Can you tell us about Philadelphia, where you live?

KILIMNIK: I live in Montana now.