

Kiki Smith : [brochure] prints, books & things : December 5, 2003-March 8, 2004

[text, Wendy Weitman]

Author

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Kiki Smith

Prints, Books & Things

December 5, 2003 – March 8, 2004

The Museum of Modern Art

*With a print, I get to have an experience making it.
It takes time and it's a struggle and at some point
I get the rewards when I say it's finished.*

— KIKI SMITH, 2002

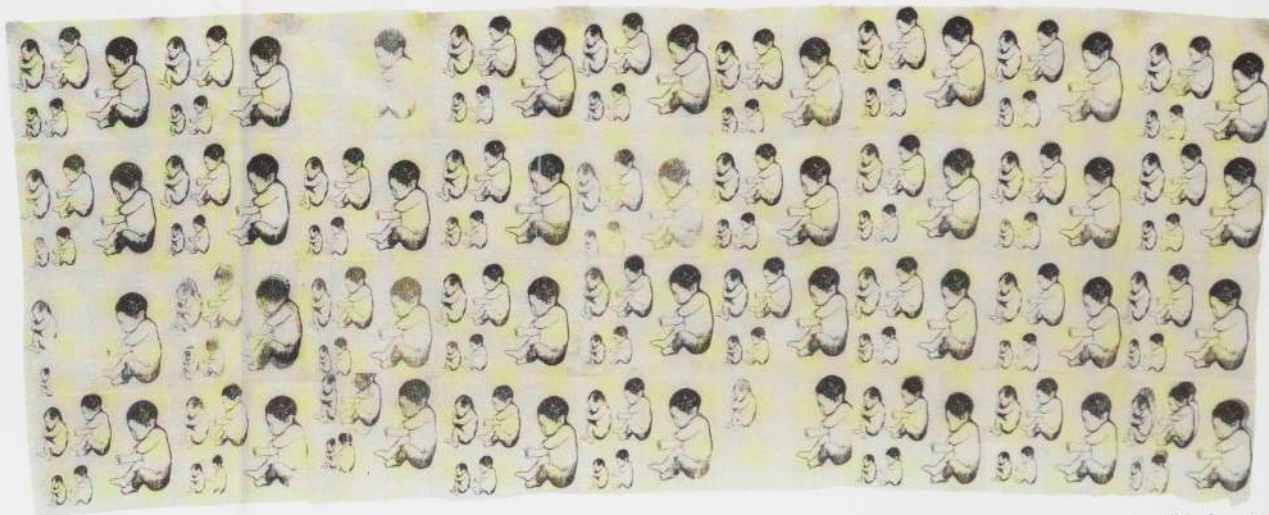
Kiki Smith (American, born Germany, 1954) is among the most inventive, committed, and prolific printmakers of her generation. She is best known as a sculptor whose work reintroduced the human figure as an important realm for artistic investigation and discovery. Printmaking became an integral part of her work in the mid-1980s, and since then, prints for her have been a parallel exploration to sculpture, the two moving sometimes in tandem, sometimes quite independently. Smith's creative efforts have enormously expanded the scope of printed art in a body of work ranging from the handmade to the digital and from the unique to the mass-produced. Her approach to printmaking has been decidedly informed by the physicality of working in three dimensions, often inspiring inventive, indeed utterly unconventional methods of image making. Her passion for, and facility with, paper—a material she has explored extensively in sculpture—has also fueled her innovative endeavors in prints and books, resulting in intricately folded and layered compositions of delicate handmade sheets.

Smith's roots as an artist grow out of her love of craft and of populist art forms. She admires the colorful Russian folk prints known as *lubki* and the broadsides of Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada. "I like the fact that people are empowered through printmaking," she has said. Smith also thrives on collaboration and the experience of making art. Her desire for communal environments has driven her to create much of her work in the collaborative settings of universities, sculpture foundries, and print workshops around the United States, in Mexico, and in Europe.

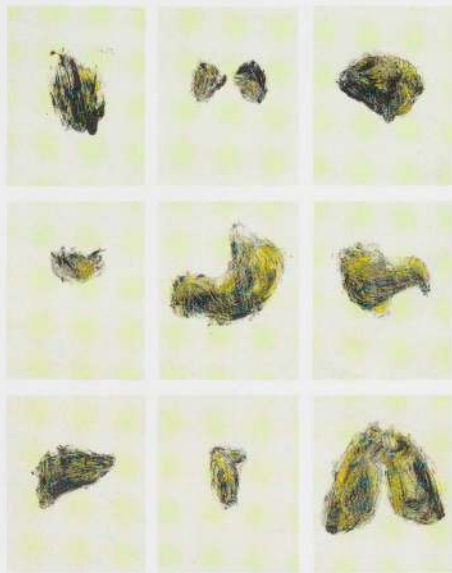
Printmaking has played a role in Smith's work since her earliest days as an artist, in the late 1970s, when she made monotypes on friends' etching presses. Much of her effort in the 1980s was devoted to screenprinting, on fabric as well as on paper. In the late 1970s Smith joined

Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Colab), a loosely knit artists' cooperative that worked outside the commercial gallery system. Colab also ran a series of stores that sold inexpensive artworks and artist-made accessories. Smith was an avid participant and made her first screenprint, a T-shirt, for the souvenir shop at Colab's sprawling 1980 exhibition *The Times Square Show*.

In 1988 Smith began what would become a watershed group of screenprinted works on paper based on an image of a fetus she had found in a Japanese anatomy book. With *All Souls*, printed on sheets of Thai tissue paper that she attached together in various formats, Smith established a strategy that she would explore over several years with similar motifs, usually fragmented and repeated in a grid. Smith's unique talent for fusing the decorative and the confrontational (a characteristic that has distin-



All Souls. 1988



Possession Is Nine-Tenths of the Law, 1985

guished her strongest work) as well as her ongoing interest in the themes of birth and regeneration are announced with this early image. The title has Catholic allusions, another important thread uniting Smith's work. It refers to All Souls' Day (November 2), which the Church calendar sets aside for prayer for dead souls in limbo—a state Smith has described as similar to her own during these years.

Smith's earliest exhibited work addresses the human body, simultaneously so frail and so enduring. Representing the fragmented body both inside and out, in stark yet poignant depictions, was her way of learning about it, gaining control over it, and showcasing its importance. Her images of our vital biological parts are shockingly

honest, nonhierarchical, nearly clinical. In 1985, Smith completed her first published portfolio, *Possession Is Nine-Tenths of the Law*, a set of nine screenprint and mono-types with hand coloring. Here she elevates individual internal organs to precious still lifes by isolating them in the middle of the sheet, an austere compositional strategy that recurs frequently in later work. Smith's sister Beatrice had wanted to become an emergency medical technician, and Smith enrolled in a program with her, gaining a profound and intimate perspective on human anatomy. The portfolio's title, a legal adage, refers to the political ideologies concerning the body, and reflects the influence of the socially engaged milieu that surrounded Smith during this period. Controversies ranging from genetic engineering and organ transplants to governmental controls of the body, whether through inoculation or incarceration, are embroiled in this suite.

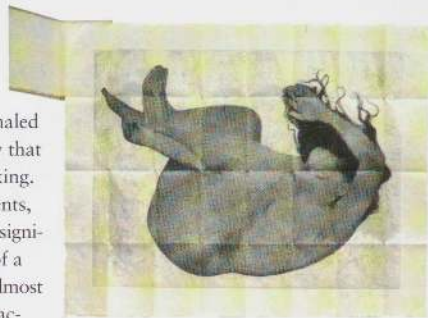
In 1989 Smith was invited to make prints at the renowned workshop Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), in West Islip, Long Island. Although reluctant at first, Smith came to relish her collaborations with ULAE, and now considers them among her most rewarding experiences as an artist—the workshop provides a communal environment that she finds nurturing both personally and



Untitled, 1990

creatively. The first print she completed there signaled the unique approach to two-dimensional imagery that Smith, as a sculptor, would bring to her printmaking. Having shifted her focus to external body fragments, she became interested in hair as a potent feminine signifier and as a Catholic relic (a physical memento of a departed soul). With its swirling allover lines and almost square format, *Untitled* lies on the verge of abstraction. But a closer look discloses the lines to be tendrils of hair, in this case the artist's own, which she literally laid down on the lithographic plates with an array of other unusual materials, including a wig and corn silks. Imprints of her cheek and ear are visible in three corners, revealing the physical actions involved in making this evocative, sensual image.

Smith continued to experiment at ULAE and created an extraordinary body of prints, many of which comprise complex layers of photography, collage, and cutout papers, revealing her love of craft traditions. Several incorporate her own image, a motif she intentionally avoided in her sculpture at the time. She credits ULAE with providing the security and confidence she needed to make art with a strong personal stamp. Among her most intriguing self-portraits is *Free Fall* (1994), a nude photographic rendering manipulated to suggest a figure falling through space. Smith used photogravure, a medium reminiscent of Victorian art (which she greatly admires and continues to explore). The metaphoric sense of falling is heightened by the drama of viewing the work, which must be literally unfolded to see—for storage it is gathered up and sandwiched between two small boards. Like a road map, the sheet unfolds across and downward, becoming increasingly awkward to handle and creating a certain



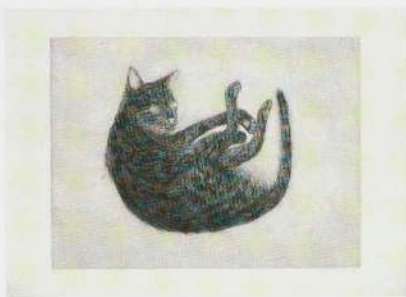
Free Fall, 1994

anxiety that the piece itself, like its nude subject, will fall. This unusual format reflects Smith's love of folding, a device that appears frequently in her work and recalls medieval and early Renaissance books, in which sheets were collaged together and folded to accommodate large images.

Smith has folded her own image in several books as well, including one particularly inventive project titled *Re* (1994), after the Egyptian sun god. Combining a text fragment from an ancient papyrus on the theme of creation with photoengraved self-portraits emulating the Egyptian goddess Hathor (daughter of Nut and Re), *Re* is an example of one of Smith's favorite designs, in which all the elements are printed together on one sheet that is then slit in the center and folded in a French fold format. In this case she also attached Japanese paper to the book's edges to create a billowing skirt beneath the images. This modest gem of a book reveals Smith's identification with historical female figures across cultures and cosmologies and the subtle methods she uses to suggest spiritual kinships.

As increasing numbers of artists in the 1980s began addressing themes of the body, Smith moved on to concerns outside it, turning her attention to images

from nature—birds, animals, and the cosmos. Her renderings of birds allude to subjects ranging from the fragility of the environment to the realm of the Holy Spirit. Around this period Smith also discovered the detailed, refined line available with etching, and found it an irresistible medium for describing feathers and fur. During one of Smith's numerous university residencies, she learned an etching technique that involved scratching onto black photographic films that were then transferred onto plates for printing. She completed several projects using this method, including the extraordinary *Peabody (Animal Drawings)*, a printed floor piece for the installation *Landscape* at Boston's Massachusetts College of Art in 1996. The following year she began the first of many collaborations with master etching printers Felix Harlan and Carol Weaver. *Destruction of Birds* (1997, dated 1998) is a monumental image for which she sketched specimens lent to her by a natural history museum, right there in the workshop. In 1999, when her beloved cat Ginzer died, Smith brought the body to the workshop, placed it on a copper plate, and traced its outline. *Ginzer* belongs to a series on dead animals that Smith completed over a period of two years, in



Ginzer. 2002

which the figures float austere in the center of the sheet, seemingly frozen in time and space. In these works she tempers the severity of her earlier bird etching by building up the image in layers and, in the case of *Ginzer*, by using the washy spit-bite aquatint process to enrich the texture of the fur. Smith is now a master of the etching medium, and creates her work's spine-tingling tension by combining the detailed draftsmanship of traditional animal portraiture with her cadaverous subject matter.

From her early years growing up as, in her phrase, a “girl-child” to her later years of maneuvering through the professional art world as a female artist, Smith has strongly identified with her gender. While rarely presenting any polemical agenda, much of her work revolves around feminine forms and content, and attempts to express universal concerns from a female perspective. Her most recent work shows a nostalgia for childhood as she elaborates and reinvents myths and fairy tales with subtle feminist revisions. The fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood” has preoccupied Smith the longest; she has created numerous sculptures, prints, paintings on glass, photographs, and drawings on the theme, beginning in 1999. Among her most recent interpretations is the enormous lithograph *Born* (2002), in which Smith created a relatively violent rendition, illustrating the episode where the grandmother and the little girl emerge from the wolf's belly. By depicting her figures in cloaks and standing upright as in a resurrection, Smith imbues the scene with biblical overtones, further enhanced by the figures' resemblance to images of the Virgin Mary on the crescent moon—a source the artist has cited. While alluding to old master paintings in composition, *Born's* drawing style and coloration are reminiscent of Victorian illustration, and the fact that both figures' faces are

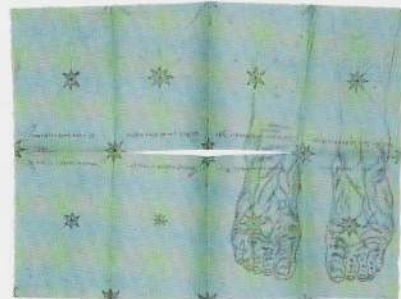


Born. 2002

self-portraits suggests a range of feminine concerns, from adolescent rites of passage to aging.

Smith's involvement with printmaking has grown steadily over the past twenty years, and she is now the author of an extensive body of work made at numerous workshops in diverse techniques and formats. She is among the most prolific and committed artists using the medium, and has already achieved a place among the crucial voices of the contemporary period. But Smith is still young, and her most recent printed works, such as *The Blue Feet* (2003), reveal an artist stretching herself formally and conceptually. Based on excerpts from a poem by the seventeenth-century Mexican nun Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, considered to be among the first

female poets of the Americas, *The Blue Feet* conflates startling body fragments with a starry sky in an expression of spiritual longing. This delicate, moving book crystallizes many of Smith's paramount concerns. Her recent



Trial proof for *The Blue Feet*. 2003

passion for etching continues; a female voice dominates; and the tension between the beautiful and the confrontational remains. The work's French fold allows it to be viewed page by page or, when unfolded, as a single composition. *The Blue Feet*, a consummately resolved work, was still being editioned as this brochure went to press. It is exciting to ponder the beauty yet to come.

WENDY WEITMAN, CURATOR
DEPARTMENT OF PRINTS AND ILLUSTRATED BOOKS

This brochure is modeled on the distinct format of The Blue Feet. To refold after opening, pinch center fold at left and right edges and push together.

The exhibition is made possible by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro.

Generous support is also provided by the Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Emily Fisher Landau, and Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley.

Additional funding is provided by The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

The accompanying educational programs are made possible by BNP Paribas.

Illustrations

All Souls. 1988. Screenprint on thirty-six attached sheets of handmade Thai paper, composition and sheet (overall): 71 1/4" x 15 1/8" (181 x 460 cm). Publisher: unpublished. Printer: the artist. Edition: several known variants. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Riva Castleman Endowment Fund, 2003

Possession Is Nine-Tenths of the Law. 1985. Portfolio of nine screenprint and monotypes with ink additions on mold-made T. H. Saunders paper, composition: various dimensions; sheet (each): 21 1/16" x 16 1/8" (55.7 x 43 cm). Publisher: Fawbush Editions, New York. Printer: the artist. Edition: 15. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Richard A. Epstein Fund, 1986

Untitled. 1990. Lithograph on handmade Japanese paper, composition and sheet: 35 3/4" x 36" (90.8 x 91.5 cm). Publisher and printer: Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York. Edition: 54. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Emily Fisher Landau, 1990

Free Fall. 1994. Photogravure, etching, and sanding on handmade Japanese paper, folded and mounted into cardboard folder, plate: 27 1/16" x 35 1/8" (69 x 90.2 cm); sheet (unfolded): 33 1/4" x 42 1/8" (85 x 106.8 cm); folder (closed): 9 1/4" x 5 1/4" (23.2 x 14.6 cm). Publisher and printer: Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York. Edition: 40. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Emily Fisher Landau, 1995

Ginzer. 2000. Etching, aquatint, and drypoint on mold-made Hahnemühle paper, plate: 18 x 24" (45.7 x 61 cm); sheet: 22 1/4" x 31 1/4" (57.2 x 78.7 cm). Publisher and printer: Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York. Edition: 24. Courtesy Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York

Born. 2002. Lithograph on mold-made T. H. Saunders paper, composition: 68 3/4" x 55 1/4" (173 x 141.5 cm); sheet: 68 3/4" x 56 1/8" (173 x 142.5 cm). Publisher and printer: Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York. Edition: 28. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Emily Fisher Landau, 2002

Trial proof for The Blue Feet. With adapted text by Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz. 2003. Book of cut-and-folded etching and drypoint on handmade colored Japanese paper, unfolded: 18 1/4" x 25 1/4" (46.8 x 64.1 cm). Publisher: Carpe Diem Press, Oaxaca, Mexico. Printer: Fernando Sandoval, Oaxaca, Mexico. Edition: 35 projected. Courtesy Carpe Diem Press, Oaxaca, Mexico

COVER (detail) and VERSO. In collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum. *Weeping Willows*. 2003. Screenprint on cotton sateen paperbacked wallpaper, width of repeat: 43 1/4" (111.1 cm). Publisher and printer: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia. Edition: unlimited. Courtesy the artist, New York, and The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia

Publication

Kiki Smith: Prints, Books & Things

WENDY WEITMAN

Kiki Smith: Prints, Books, and Things is the most complete survey to date of Smith's printed art, beginning with her first screenprint, made in 1980, and including works that were in progress as the catalogue went to press. This volume features an eight-page insert, *Full*, that Smith created specifically for it. 9 x 11 1/2", 150 PAGES; 153 COLOR AND 19 B/W ILLS. \$83. HARDCOVER \$45.00, MEMBERS \$40.50

Public Programs

The following programs will be held in conjunction with *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books, and Things*:

A Conversation between Kiki Smith and Lynne Tillman
Wednesday, January 28, 2004, 6:30 P.M.

Artist Kiki Smith and critic and novelist Lynne Tillman explore major themes in Smith's work, such as anatomy, self-portraiture, nature, and female iconography, with special attention to the artist's articulation of these themes in printed art. Smith's fascination with printed art forms—from postage stamps to medieval prayer books to Victorian children's books—and how they have informed her own printed work, are also discussed. Moderated by Wendy Weitman, Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, The Museum of Modern Art, and organizer of *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books, and Things*.

Retelling Little Red et al: Fairy Tales in Art and Literature
Tuesday, February 24, 2004, 6:30 P.M.

Fairy tales have inspired a myriad of creative endeavors across artistic disciplines. Kiki Smith's representations of childhood heroines, such as Little Red Riding Hood and Alice in Wonderland, reflect her personal reading of these stories and her manipulation of the tales' plots and motivations. Panelists investigate the way female characters have been portrayed in classic fairy tales, and discuss contemporary interpretations in art and literature. Moderated by Wendy Weitman, curator of the exhibition. Panelists include Kate Bernheimer, editor and novelist; Francine Prose, novelist; Jack Zipes, Professor of German and Comparative Literature, University of Minnesota; and Kiki Smith.

PROGRAMS WILL BE HELD AT THE GRAMERCY THEATRE,
127 EAST 23 STREET AT LEXINGTON AVENUE.

For ticket information, please call (212) 708-9781 or (212) 247-1230 (TTY), or visit www.moma.org/momalearning. For general information about the exhibition, please call (212) 708-9400.

Web Site

The Web site www.moma.org/exhibitions/2003/kikismith is organized around the exhibition's themes and includes over 135 images in more than fifty comparative groupings. A special "Process" section illustrates the evolution of two prints through sequences of proofs, providing a window into Smith's creative thinking. The site also features original music composed by Margaret De Wys, a frequent collaborator of Smith's, as well as video footage of the artist working in print workshops.

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