

DIRECTIONS

Kiki Smith: Night

March 19–June 21, 1998



Jersey Crows (detail), 1995, silicon bronze; 27 units, smallest 6 1/4 x 17 1/2 x 11 in. (15.9 x 44.5 x 27.9 cm), largest 16 x 19 1/2 x 23 1/2 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, ironically, 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 beautifully rendered as the scientific illustrations of the eighteenth-century naturalist Mark Catesby or the nineteenth-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 cows 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 everything 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 supposition to an experience of the world in



Crèche, 1997, phosphorous bronze; 27 units, smallest approximately 3 x 1 1/2 x 1 1/2 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

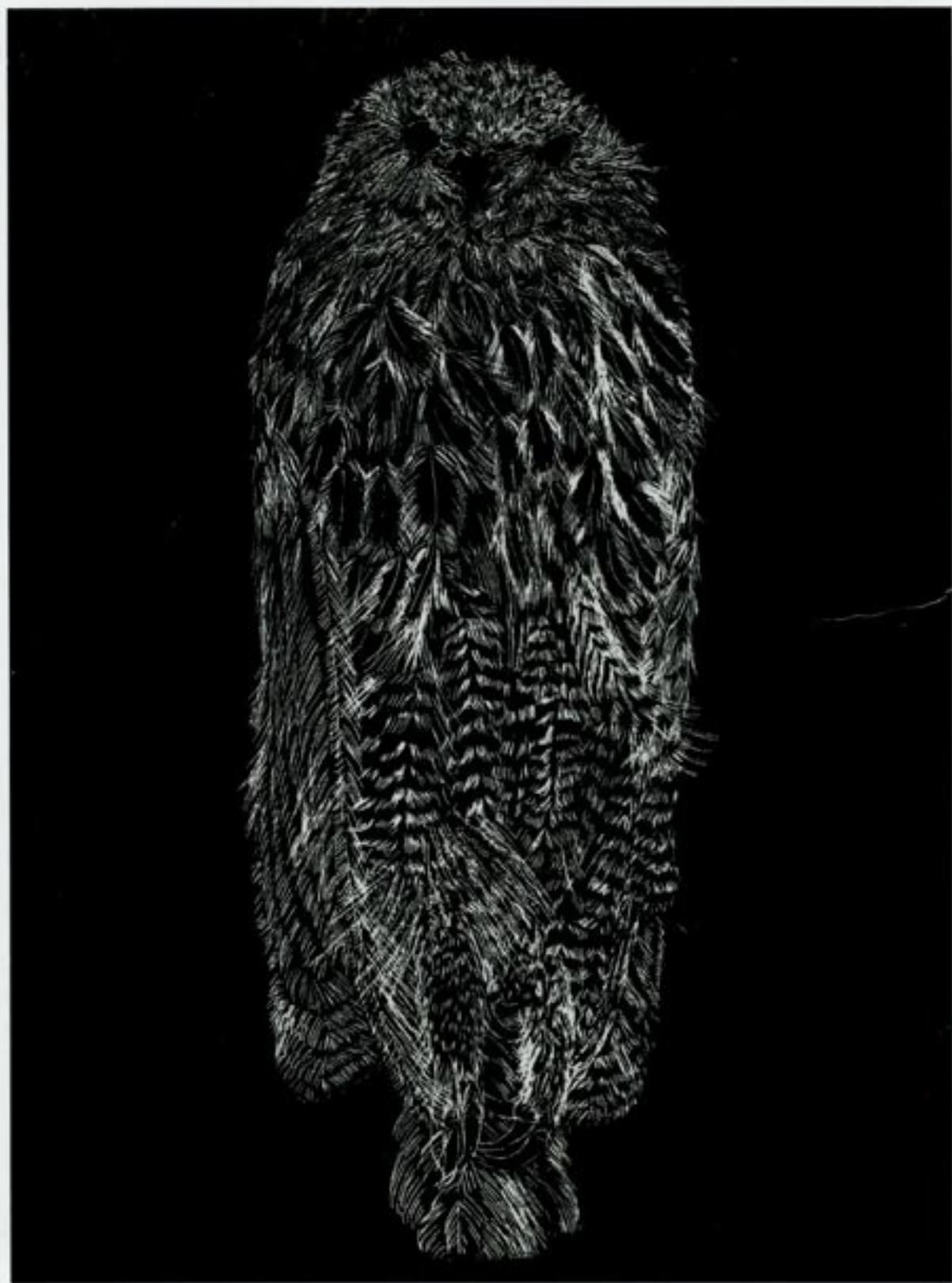
All unattributed statements by the artist are from discussions with the author in New York (September 30, 1997) and Washington (January 12, 1998).

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.

— From "Dressing Up My Pets," 1997. Unpublished poem by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge.



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Owl, 1996–98, etching on Nepal paper, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York.

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.

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

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