

# GLADSTONE

Roberta Smith, "Scattered Stories, Shaken and Stirred," *The New York Times*, May 30, 2007

*The New York Times*

## Scattered Stories, Shaken and Stirred



Inside "The Red Room in the Modern Architecture," showing some of the 50 small works.

Photographs by Aaron Igler/Institute of Contemporary Art

By Roberta Smith

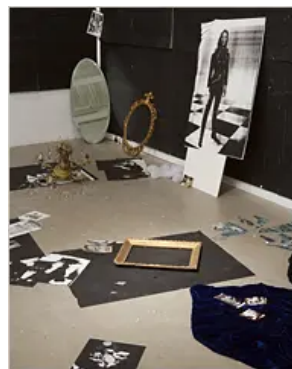
May 30, 2007

PHILADELPHIA — Karen Kilimnik has gotten the survey that her strange, still difficult achievement deserves. For one thing, her show at the Institute of Contemporary Art is appropriately strange itself, beginning with a barren, seemingly empty, party's-over gallery. It goes deep into her woman-child imagination, touching an all-too-American sense of emptiness. It also makes her efforts in installation art, which encompass materials as various as glitter, fake snow and blood, stuffed animals, ballet shoes and piles of party drugs, feel of a piece with her painting, photography, video and drawing.

The show tours a scrapbook's worth of the heroes, stars, victims and star-victims — both real and imagined, and from stage, screen, fashion magazine and tabloid — that are Ms. Kilimnik's obsessions (and often ours too). These form a witchy chain-link fence of intersecting identities and tales: Liz, Gelsey Kirkland, Giselle, Nureyev, the murdered family of the last Russian czar, Lisa Steinberg, Charles Manson, Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Moss and "The Avengers."

In all, the Kilimnik exhibition confirms once more that the Institute of Contemporary Art, part of the University of Pennsylvania, is among the most adventuresome showcases in the country where art since 1970 is concerned. It chooses its subject well, keeps things accessible through the judicious use of well-written labels and brochures, and takes risks that prove that the curatorial discipline is alive and kicking.

Ms. Kilimnik, a 50-year-old Philadelphia native, made an international name for herself in the early 1990s with seemingly random accumulations of cheap objects and materials that functioned a bit like three-dimensional rebuses.



An installation, "The Hellfire Club Episode of the Avengers."

Aaron Igler/Institute of Contemporary Art

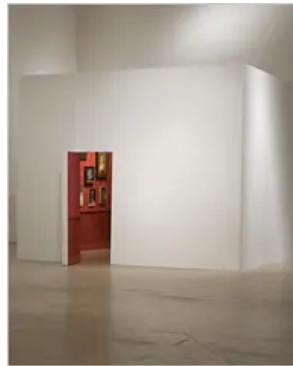
Alternately girlish and demonic, they merged popular culture, personal fantasy, history and current, often violent events and fell under the heading of scatter art, a phenomenon whose definition and membership remains a bit blurred. The artists most often identified with it — like Ms. Kilimnik, Sylvie Fleury, Cady Noland and, to some extent, Jessica Stockholder — are women, as are those artists' most important precursors, among them Yvonne Rainer, Joan Jonas, Barbara Bloom and the photo-based generation grouped around Cindy Sherman. It could also be seen as including Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jack Pierson and even Matthew Barney.

Starting in the late 1980s, scatter art was a proving ground where early 1980s appropriation art was given a new life by infusions from early '70s Process Art. Its basic strategy of accumulations of separate images and objects — a kind of assemblage or collage, minus the glue — has had a pervasive influence on the art of the last 15 years.

Ms. Kilimnik's work offers a kind of lexicon of appropriationist techniques. Like Sherrie Levine, she has rephotographed famous photographs; like Sarah Charlesworth, she has spliced images together. Like Ms. Sherman, she recasts herself as other women (Liz Taylor, Gelsey Kirkland), except in photographs that are crudely altered with black marks. Her drawings resemble copies of fashion illustration gone horribly awry. And as with innumerable others, Ms. Kilimnik's painted images all come from the medium's past — the more romantic the better.

Her scatter pieces might be described as set-up photography in the manner of Ms. Sherman and Laurie Simmons — only without the photography. They can seem laughably slight on first glance, resembling failed attempts at store-window dressing, make-believe, homemade stage sets by a theater-crazed child or a teenage girl's messy room. But once you start examining them bit by bit, you can find yourself engrossed by their elaborate collisions of narratives and the poignant sense of longing for contact, beauty and happiness that animate them.

The exhibition, organized by Ingrid Schaffner, the institute's senior curator, shows how Ms. Kilimnik has moved from scatter pieces into painting, pastels and conventional sculptures. (You can't scatter forever.) She has also developed a more grown-up kind of installation art: paintings and other images displayed in flimsy, patently fake period rooms with bright walls, wainscoting, sconces and bits of furniture.



An installation view of Karen Kilimnik's "Red Room" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.  
Aaron Igler/Institute of Contemporary Art

But the displays in this survey suggest that her work remains scattered on some deep level, right down to her jangling late-Manet brushwork (which is aided by an unerring sense for intense, jewel-like colors). Scatteredness is her art's subject, its strength and also its weakness.

In its daring opening gambit the Kilimnik show telegraphs the destabilizing nature of her early work with what might be considered a curatorial scatter piece. That first empty-seeming gallery is daunting, double-height and a trifle dark.

All you see is glum cement floor, bare walls and, in one corner, a glowering arrangement of black sheets of paper, ornate mirrors and a smashed chandelier. It's a piece from 1989 titled "The Hellfire Club Episode of the Avengers." Photocopied images of Diana Rigg as Emma Peel and clubby-looking Georgian-style mansions loom large to the sounds of the Pet Shop Boys and Madonna, as well as "The Avengers" theme song.

Yet the main event in this gallery, set off in the expanse of bare concrete, is a freestanding room that suggests a Modernist cabin. Its narrow door, half-open, reveals a welcoming if slightly bordello-like slice of red wall and scores of small framed images. A red tufted circular divan underscores the 19th-century mood; its brocade echoes the wallpaper's pattern.

Inside, the 50 works — mostly paintings — rampage decorously through various styles and periods and different levels of fact, fiction and fantasy. The flurry of possible narratives makes the point that all meaning is always in play, constantly stirred and shaken by our thoughts and associations.

Multipurpose images underscore this. "The Moonstone" depicts the moon seen through a screen of leafless black trees. "Little Red Riding Hood" is the same setting, with the addition of an ornate red and gold coach that adds Cinderella and Queen Elizabeth II's coronation to the fairy-tale mix. Nearby, Mr. DiCaprio is painted in swashbuckling hat with long golden hair in a work titled "Prince Charming."

A Renaissance image of a kneeling female saint is adjusted just enough to live up to its title, "The Witch Squeezing Blood from a Miniature Human." What appears to be a generic image of a cat is recast as "The Czar's Kitten." A beautiful young supermodel type who is behaving something like a witch (there's the small dead animal in front of her) is titled "Tabitha." That's the daughter on the old TV comedy "Bewitched," after whom Ms. Kilimnik named her real-life cat, who stars in a video further along in the show.

There are scenes from Ms. Kilimnik's own imaginary, jet-set life, like "Me Getting Ready to Go Out to a Rock Concert with Bernadette in Moscow in 1977, II" (in a backless black dress that screams 2006). And in the middle of this, a photograph of a dead but intact squirrel on the road, titled "Just Resting" — words that a mother might speak to her anxious, inquiring child. Finally "The Avengers" reappear in a painting titled "Steed Leaving for Costume Party on Deserted Island — Emma Stays Home to Work."

Ms. Kilimnik, a shy, some might say reclusive, woman who lives alone in a house in suburban Philadelphia is herself someone who stays home to work, while letting her imagination roam the landscape of the past and present.

In a sense, the show's first gallery, with its little, boxy, art-filled house on the cement prairie, says it all: suggesting both the barrenness of everyday life and the wistful yet grandiose stories with which we keep it at bay.

"Karen Kilimnik" remains on view through Aug. 5 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia; (215) 898.7108, [icaphila.org](http://icaphila.org).