

# WHITNEY

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## Press Release

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July 2006

### WHITNEY TO PRESENT KIKI SMITH RETROSPECTIVE, TRAVERSING THE ARTIST'S 25-YEAR CAREER

*On view November 16, 2006 through February 11, 2007*



**Kiki Smith, *Lilith*, 1994**

*Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005*, the artist's first full-scale American museum survey, will be presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, November 16, 2006–February 11, 2007. The exhibition includes approximately 125 works done in a variety of media—glass, bronze, beeswax, papier-mâché—as well as prints, drawings, photographs, films, and installations.

Over the past 25 years, Smith has used an exceptionally wide array of materials to explore a range of subject matter; her sources of inspiration have included religion, folklore, myth, literature, and natural science. Often examining the human condition through the metaphor of the body, in all its strengths and frailties, Smith has been remarkably innovative in the arena of figurative sculpture. She is also one of the most extraordinarily accomplished printmakers at work today.

The exhibition was organized by Siri Engberg, Curator of Visual Arts at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in close collaboration with the artist. The New York installation is being overseen by David Kiehl, the Whitney's curator of prints and special collections.

Born January 18, 1954 to Jane Smith, an opera singer and actress, and Tony Smith, the postwar abstract artist and architect, Kiki Smith grew up in New Jersey. Her father encouraged Smith and her younger twin sisters, Beatrice and Seton, to participate in the making of his work, and often hosted fellow artists and friends such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and the young Richard Tuttle as household guests.

After a year at Hartford Art School, Smith settled in New York City in 1976, where she turned seriously to art. Within a few years her underground reputation grew steadily alongside her involvement with Collaborative Projects, Inc. (CoLab), a New York-based artist cooperative. Her art in these early years introduced the body as subject, and reflected her interest in such visual sources as *Gray's Anatomy*, the classic text first published in 1858, in which organs are depicted as discrete and de-contextualized. An untitled plaster cast of a hand and forearm, made in 1980, the year of her father's death, evidenced the beginnings of her interest in casting the body from life, and also introduced the notion of mortality into her visual thinking, which would continue to be a preoccupation in her work.

In 1985, Smith spent three months training as an emergency medical technician. This led her to consider interior physiology as a subject for her art and to move to a more clinical depiction of the body. Through sculptures and prints, she created a lexicon of often life-size anatomical images—individual organs and parts, lifted from their corporeal context and reinterpreted in unexpected, delicate materials. Works such as *Glass Stomach* (1985), an elegant, crystalline vessel; *Ribs* (1987), constructed of terra-cotta "bones" interlaced with thread and precariously attached to the wall; and *Shield* (1988), a plaster cast of a third-trimester pregnant belly, are all fashioned from materials that in their vulnerability allude to the fragility of life itself. Other works from this period reveal Smith's abiding interest in craft. *Dowry Cloth* (1990), a sensuous and tactile work formed through felting, one of the earliest methods for making fabric; and *Lucy's Daughters* (1990), a cluster of stitched and printed dolls, all were made using practices associated with domestic handiwork that inform Smith's art to the present.

In the early 1990s, Smith continued to embrace the human body as subject, moving away from her

investigations of organs and systems to works depicting the complete figure. Using materials such as beeswax, paper, and bronze, she made a number of pieces—often cast from life—that examined the female form as a site of political and social meaning. Her disarming, anonymous bodies are far from the ideal nudes populating much of art history. Like Smith's early sculptures, they are at once visceral and dignified, familiar yet discomfiting. In her disquieting *Untitled* (1990), the naked bodies of a woman and a man slump with bowed heads suggestive of Adam and Eve ashamed of their new knowledge five minutes after sharing the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Works from this period demonstrate Smith's use of paper as a powerful medium of expression. *Untitled (Blood Noise)* (1993) includes sentences written by her sister Beatrice, who died of AIDS in 1988, describing the final symptoms of her illness. The texts hang like streamers from a quilt-like, painted collage of lithographs that form a narrative and symbolic portrait.

Smith's focus on the female form in her sculpture soon led her to reexamine traditional feminine archetypes from religion, mythology, and folklore. Her depictions have been unexpected, as seen in sculptures such as the *Virgin Mary* (1992), flayed skinless like an anatomical model, her muscles exposed. Smith also depicts women that art history has largely forgotten, such as Lilith, who in various Hebrew legends was Adam's first wife (and as such refused to submit to a subordinate role), or a vengeful, night-flying demon of the air. Smith cast her *Lilith* (1994) in bronze, with eerily human glass eyes peering from the dark patina of a body that seems to crawl across the wall.

The natural world has played a significant role in Smith's art, with many works based on landscape, the cosmos, and the historical and spiritual connections between humans and animals. Smith has incorporated birds extensively in her work, and has also turned her attention to a wide array of other creatures, frequently depicting wolves, deer, cats, owls, bats, mice, and other animals drawn from the contexts of religion, literature, and folklore. Some of these works, such as *Crèche* (1997) and *Black Animal Drawing* (1996–1998), assemble animals in a menagerie. Other pieces alluding to landscape and natural phenomena consist of accumulations of like objects, as in *Mine* (1999), a constellation of sharply pointed stars made from delicate Schott crystal; and *Flock* (1998), a gathering of bird specimens arranged in neat rows to form an invented taxonomy.

More recently, Smith has explored storytelling as subject matter, separating characters from their traditional narratives, as she weaves together elements from fairy tales, folklore and myths to create evocative pieces that invite multiple interpretations. This is often achieved through her use of materials, as in *Daughter* (1999), a curious and disturbing sculpture of a young Red Riding Hood

crafted from Nepalese paper with blue glass eyes that stare from beneath a red cloak. Smith covers the figure's face in excessive hair, suggesting that she is the daughter of Red Riding Hood and the Wolf. In other works that merge humans and animals, Smith draws on both narrative and art-historical references. *Pietà* (1999), a self-portrait depicting the artist mourning her dead cat, is rendered in a posture reminiscent of the grieving Virgin Mary. *Rapture*, a work from 2001, shows a woman emerging from the belly of a wolf, evoking the final scenario from the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, and the broader notion of rebirth.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Walker Art Center has published a 312-page, fully illustrated catalogue with essays by exhibition curator Siri Engberg, art historian Linda Nochlin, and folklorist Marina Warner, as well as an interview with the artist by novelist Lynne Tillman. The publication features a complete exhibition history and bibliography, and a comprehensive illustrated chronology of Smith's life and work. Smith has contributed a 16-page photographic work entitled *Thicket* (2005) as an insert in the book. The catalogue is distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc.

The exhibition debuted at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it was on view November 19, 2005–January 29, 2006. An expanded presentation was recently shown at the Walker Art Center; it travels next to the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (July 22–September 24, 2006), before coming to the Whitney.

*Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980–2005* is organized by Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and is made possible by generous support from the Elizabeth A. Sackler Museum Educational Trust, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, the Barbara Lee Family Foundation, Lowry Hill *Private Wealth Management*, and Donna Miller.

For the New York presentation, major support has been provided by the National Committee of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

### **About the Whitney**

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the leading advocate of 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century American art. Founded in 1930, the Museum is regarded as the preeminent collection of American art and includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper, the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, Louise Nevelson, and Lucas Samaras, as well as significant works by

Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense debate, the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in America today.

**IMAGE CREDIT:** Kiki Smith, *Lilith*, 1994. Silicon bronze and glass; 33 x 27 1/2 x 19 in. Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; accessions Committee Fund purchase. Photograph by Ellen Page Wilson

**Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art:**

Full House: Views of the Whitney's Collection at 75 *Edward Hopper on view Through December 3, 2006	Through September 3, 2006*
Mark Grotjahn	September 15, 2006-January 7, 2007
Picasso and American Art	September 28, 2006-January 28, 2007
Albers and Moholy-Nagy	November 2, 2006-January 21, 2007
Kiki Smith	November 16, 2006-February 11, 2007
Terence Koh	January - May 2007
Gordon Matta-Clark	Opens February 2007
Lorna Simpson	Opens Spring 2007

*The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. For information, please call 1-800 WHITNEY or visit [www.whitney.org](http://www.whitney.org)*

**Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria:**

Trace	Through November 12, 2006
Burgeoning Geometries	December 7, 2006 - March 11, 2007

*The Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria is located at 120 Park Avenue at 42nd Street. Gallery hours: Monday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thursdays 11 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Sculpture Court Hours: Monday through Saturday from 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., Sundays and holidays 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. The Whitney Museum at Altria is funded by Altria Group, Inc. Admission is free. Free gallery talks are offered every Wednesday and Friday at 1:00 p.m. For further information, please call (917) 663-2453.*