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In the Middle Galleries we encounter a Wunderkammer, a cabinet of curiosities containing a myriad of forms and materials, both human and animal. The artist began making these multiples (limited series of identical objects, often cast) around 1980. Compelling evocations of the body – often dissected or disembodied – can be seen in this abundance of Kiki Smith’s material experimentation, from bronze, plaster, glass and porcelain to paper mâché, resin, cast silver and gold leaf – demonstrating her constant curiosity. A collection of hybrid creatures and natural phenomena are also displayed including a glass frog, a porcelain dead cat, a silver shooting star and a bat cast in bronze with piercing ruby eyes.

‘I am a wanderer,’ Kiki Smith says. And indeed, she is a wanderer through time and space, making ‘contact’ on a decades-long imaginary journey that takes her through foreign cultures. With the wanderlust of a cultural anthropologist she roams through lands and historical epochs, collecting and preserving the heritage of our collective memory. The artist herself speaks of the possibilities of ‘resurrection’ and ‘regeneration’, creating visions of beauty, reconciliation and hope in a dystopian world, communicating both poetic sensibility and appeal for action.

This exhibition is curated by Petra Giloy-Hirz.
"I do see a path of subject matter in my work – I went from the microscopic organs to systems to bodies to the religious body to cosmologies [...] But that's only in retrospect. At the time it's more that certain materials interest you, and you go in that direction."

– Kiki Smith, 1997

This exhibition's selection of works was generated in close collaboration with the artist, and in dialogue with the city of Oxford, its medieval heritage, historic museum collections and strong tradition of fantastical literature, exemplified by C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Lewis Carroll. The city is the perfect host for an exhibition so rich in storytelling and mythology, in which Kiki Smith unfurls an entire world populated by beings of different cultures in time and space, foreign as well as familiar ones: female figures in particular, hybrid creatures, animals of all kinds, plants and heavenly bodies in a variety of forms and materials.

The interdisciplinary and collaborative spirit of Smith's work across a rich variety of media, printmaking in particular, creates an interesting parallel with the arts and science context of Oxford's renowned research culture. The political urgency of the artist's work is equally expressed through a visual and material solidarity with marginalised beings and the natural environment. Smith continually portrays the connection between animals and humans in new configurations, emphasising friendship, survival, and protection. Her modern 'bestiary' (a medieval compendium of beasts) comes to life, to convey a sincere and timely message. Smith says: 'We are interdependent with the natural world... our identity is completely attached to our relationship with our habitat and animals. I make things from images that catch my attention.' In the manner of a subtle, poetic environmentalist, Smith communicates through art and beauty to remind us that it is mutual respect between humanity and nature that will secure the survival of both, and the planet as a whole.

Kiki Smith's childhood in New Jersey was shaped by the intellectual and artistic milieu of her parents, opera singer Jane Lawrence and architect, painter, and sculptor Tony Smith, an important figure of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Instead of the Minimal emphasis on the reduction of forms, the asceticism of the materials, and the banishment of emotion, historical context, and pathos, in Kiki Smith's art feelings come to the fore: emotional states such as fear, dissonance and trauma.

Her inspiration has always derived from daily life and everyday experiences. As the artist explains: 'I moved to the Lower East Side of New York City in 1976. The late 1970s and 80s was a moment of romantic enthrallment with sex, drugs and rock and roll, but also the time of the United States' covert and overt military aggression in Central America. I began using images of bodies in an effort to find a language for my own discomfort and anxiety.' Smith's early artworks were influenced by the incredible political, social and cultural changes of this time, as shaped by the AIDS crisis, discourse on sexual identity and social gender, and feminist activism. She focuses on existential questions and answers in direct response to the world. The artist investigates the human body without fear of taboos, humiliation, or the constraints of shame, using the body as a medium to reflect on the body, and the body as a prism to view the world.

Smith's early works are expressed in the language of craft and decorative arts. Her first sculptures were dedicated to parts of the body such as disembodied arms and fingers. By the mid-1980s, the artist seemed to dissect the entire human anatomy (using knowledge from training in anatomy class) and reproduces the human figure in its entirety in a life-size sculpture made of beeswax in 1991. Some of these full-scale wax sculptures from the 1990s are captured by photography to interrogate the afterlives of her sculptural practice.

In the Middle Galleries we encounter a Wunderkammer, 'a cabinet of curiosities' containing a myriad of forms and materials, both human and animal. The artist began making these multiples in 1996, leading to a series of thousands of objects, including a glass frog, a porcelain dead cat, a silver shooting star and a bat cast in bronze with piercing ruby eyes.

'I am a Wanderer, ' Kiki Smith says. And indeed, she is a wanderer through time and space, making 'contact' on a decades-long imaginary journey that takes her through foreign cultures. With the wanderlust of a cultural anthropologist she roams through lands and historical epochs, collecting and preserving the heritage of our past to remind us of beauty, reconciliation and hope in a dystopian world, communicating both poetic sensibility and appeal for action.

This exhibition is curated by Petra Giloy-Hirtz.

"The first works are based on the facets of the body, then I become more overt about languages of craft and decorative arts."

– Kiki Smith, 1997

Kiki Smith, Oil on canvas, 1986. Courtesy the Artist and Pace Gallery.
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I am a Wanderer
Kiki Smith

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Cover images:

Kiki Smith, Untitled (Daughter), 1999. Courtesy the Artist and Pace Gallery.

Image courtesy of Universal Limited Art Editions.
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Upper Gallery
Tapestries

During the intensive fouryear process of making this body of woven works, it was important to Smith that the tapestries were made on the same scale as her original printed and collaged compositions (the cartoons), to retain the intimacy and textures of the work as initially conceived. As she explains: ‘It’s important that each scale has its own integrity. Some of the same imagery from her 12 tapestries has also been used to make works in stained glass and ceramic tiles.

Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery and Timothy Taylor, London / New York

1. Squiggle, 2015 Cotton / Jacquard tapestry
2. Visitor, 2015 Cotton / Jacquard tapestry with gold leaf
3. Forms, 2014 Cotton / Jacquard tapestry
4. Earth, 2012 Cotton / Jacquard tapestry
7. Sky, 2012 Cotton / Jacquard tapestry
10. Spinner, 2014 Cotton / Jacquard tapestry, hand-painting and gold leaf

Middle 1 Gallery
Small Sculptures

As an artist, KiKi Smith embraces collaboration with skilled craftpeople and utilizes many artisan techniques in her multidimensional small sculptures, including glassblowing, casting, and working with delicate and complex materials including porcelain, bronze, silver and papier-mâché. Smith makes many of her three-dimensional works initially on this intimate scale. They are then scanned – thanks to recent developments in technology – to produce larger cast sculptures, often intended for outdoor settings.

Courtesy of the Artist and Pace Gallery

21. Eat, 2010 Glass
22. Untitled (skeletally), 1997 Gold-painted paper mâché

Middle 1 and 2 Galleries
Photographs

In some instances, Smith’s photographs document a work in progress to help the artist gain a sense of a work’s final emotional impact. In others, she records and interrogates different perspectives on a sculpture long after its completion. Some of these photographs give an insight into the making of Smith’s major installations from the mid-1990s, including the multiple bronze casts of dead birds in Jersey Crows, 1995. She will often photograph a detail – such as a pair of severed crows’ feet – so that it takes on the treasured status of a religious relic; a fragment standing in for the whole. There is frequently a degree of abstraction and alteration at work in her photography: for example, the life-size wax cast of a body in the fetal position is captured from the back at an angle, creating an entirely new experience of the sculpture.

Courtesy of the Artist and Pace Gallery

Upper Gallery Tapestries and Sculptures

1-20

23. Untitled porcelain dead cat half upper body, 1998 Porcelain
24. Untitled (east bronze bird’s nest), date unknown Bronze
25. Crazed Nest, 1998 Bronze and ruby
26. Light Crazed, 2011 Porcelain
27. Sausage, 1997 Glass
29. Sheel, 1996 24 carat gold
30. Frag, 1999 Glass
31. Untitled PDF int cast, upper torso, 1998 Bronze
32. Yolk, 1999 Solid worked glass
33. Star with Tal, 1997 Sterling silver
34. Tal, 1997 10th cast lead crystal bronze

52-61

62-80

67. Touch, 2006 Aquatint, etching and drypoint on Hahnemühle bright white paper


70. Proof of Time I, 2000 Intaglio with hand watercolour on Etch on paper Courtesy Universal Limited Art Editions

71. Glitter, 2000 Aquatint, etching, and drypoint on Hahnemühle bright white paper Printed and published by Harlan & Weaver, NY


74. Me and the Ear, 1997 Legionary cut

Piper Gallery
Prints

KiKi Smith says of printmaking that: ‘It has a technical aspect to it, and also endless amounts of freedom’. She is equally interested by the mechanical properties of prints and the collaboration it takes to produce them: ‘I like that your mark is distanced, it gives you something that your own hand can’t, even though it comes from your hand.’ In the late 1980s, Smith discovered that etching was particularly well suited to capturing the fluid and texture of fur, hair, feathers and other complex surfaces that cover both animal and human bodies. To make her prints of animals, Smith has drawn directly from her own pets, such as her cat, Gitter, after his death. Like many of her studies from the natural world, the final image of Gitter is uncertain in its possible suspension between life and death, a sombre memorial that is also a celebration of the close relationship between animals and humans.

Piper Gallery Prints

KiKi Smith, 1989 Aquatint and drypoint on paper Master Printer: Nathan Carlin. Publisher: LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies, Columbia University

My Blue Lake, 1956 Photograph and lithograph in 3 colours on Etch on paper Courtesy Universal Limited Art Editions

250 Limited Editions and Copies 1-150 Editions 1-20

Sorcery (1st - 8th Hour), 2019 Etching on Hahnemühle paper, set of 9 Courtesy of the Artist and Pace Gallery

Sueno, 1992 Intaglio in 2 colours on Edizen Kozu Courtesy Universal Limited Art Editions

Untitled I, 1990 2-colour Lithograph Courtesy of the Artist and Pace Gallery

P Print, 2012 5 photopolymer prints on Hahnemühle paper Private Collection, London

Bosun, 2012 Seven-colour lithograph on Zerkall smooth white paper Private Collection, London

10. G7H, 2012 Lithograph (four-colour) on Zerkall Smooth bright white paper Courtesy of the Artist and Pace Gallery

Please ask our Visitor Assistants if you have any questions.

Kiki Smith, I am a Wanderer is supported by Timothy Taylor, London / New York.

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