

# Kiki Smith and the Pursuit of Beauty in a Notably Unbeautiful Age

In her four-decade career, the artist has gone her own way, creating unapologetically lovely work that feels particularly relevant.

By Nancy Hass

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STROLLING WITH THE ARTIST Kiki Smith down the not-entirely-gentrified East Village block where she lives and works, in a townhouse with a cherry-red door, can take a remarkably long time. It's not that she isn't nimble — at 64, she has energy to match her famously prodigious output, able to navigate in a billowing black cotton shift around the occasional glob of garbage or a slab of broken pavement. It's that Smith courts distraction. Her 40-year career as an icon of figurative art has made her one of the most enduring creators of post-feminist imagery in mediums from sculpture and drawing to tapestry and printmaking, her very range demonstrating her constant restlessness. Some of her friends flatly refuse to walk with her anymore, she admits, in her halting, dreamy voice, shaking back her flint-gray hair. She completely understands. Who has the time?

A long tendril of ivy in shades of persimmon and ocher has detached itself from the building across the street; it catches her eye as it swings in the breeze. Next, she stops to ponder a blue jay, chattering madly as it flits between the flowering cherry and pear trees that line the block. And what about that light carpet of moss, like a chartreuse 5 o'clock shadow, making patterns on the steps of the brownstones? Are you aware that the spikes at the bottom of the wrought-iron banisters were invented a century ago to scrape the mud from your boots before coming to call?

"I know I'm annoying — I've probably gotten more annoying as time's gone on," she says with a sigh. We are back inside the house, eating raspberry rugelach from a white bakery box she has produced from her tiny, rarely used kitchen. She's cleared a space on a wooden dining table stacked with paperwork and sketches on the open second floor that is both her living area and studio, with little distinction between the two. A pair of sawhorse tables near a teal sofa are arrayed with tiny cutout photos of the pieces she plans to show at Pace Gallery in February — her first New York solo exhibition in five years. She rises from her chair to move them around absent-mindedly with a fingertip, like puzzle pieces, imagining how they will look together. In these moments, you can see her mind at work, alternately intense and drifty. You can also see, at the point where her thumb meets her index finger, the inch-square star tattoo she gave herself when she was 15 — "Um, now that I think of it, maybe not yet 15," — with a needle and some India ink. "I'm just in my own world," she says.



“Wolf Girl,” part of a 1999 series called “Blue Prints,” which explores fairy tales and childhood in etchings made with aquatint and drypoint. Kiki Smith, “Wolf Girl,” 1999, etching and aquatint on paper © Kiki Smith, courtesy of Pace Gallery

This is not her only understatement — with her lack of art-speak pretension and deadpan self-deprecation, she has a genius for it — but it may be the most telling. If contemporary art has become a blood sport, slick and sped up to hide the bodies in a blur, Smith is not playing and never has. Let dealers hype emerging talent to whet the enthusiasm of wealthy collectors; let the bankers flip blue-chip sculpture at auction with the same manic gusto once reserved for trading stocks: She has always floated above, a porcelain-complected wild child morphed by time into an earth mother, vibrating on an alternative frequency.

More than just creating individual works or even constructing a linear oeuvre, she has, over the years, woven from glass, bronze, paper, glitter, steel, lead, clay and thread a vast, all-encompassing universe of enchantment, religious ecstasy and personal mythology, one that challenges the notion of decorative figuration as somehow less powerful than muscular, largely male abstraction and minimalism. Her earlier work, from the 1990s and continuing into the next decade, was an unrelenting confrontation with the human body, mostly female, parts and all: intestines made from iron affixed to the wall like a radiator; a bronze of a girl being straddled by a goat, a papier-mâché torso with breasts like empty dry-cleaning bags; a full-size woman in wax, skin partly flayed.

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But Smith’s most enduring contribution may be the scope of her fully realized world, in all its Jungian glory: birds, stars, wolves, imaginary creatures and otherworldly vegetation — along with the humans who wander through. Hers is a liminal, defiantly female place of both shadow and light, where transformation is effortless, if ultimately unsettling. Driven by instinct rather than conscious ambition — it is difficult to think of a contemporary artist as prolific over so many years in so many mediums — she conjures a bestiary of creatures that seem forever on the verge of becoming something else. A woman steps out of a wolf’s abdomen in “Rapture,” a sculpture from 2001, and in “Sirens” (2007), a flock of bronze birds wears outsize human heads. Smith photographed herself as a waterfall for the 2013 series “The Falls.” Among the works she will show at Pace is a bronze sculpture of a pair of breasts that seem to emerge from the grain of a crosscut tree, as though a

nymph were imprisoned in the trunk and were pushing her way to the surface. Like the Brothers Grimm and the British novelist Angela Carter, Smith's witchy fairy tale domain has its own taxonomy and colors (blood-red, turquoise, sapphire, silver); like the artist Kara Walker, whose silhouettes suggest a hieroglyphic alphabet of enslavement and revolt, Smith's insular world is by turns claustrophobic and expansive. But it is always beautiful, and once you step through the crimson door and over her threshold, the rules of engagement seem forever changed.

IN PERSON, Smith is ethereal yet earthbound, as though she has materialized, slightly dazed, from behind a field of wheat or beside a wandering fawn: She is like something from one of her enormous tapestries come to life, entering a room like the nude woman at the center of "Earth" (2012), emerging dramatically from a tangled forest, bathed in sunlight. Ordered rows of what look like dark green dots run from her wrists to her clavicle — tiny tattooed stars that have over the decades blurred into blobs. Around her neck hang gold medallions — Catholic saints — inherited from an aunt; she has not actively practiced the religion since childhood, she says, but "the church just has the best iconography."

Critics have always read subtext into Smith's work, intellectualizing her birds as symbols of queer ascendancy or her dandelions as stand-ins for cultural annihilation. She seems to find this flattering and mildly confusing. Because she came of age in the raggedly vibrant East Village art scene of the 1980s, amid the ravages of AIDS — one of her younger sisters, Bebe, an actress in underground films, died from complications of the disease, as did her friend, the artist David Wojnarowicz — her work has often been interpreted through a political lens. As an artist who worked quietly and with only a small amount of attention throughout most of the '80s, she never fit neatly into the macho neo-abstraction that was popular at the time, nor did she deploy didacticism of the era's conceptual art. In fact, it wasn't until the '90s, as the commercialism of the previous decade gave way to a collective hung-over anguish, that she began gaining notice. "The decade of the Me Generation had evolved into the decade of the human body as political battleground," as Michael Kimmelman wrote in *The Times* in 1992, adding that "the time became right for" her. Her works, including paper etchings that resembled hanging skin, jars full of mysterious fluids and sculptures of bloody organs and crouched, defecating women, became touchstones for a generation that had survived the horrors and humiliation of AIDS and Reagan. And yet, Smith has often resisted this characterization (the greatest fallacy, she says, is the idea that her art has ever been "about anything"), and indeed, her work has always offered a kind of tangential, slanted view of the culture. It is less about documenting or confronting a specific kind of pain than it is about exploring its lingering aftermath.

Her work became less confrontational as the decade progressed. But when she began to reclaim various practices once dismissed as lowly "women's work" — embroidery, lacework — as a vital form of contemporary expression, it also became more expansive and mysterious. The dismembered limbs of her sculptures took on an almost decorative, attractive glimmer that remained brave because of Smith's allegiance to the macabre. For all the timely intensity of her work, she stayed curiously apolitical, never crossing a line into an overtly polemical gesture. "What I make is just a thing," she says. "It has to sustain itself. It stems from me wanting to know what something is going to look like when I'm done. I'm completely influenced by where I am, what's around me. I just react." As she talks, she has a tendency to cast her pale blue eyes heavenward, meditatively. Her strong hands — she has drawn and cast them many times — roam over objects on the table and are never quite at rest.



Cutouts of works for Smith's show early next year at Pace Gallery. Jim Goldberg

What she reacted to in her earliest years was a sui generis childhood, one that indelibly colored everything that followed. Her father was the architect and sculptor Tony Smith; her mother, Jane Lawrence Smith, an opera singer and actor who was the model for Jackson Pollock's "Number 7." Instead of occupying a loft downtown, which might seem in character, they lived in suburban New Jersey, in the South Orange six-bedroom Victorian where her father had grown up, the son of a prosperous manufacturing family. It is part of Smith's lore that as teens, she and her twin sisters, Bebe and Seton, an artist who now lives on the Lower East Side, spent evenings making tiny geometric maquettes for their father. They labored at a dining table that was one of the only pieces of furniture in the house, lit by a single floor lamp. The painter Barnett Newman visited often. "We used to drag the couple of chairs we had from room to room," she says. "Our bedside tables were crates."

Smith was a disinterested student and spent much of her 20s and 30s kicking around downtown, studying to be an emergency medical technician, working as an electrician's assistant and a short-order cook. She got swept up in the loose, Lower East Side art scene centered around the storefront gallery ABC No Rio, run by a group known as Colab — for Collaborative Projects — that included the conceptual text-based artist Jenny Holzer and Tom Otterness, whose cartoonish bronzes are installed in Battery Park City and the subway station at 14th Street and 8th Avenue. She made posters and silk-screens and played in the group's famed faux-band (they performed with cardboard instruments), but it wasn't until her father died, in 1980, when she was 26, that she began to produce work at what would become her notoriously furious pace, culminating in her first solo show, two years later, at the Kitchen in 1982. Although she had adored her father and his spare forms — displayed in her house are some of his smaller works, including a foot-tall black steel abstraction at the top of the staircase — his death at 68, after years of struggling with a blood condition, freed her. The loss, she says, "gave her a boon of unknown and unconsidered feelings" that helped her find her lingua franca.



For decades, she had a New York show every two years, and while that rate has slowed, she still produces new pieces incessantly, working in metal, clay, lithography, ink on paper, gold leaf, cast aluminum and a slew of other forms. In her spare moments, she rubber-stamps little designs on small notecards (“for no reason at all”). She travels frequently to lecture and oversee installations of her work (she is among the most widely shown artists worldwide, with work in the collections of virtually every major international museum) and teaches at Columbia and New York University. “I just have a hard time not doing something with my hands all the time,” she says.



“Prayer to the Sky” (2018), an original photograph made for T by Kiki Smith, with the help of Joshua Brehse. Kiki Smith, “Prayer to the Sky,” 2018, Kiki Smith with the help of Joshua Brehse, image courtesy of Pace Gallery © Kiki Smith

IF SMITH’S ART has always been influenced by her surroundings, her early work centered on her close circle of bohemian artist friends, who lived on broken-bottle-strewn avenues, and their struggles with sex, their bodies and death. Now, the severed appendages and innards have become fallen leaves, and many of the people in her work are shown among animals and flora, a reflection of the increasing amount of time she spends at her old farmhouse in the Hudson Valley. She has a quieter life upstate. She got married nearly four years ago to “a retired guy up there,” who keeps bees and is building her a free-standing studio, her first. She watches families of wild turkeys roam her five and a half acres, intrigued by their “vitality and strangeness.” And when they trot off in a row into the distance, the little ones following the big, she returns, as always, to work.



On the surface, the creations seem to have softened as the artist has grown older — the blood and guts giving way to silhouettes of wolves and birds, the trauma of the downtown apocalypse fading into bronze statues of girls sleeping peacefully among a flock of sheep. And yet, softer does not mean gentler. There remains a spark of intensity in this increasingly pastoral vision, a kind of grace that is, paradoxically, an unadulterated balm for a decidedly ungraceful time, one that has much in common with Smith's foundational years. Some of her peers, like Holzer, with her biting aphorisms, and Cindy Sherman, with her iterations on identity, are, by choice, tethered to the literal and corporeal, easy to view as bards of a roiled body politic, reflecting and commenting on cultural realities that shift painfully in the harsh light.

But what is eternally pleasurable about Smith's work is the opposite: As other artists have become more explicit, even bellicose, she has only gotten quieter, layering detail upon detail as she weaves a canopy of singular beauty amid the chaos. It is in this very act of working ceaselessly, of pushing forward to construct a macrocosm evermore expansive and enveloping while everything around her seems to rub and scrape and fall apart, that is itself Smith's ultimate political act.

She has always had an oracular quality, albeit a humble one, her imagery prefiguring by decades the acceptance of radical transformation and the fungibility of identity. In its latter years, Smith's world has become, unpredictably, fiercely optimistic, every stroke and line imbued with a skittish, supremely human touch. The violence and discomfort is largely gone, but this overwhelming faith remains a profound gesture, evidence that not only have we survived but that we will continue to, so long as we, like her, continue to notice everything, and fear nothing.

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