Kiki Smith: Night

*Jersey Crows* (detail), 1995, silicon bronze; 27 units, smallest 6 ¼ x 17 ¼ x 11 in. (15.9 x 44.5 x 27.9 cm), largest 16 x 19 ¼ x 23 ¼ in. (40.6 x 49.5 x 59.7 cm). Installation dimensions variable. Photo by Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York.
Flew out/into the Night

Where there is no light there is no need for eyes
Photosensitive
Barren
Glass ice
Forest of twilight
A place to reside
Full of wind and birds
Forage
Black Rain
Coal
Black Snow
Black Rabbit
Black Cat
Black Water
A Black Cloud
Winter!
Bats under rocks
Four Seasons
Dead Fields
Black snow storm

— From Kiki Smith’s notebook, 1998

Night is in the realm of darkness; it is associated with myth, death, despair, and dreams and fantasy, all of which are elements in Kiki Smith’s work. Smith has been known since the 1980s for her depictions of human anatomical fragments, internal organs and structural systems, and later, full-scale figures—often rendered in exquisite and fragile materials such as paper, glass, and terra-cotta, as well as bronze. This work has been interpreted as expressive of a shift in contemporary art to a preoccupation with the “abject”—that which is taboo, uncomfortable, or “vandalized,” as writer Steven Madoff characterized it (New York Times, November 2, 1997) rather than ideal — in human form. In the early 1990s, images of figures merging with nature began to appear in Smith’s work: small “faeries” with tin butterfly wings, 1993; life-size plaster figures with large metal and glass butterflies attached to them or with glass flowers seeming to grow out of their head or arms, suggestive of the transmutations of mortals in Ovid’s Metamorphoses; and an aluminum bird’s head mounted atop a cloth-wrapped plaster torso, all 1994. More recently, animals, birds, flowers, and celestial bodies—stars and the moon—have emerged alongside the human body as the subjects of her drawings, prints, cast sculptures, and forays into video.

The move from the human figure to the animal or natural world might seem a logical one in Smith’s work: a move from the inside of the body as subject matter to its outside, the outside of the body to the world surrounding it, and finally, to the larger, cosmological system. Smith remarked to critic Michael Kimmelman:

[There are] images from around the world of bird-humans. ... Birds become stand-ins for souls. ... Our identity is deeply, sometimes tragically, connected with the natural world. ... I see animals as a natural progression in my work ... whole figures and sculptures based on different cosmologies. And then, through the cosmologies, animals (New York Times, November 15, 1996).

In natural history museums, row upon row of dead birds, animals, and plants are displayed in the service of taxonomy. The specimens are culled, collected, and classified according to criteria that determine their assignment to kingdom, phylum or division, class, order, family, genus, and species, a systematic breakdown that connotes an objective disposition of objects in the universe. Contrary to such orderly classification, Smith’s work, she says, has more to do with biblical themes than with natural history. Indeed, biblical
allusions seem apparent in the titles of some of her recent pieces, such as 
Crèche, 1997. One of her fantasies, she 
says, has been to remake a kind of 
Noah’s Ark. The result has been, ironi-
cally, the creation of singular dead 
animals—a series of “death barges” 
rather than arks.

Smith’s drawings and etchings are 
as detailed and lovingly and beauti-
fully rendered as the scientific 
illustrations of the eighteenth-century 
naturalist Mark Catesby or the nine-
teenth-century ornithologist John James 
Audubon, many of whose subjects, like 
specimens in museums, are now 
extinct. But unlike those artists, who 
painted their creatures in lifelike poses 
and habitats, Smith accentuates the fact 
that hers are depictions of corpses—of 
delicate little dead bird bodies, for 
example, shaped strangely like shields.

Lifeless black Jersey crows made of 
cast bronze, glass eggs, stars, fanciful 
birds’ nests, silver-leafed snowflakes 
and animal scat, together with videos 
of jellyfish, the moon, and reanimated 
compilations of Eadweard Muybridge’s 
and Étienne-Jules Marey’s photographs 
of animals in motion, culminating in 
the flight pattern of a white bird, have 
been featured in her recent exhibitions. 
The pieces in this installation refer to 
many of those same subjects. All the 
work here, however, is dark or black, 
the color of night. “Night equalizes 
everything.” Smith says, “makes every-
thing black. ... [I envision] night 
without stars, ... tears, black rain, black 
stars, black sky.”

In an interview in 1994 with Kyong 
Park, Smith observed, “The body is 
always under the siege of ideologies, 
the church, politics. To understand the 
body ... you have to go under the 
surface and look at the entire system. It 
is a hologram that contains all the 
information for the rest of everything” 
(Positions in Art, p. 126). In the same 
conversation she imagined reversing 
the situation of being female in a world 
in which male is posited as the norm. 
Her recent work extends the suppos-
tion to an experience of the world in

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Crèche, 1997, phosphorous bronze; 27 units, smallest approximately 3 x 1 ¼ x 1 ½ in. 
(7.6 x 3.8 x 3.8 cm), largest approximately 10 x 20 x 9 in. (25.4 x 50.8 x 22.9 cm). Collection of 
Vicky and Kent Logan. Photo by Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York.
which to be human is no longer to occupy the center. In the small-press book *Madame Realism* (1984), which Smith illustrated with drawings of sperm and other cellular forms, Lynne Tillman wrote, “Boundaries are achieved through battle.” Perhaps Smith’s work may be seen as addressing boundaries and their permeability, for, as she noted to Park (p. 130), “It’s very pleasurable to explore the borders [of our existence].”

Exploration in Smith’s work extends to materials and processes. Her experiments in a variety of media and techniques, whether casting, printing, or manipulating by hand, suggest a nearly metaphysical relationship between the materials and the forms they are used to represent. She has often compared paper to skin, while also noting that paper is a “material that nobody cares about, that [is] discarded” (p. 118). Conversely, Smith has used precious or exquisite materials to depict animal and human excrement and bodily fluids.

Simultaneously about vitality and death, art as a process of investigation and a physical reality, Smith’s work mixes delicacy and crude matter-of-factness. Her subject matter—cosmic affinities and mortal decay—is rendered deftly, touchingly, with a hint of the ineffable and the absurd and with immediacy, humor, and tenderness. Pushing past the familiar, or digging deeper into it, like fairy tales, myths, and contemporary horror films, her art addresses that which is both threatening and alluring, often hidden behind an ordered facade but which has, conversely, often inspired notions of beauty.

Phyllis Rosenzweig
Associate Curator

All unattributed statements by the artist are from discussions with the author in New York (September 30, 1997) and Washington (January 12, 1998).

*Piñons on a crest at dusk, separate figures, will become imageless, integration of all the black trees, black animals, etc., night animals, domestic animals waiting at home.*


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BIOGRAPHY

Born January 18, 1954, in Nuremberg, Germany, daughter of American actress and opera singer Jane Smith, who had been living and performing in Germany, and American architect and sculptor Tony Smith. Grew up in South Orange, New Jersey. In the late 1970s was involved with artists’ collaborative group CoLab (Collaborative Projects Inc.); participated in its cooperative ventures at alternative venues such as “Times Square Show,” 1980. In 1985 completed training as an emergency medical technician and made her first works in glass and bronze. By 1988 was also making work using wax, cloth, beads, paper, and ceramic. Smith lives and works in New York.

The Selected Bibliography includes exhibition catalogs that provide detailed chronologies and bibliographies as well as statements by and interviews with the artist.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

* Publications cited in text


Catalogue raisonné.


SELECTED BOOKS ILLUSTRATED BY KIKI SMITH


Since work in the exhibition was in progress when this publication went to press, a checklist is not available.

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