

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

We are in a living room filled with candelabras, sculpted birds, and female figures. Birdy, the 15-year-old dove, contentedly watches the rain through a back window. Kiki Smith is leaving for Italy tomorrow to open a show and then travels to San Francisco to install a 25-year retrospective, yet she calmly draws as she discusses her career. Seated in front of two giant stacks of watercolor paper, Smith holds a pencil in her left hand and a photograph of her deceased mother in her right. Although I am eager to discuss the dark, bewitching roles she sometimes assumes in her self-portraits, as well as the irreverent ways she uses the body and its parts as potent metaphors, Smith has ways of shielding her artistic persona. In conversation, she uses the first, second, and third person. She occasionally talks looking into my eyes, but usually she gazes down at her drawing.

Smith's retrospective, organized by Siri Engberg at the Walker Art Center, opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in November 2005 and is currently at the Walker. It will also travel to the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. The show reveals the myriad avenues of Smith's creative process, her array of materials, and historical and personal perspectives. According to Engberg, "With the body as its center, her work has drawn inspiration from art history, literature, decorative arts, and her own biography. Her process is one of constant reinvention — she never closes doors for herself."



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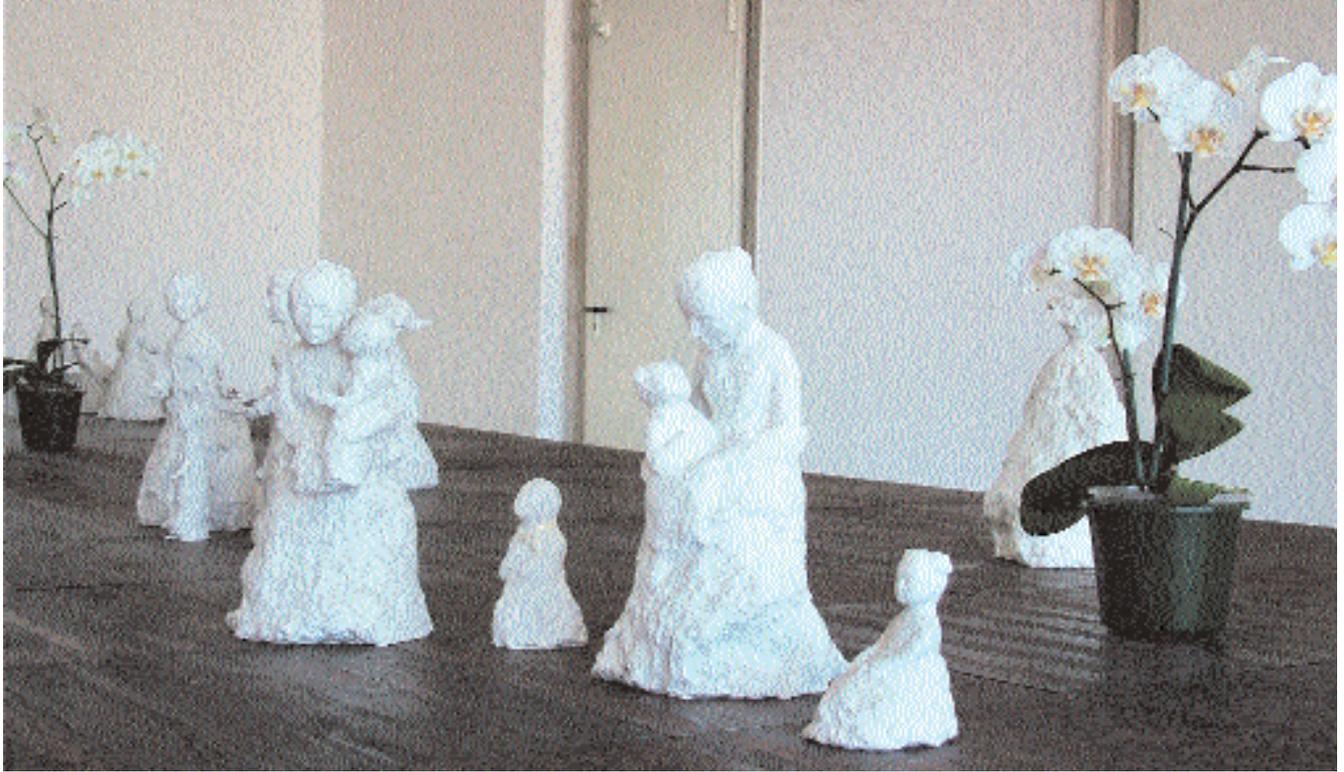
Pee Body, 1992. Wax and 23 strands of glass beads, 68.6 x 71.1 x 71.1 cm.

Kicking Out the Boundaries

A Conversation with

Kiki Smith





Jan Garden Castro: *I loved the images of women and domestic space in colonial America from your installation for the Querini Stampalia Foundation (summer 2005). A portion of this work, Kitchen, is part of your traveling retrospective. What are the processes and themes behind this installation?*

Kiki Smith: The Querini Stampalia asked me to make an exhibition that would be up during the Venice Biennale. They are a house museum with a collection of many Pietro Longhi paintings of 18th-century bourgeois domestic life in Venice and a contemporary art space on the top floor. I began thinking about that and about domestic life in New England at the time people were colonizing this country. I was reading books by Laura Thatcher Ulrich, who wrote about colonial women's lives, and I was making a piece for the de Young Museum at the time—they have wonderful colonial American paintings in the Rockefeller Collection. This got me thinking about colonial American things, and I thought it would be interesting to play in some of those languages.

I tried to make things that had a relationship to the Querini Stampalia collection. For instance, they have a large Sèvres porcelain collection, so I made a kitchen room upstairs. I worked with a ceramicist named Marty Kendall—making pots in New York and in Aspen, Colorado—mimicking some New England motifs, and I bought a lot of things at flea markets, including some Amish floor runners. When I was on the plane coming over to install my show, there was an extensive article in the *New York Times* about American soldiers torturing Afghan people, which was hideous. I put it in *Kitchen*, because our foreign policies move out of our kitchens and seep into the world. The kitchen is the heart of a house and is not devoid of the outside world. I made photograms of New England scenes from paintings and had a girl looking out a window.

JC: *Were there any self-portraits?*

KS: Just one of me looking stupefied in my backyard with a light bulb. I made it the year before when I was interested in 19th-century photography.

JC: *The newspaper references violence brought into the home?*

KS: Our foreign policy is coming out of our psyches, spilling out into the world and then coming back in and affecting our domestic lives. It's going in both directions, but it's not separate from our domestic lives.

JC: *Did you write all of the narratives? I loved the tale about the woman who danced her way into the future.*

KS: Yes, using the Pietro Longhi paintings of women doing ordinary things, I changed the narratives to mix it up a little bit—as though they were all up to something, although I don't know what that really was. Also, it's about being a foreigner. When you go someplace, you are reading from your own experience. As a tourist, you have convoluted understandings—or misunderstandings—about what you're seeing. In that sense, it also gives you the opportunity to make new narratives or other narratives out of misunderstanding, which affords you a way to jump out of your own culture into other cultures.

JC: *The woman dancing into the future is a perfect metaphor for being an artist, and it also suggests the role of the body in the creator's life. Could you talk about the ways that you have examined, classified, and mythologized the body?*

KS: I don't think about it so much any more. When I was younger, I thought it was an interesting way to think about being here—through your body, through the experience of your body. A great deal of our experience is social-physical. I'm not trying to do anything in a methodical way; I'm just seeing what happens.

JC: *Around 1980, you started with Gray's Anatomy and an exhibition featuring diseased severed fingers, and you trained as an emergency medical technician in 1985. So it seems that very early on you got the idea to use art to examine bodily dysfunctions as well as functions.*

KS: It seemed like something apparent to pay attention to, and I did for a fair amount of time, and then I started thinking about other things, or not thinking about other things.

Opposite: *Large Dessert after Pietro Longhi* (detail), 2004–05. 23 figures and dining room table, dimensions variable. This page, clockwise from right: Installation view of “Kiki Smith: New Work,” 142 Greene Street, New York, 1995. *Wolf*, 2001. Bronze and sewn cotton, 44.25 x 46 x 12 in. *Lilith*, 1994. Silicon bronze and glass, 33 x 27.5 x 19 in.



JC: *Then the body became bodies in mythological time.*

KS: It's just following one's interests. And you get into these strange, tangential interloping spaces that hold your attention. For instance, Pietro Longhi's art is not something that I would normally think about for more than five seconds, but for some reason, certain images have a dearness that is attractive, and you see a possibility of taking that image and transforming something. You can use other artists' work as a springboard for re-contextualizing or for recognizing what still seems very vivid or vibrant about certain images or a type of historical form.

JC: *What was the genesis of Pee Body?*

KS: At the time that I made it [1992], I had a show at the Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst, a decorative arts museum in Vienna, so I tried to use historical decorative materials. I used Czech beads, but the Austrians were involved in bead-making, chandelier-making, and glass, and bead work is a big part of their history. They also have a history of using anatomical wax figures to teach medicine. I was reacting specifically to a particular place and making a piece that used decoration. Another interest

was to make something between a solid sculpture and a drawing. A piece of my father's called *Source* is a big influence on me. It's a body and an appendage—something coming precariously off of a mass. In *Pee Body*, one part has a solidity to it, and the other could be contingent and changing. Each time you install it, it makes a sort of Baroque line drawing on the floor.

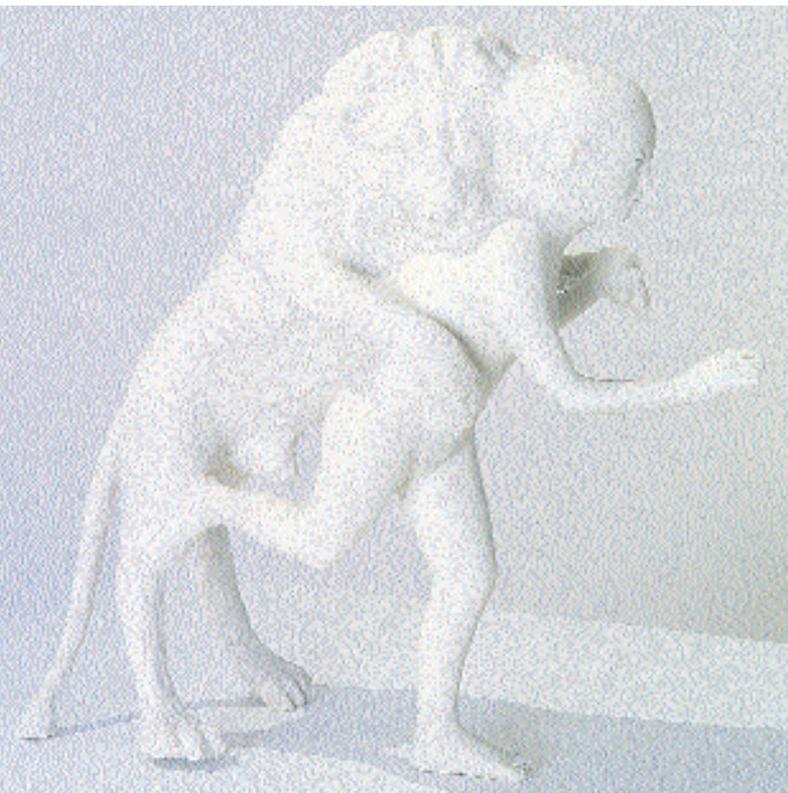
JC: *How do your fluencies in different media influence each other?*

KS: Beads are at the bottom of the glass chain, but they are historically important. In terms of world commerce, they have an incredibly developed history. In a perverse way, I like playing around with different media, materials, and techniques to make provocative references to those different histories, so that you're not caught in the conventional or the momentary contemporary reading of things. Situations are often culturally dictated, so it's interesting to keep shifting the reading around.

JC: *MoMA held a retrospective of your prints, books, and multiples two years ago, and now the Walker is organizing an even bigger, all-media retrospective. What are some of your favorite early works? Are there works you no longer like?*



KS: Most of the time, I don't think about any of this. Certain things I wish would burn down in people's houses or disappear off the planet; then I think, that's just a problem of self-acceptance. All of the things you're doing are experiments, ultimately, to see what happens. If you consider the whole thing as a process and as artifacts of process, you don't have to be attached to whether on a given day you think they're good or bad. In general, I'm the same person, but it's finding a language that seems to work appropriately. When I first came to New York, I made things that were very funky and somewhat comical, which is still a big aspect of my work. I think that my work has a lot of humor that's not really seen. I mean things seriously but also humorously at the same time. Sometimes I can see that I had no idea craftwise how to make things. I'm learning on the job.



Just as in one's personal life, you sometimes can't believe what you did two years ago, and you think, "Oh, I was so young then." Then you realize you weren't that young. It's the same with art: sometimes one feels appalled by what one has made; then sometimes one has tremendous affection for certain things and they are very important, but not necessarily what is particularly good. Lots of times I saved my worst drawings, because that's where the most struggle was—and the most energy, much more so than in things that were resolved. With other people's work, too, sometimes it's the things that I find the most problematic that stick in me the longest, that I have to grapple with; in the end, they give me the most energy because they're unresolved. Some great things one learns the most from, but some great things simply reiterate good taste. At times I move from curiosity, and I also move a lot from discomfort.

JC: *You told Lynne Tillman that in your work up to age 40 you were "vomiting up your childhood."*

KS: I was working very automatically, having tremendous necessity for self-expression.

JC: *You're the daughter of sculptor Tony Smith and opera singer Jane Lawrence. Was your childhood difficult?*

KS: Everyone's childhood is problematic for them. Everyone has insatiable desires as a child, and that gives one energy later in life. I had a very interesting childhood. Some stuff had something to do with my parents, and some very motivating things in my life had nothing to do with my parents. I feel very fortunate to have grown up around artists.

JC: *Your readings of Little Red Riding Hood and other girl and animal tales are fascinating. In one tale, she goes to bed with the wolf, there is wild animal sex, and she becomes the wolf.*

KS: I have a friend, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, who has had a big influence on my thinking about one's relationships to animals, trees, and the natural world—seeing what they mean to you in a meandering way with no particular direction. I sound cagey, but don't want to get trapped by language.

JC: *I love the transformations, the way the girl seems to be hurt or violated, but she also ends up as the wolf.*

KS: I made all of these works of women being attacked by animals, but it was just a way to get out of being here, more like animal spirits coming into your body. They're just funny to me. Like the blue versions of Krishna, like in Artaud's drawings with blue holes in them—you could say he's attacking the portraits, but you could also say he's creating space to release internal pressure. The animals are a way to get out of being in the body.

JC: *Obviously, you're drawing, too, on meanings from other cultures; for example, Native American views of animals and spirits.*

KS: I have a friend, a sort of shaman, who has communications with animals. In a way, I'm making a reference to my friendship and to that fluent spirit world of animism. And I was raised Catholic, which has similarities to animism. It's a spirit-worshipping religion that believes in a live universe and also in things being imbued with symbolic powers.

JC: *You variously address notions of beauty in your work. Siri Engberg suggests that you create a tension between your frank*

subject matter and your seductive uses of materials. What role has feminism played in your life and work?

KS: It shows the necessity to expand notions of beauty in an active or assertive manner. I don't have super big art agendas, but I do have agendas of trying to have a good life here. Often our culture is more restrictive than our beings are psychically. Often there's not enough space for one's nature. One has to keep trying to kick out the boundaries so one's nature can have space for itself.

JC: *What inspired your famous sculpture of a woman with sagging breasts painfully crawling, with what Linda Nochlin calls "a 'tail' of shit" or "perhaps a long, long intestine" dragging behind her (Tale, 1992)?*

KS: I just thought it was funny. Basically, it references my father's *Source* sculpture, a body and an appendage. I thought that one's own history trails one around. One tends to hold onto unnecessary situations from one's personal past. Like a bad tale, one doesn't let go. A physical illustration of that seems insane, but in one's personal life, one won't let go of things one has outgrown. It was a humiliating but comical illustration.

JC: *Was your upside-down, hanging Lilith inspired by Rodin's *Je suis belle (1882)* as Nochlin suggests?*

KS: No. It just came out of making something. I was making a mold of the body and then I covered it with papier mâché. It's someone squatting or like a fly. Because it was papier mâché, I realized that you could put it on the wall. What's nice about making things is that to some extent you can have intention and to some extent you have to be doing things in the present moment.

JC: *Could you discuss scale and fragility as two important aspects of your work?*

KS: When I was young, my father was trying to teach me to draw, and he said that things had a particular scale that was important to their integrity and being. So, for the first big part of my work, I was intent to make things the size that they were. When I got interested in dolls, I made things to that scale. In general, I have made things that are body-sized at the largest. Lately, I'm making things in relationship to the scale of figurines and also to the scale of statues. Even though they are both objects of images of figures, each has a very different history.

Like beauty, it's often deceptive what is fragile and what isn't fragile. Often, historically, the things that seem fragile are more sustainable than things that have more body, more substantiality.

JC: *Siri Engberg has noted that your work permits us to re-examine ourselves, our history, and our place in the world. What is your personal philosophy about the relation between life and art?*

KS: Art is a place where people express their consciousness, and it's an infinite space. It's a meeting space between different technologies and different thought processes, curiosities, and desires. Since it can have infinite forms and subject matter, it's an extremely free space.

JC: *One of my friends says that your gallery, Pace Wildenstein, is primarily a boy's club. Is this so? As a feminist, do you consider it ironic that you're one of the few women artists there?*

KS: No. Arne Glimcher made his career, basically, showing Louise Nevelson. Some of those things are generational. I see my job as a female artist to be in as good a situation as I can figure out to put myself in. It's my social obligation. I like showing there because they're really professional. Lots of things have changed and will change enormously in my lifetime. Those are social processes. The fuller acknowledgement of women's cultural contributions changes only as a large consensus of the population realizes that this is a problem.

JC: *Your art addresses universal issues that our elders never even discussed. You've become a culture hero, and you've clearly influenced the next generations of artists. How do you balance the public and the private aspects of your life?*

KS: I've loved having an art career. It's nice to think of oneself as being useful. It's great if you have given someone a sense of possibility for their own lives that's rich and meaningful to them. I'm a mixture of a private and a slightly gregarious social person, and having an art career is different from being an artist. There are different components, models, and ways one can be an artist. Maybe the best thing is that this next generation shows many more possibilities under the loose membrane of art.

One's interests as an artist change over time, too. My personal life is relatively undramatic, which is good for me. I mostly just work. My main interest is learning about things. I feel very privileged to be in the art community.

*Jan Garden Castro is a writer and art historian based in New York. She is the author/editor of five books, including *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*, and she is also a contributing editor for *Sculpture*.*

Opposite, top: *Blue Girl*, 1998. Silicon bronze, dimensions variable.

Opposite, bottom: *Woman with Lion*, 2003. Porcelain, 11.25 x 12 x 7 in.

This page: *Getting the Bird Out*, 1992. Bronze and string, head 10 x 11.5 x 7 in., dimensions variable.

