

## Art Review

### “Kiki Smith at the Neuberger Museum of Art, New York”

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Art Review Editors

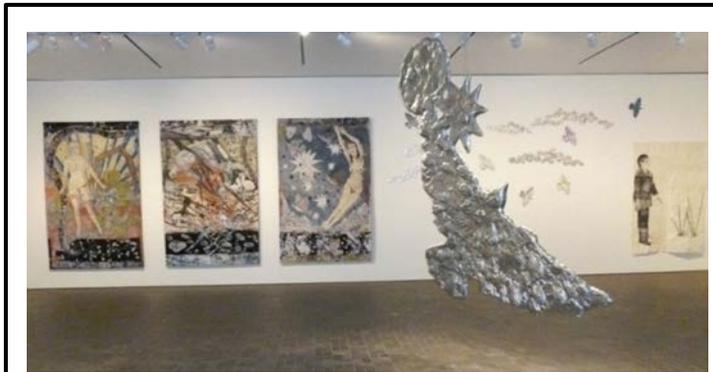
#### Acknowledgment

Kiki Smith, an American woman artist, was born in 1954 in Nuremberg, Germany. She grew up in South Orange, New Jersey and attended the Hartford School of Art in Connecticut in 1974. Since 1980 she has established herself as one of the leading American contemporary artists through her highly inventive, reflective, innovative, and diverse body of artworks.

Her father Tony Smith, a minimalist sculptor, exposed Kiki to art materials and art-making early in her life. She developed a distinctive style that expresses and comments on her worldview. She related in a 2003 [PBS Art 21](#) interview that as a child she made cardboard models for her father. She adopted his work ethic and explained that “90 percent of my time is spent doing what my intuition tells me to do in the studio.” Artwork and her life as an artist are confluent. Kiki’s works are not minimalistic in her father’s style but at times their simple presentation belies complex feminist political, social, and mythological issues. Her home life close to her father’s studio environment, combined with devout Irish Roman Catholic beliefs, had a great impact on her messages of spirituality. Ms. Smith’s works reflect recurrent themes and iconic motifs associated with

spirituality, mythology, creation, life, death, animals, birds, insects, and flowers.

For the last 30 years she has been using a figurative style in a wide range of materials to include paper, cloth, wood, ceramic, and metals. Her memory bank is a fountain of experiences waiting to be interwoven with mixed media to create her story.



**Kiki Smith Exhibition, Neuberger Museum, April 2012**

(Photo: John Caruso, Jr.)

She intuitively combines fragments, mixing and blending them to tell a story through visual language. What makes her work so intriguing and intellectually successful is the quality of surprise and inventiveness flowing from her strong intuition. Ms. Smith’s works often appear strange, odd, and even rare as they

make common images unfamiliar. The expectations of traditional figurative works of art are turned upside down and look new and fresh. These provocative works often deal with creation, life, and death. The death theme appears repeatedly in the form of dead animals and birds. One installation, *Flock* (1998), filled an entire gallery with 213 bronze dead birds. Instead of viewers feeling sad or depressed, however, her inventiveness separated death from morbidity. Through the complexity of surprise she expressed her original thinking and created an establishment which revered death as a natural occurrence.

Smith has installed her latest art works in the Neuberger Museum of Art at State University of New York Purchase College in Purchase, New York. The February-May 2012 exhibition was organized by Helaine Posner, Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs at the Neuberger Museum of Art. The South Gallery dedicated its entire space to Smith's 29 recent works of art in an exhibition entitled *Visionary Sugar: Works by Kiki Smith*.

Viewers could see her works taking new directions in terms of materials, art making, reflection, and vision. The exhibition included large scale cast bronze, drawings, printed collages, large size woven tapestries, multicolored gilded reliefs, and aluminum sculptures. The recent works made from cast bronze with gold, silver, and Japanese leaf included *Harmonies I* (2011), *Harmonies II* (2011), *Harmonies III* (2011), and *Harmonies with Black Birds* (2011).



***Harmonies I, II, III & IV***

Cast bronze with gold, silver, and Japanese leaf, 75 x 47, 2 ½ inches;

***Wolf with Birds,***

Cast bronze with gold leaf, 44 x 54 x 2 ½ inches

(Photo: John Caruso Jr.)

In her *Visionary Sugar* works, Kiki explored sweetness and joy of the life and the profound interdependence of all living things. She focused on the joy of life rather than death which she presented in the past. The celebration of life was embraced through the vitality of an animistic, spiritually-charged universe in her visual language. Her imagery, especially the drawings on paper, included female and male figures, birds, reptiles, animals, flowers, trees, the sun, moon and stars. These are ordinary aspects of life, but she successfully added her distinct treatment which turns the sublime into the profound.

Among the 29 works, a triptych of Jacquard Belgian tapestries catches the eye as a new material she is currently exploring. Kiki continues to expand her



horizon and our understanding of her vision by challenging herself with new media and materials. The three wool tapestries, each measuring 113 x 75 inches, were done in a Flemish medieval genre and are entitled *Earth* (2011), *Underworld* (2011), and *Sky* (2011).

Jacquard tapestries are woven on looms invented by Joseph Jacquard in 1805, which use a semi-mechanical process. The triptych depicts the human figure on a journey through three worlds – earth, underworld, and sky. In *Sky*, a figure that resembles Kiki floats in the heavens accompanied by birds and stars while *Earth* and *Underworld* are inhabited by beings in close communion with nature. The triptych is a constellation of works that collectively explore universal natural and spiritual realms. Kiki's view of the world is one filled with magical and mystical symbols and wonderment. The wool tapestries were created by digitizing images of her works and transforming them into large scale hangings.



**Rose Edge**

Ink on Nepal paper with palladium leaf, 94  
x71 inches  
(Photo: Hwa Young Caruso)



**Wave**

Ink on Nepal paper with colored pencil, 70 ½  
x 62 inches  
(Photo: Hwa Young Caruso)

Other major works of art were done on paper. Her printmaking and drawings of plants and figures in full length were done on a delicate, fibrous paper. She used Nepalese handmade paper similar to Asian rice paper, white, thin and translucent.



**The Temptation**

Ink on Nepal paper with glitter and palladium  
leaf, 108 x 122 inches  
(Photo: Hwa Young Caruso)

*Charm* (2011) is composed of nine captivating works (22 x 24 inches) on paper using refined etching and hand-coloring. Other impressive drawings include *Rose Edge* (2009) and *Wave* (2009).

On the opposite side of the gallery wall the works *Vision 1<sup>st</sup> hour* and *Vision 3<sup>rd</sup> Hour* (2009), on Nepalese paper, were displayed without a frame. The rough edges and approximate outline of the works added a natural approach to her intentions rather than the conformity of a rigid straight-line border.



**Birds**

Bronze with gold, silver, and Japanese leaf, 18 x 12 x 1 ¾ inches  
(Photo: John Caruso Jr.)

On the ceiling a flock of colorful, gilded bronze birds alight on a gallery wall in the form of three suspended sculptures of large flying birds, moons, and stars. These ornamental Japanese leaf sculptures are shiny, glittery, and colorific and dominate most of the gallery space.



**Annunciation**

Cast aluminum, 133 x 80 x 3 ½ inches,  
(Photo: John Caruso Jr.)

One figure in the middle of gallery entitled *Annunciation* (2008) is made of cast aluminum (133 x 80 x 3 ½ inches). It is a silvery shiny seated older female figure with a smooth texture. The figure is disproportional with an oversized head and a hand raised in the gesture of the Pope, uncomfortably seated, blessing, hailing, or halting the masses. The inspiration for this work is a blend of Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation and Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940).

Her new body of works cogently expresses a new direction, more toward the celebration of nature on earth and the joy and sweetness of living things. Kiki's work carries its own vocabulary of inventiveness and other distinctive qualities. Her artistic achievement undresses exploration by offering new surprises to viewers and is truly inspiring to the younger generation of artists and art audiences. Constantly reinventing and revitalizing one's artistic creative process is a very demanding and difficult process. Kiki's endurance and continuous career growth is remarkable and confirms her status as a leading female artist in an art world often dominated by males. It is always exciting to see what the direction of her next exhibition themes will be. What are the possibilities as she interweaves her personal inventory of images, experiences, and imagination?

Ms. Smith's complexity in the selection of subject matter, interwoven with various inventories of images, reaches new heights of awareness of expression when she delves into new mediums. Through experiencing different mediums and materials which include sculpture, installation, printmaking, drawing, works on paper, pen and ink, pencil, painting, glass, collage, fabric, and tapestry, she is enhancing her artistic experiences and expanding her artistic expression. She is reinventing herself and rejuvenating as an artist. This continuous renaissance provides viewers with a freshness of vibrant new expression. Smith has never limited herself to one medium. By expanding her vista she has established herself as a leading international artist.

Ms. Smith's works are in many prominent museum collections in New York City, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Currently Kiki Smith lives and works in New York City.

### **Acknowledgment**

We extend appreciation to Ms. Helaine Posner, Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs at the Neuberger Museum of Art, for providing materials and permitting photographs of the *Visionary Sugar: Works by Kiki Smith* exhibition.