

KIKI SMITH
AT MATRIX GALLERY,
UNIVERSITY ART
MUSEUM, BERKELEY
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BY LIZ KOTZ

The past few years have seen the emergence of "the body" as a rubric for contemporary art-making, a phenomenon brought into focus by a number of recent exhibitions organized around AIDS, censorship, reproductive rights, biotechnology, and other converging political concerns. As a curatorial strategy, this artworld focus on the body is often used in a loose way, to pull together formally diverse works addressing sexuality, disease, or the state's intrusion into private life, usually centering on works made by women and gay men.

The New York-based artist Kiki Smith, daughter of the sculptor Tony Smith, has recently

become one of the most visible artists working in this vein, drawing on a current set of fascinations ranging from death, decay, and the vicissitudes of the body, to medical apparatus, natural history, and the museum. A veteran of the artists' collective CoLab and *The Times Square Show* held in 1980, Smith is a survivor of the long-deflated East Village art scene and the vaguely neo-expressionist art-making most often associated with it. Now, in the wake of the collapse of critical postmodernism, the raw energy, emotion, and visual directness of this neoexpressionist tradition is undergoing a kind of reassessment or retrieval with artists such as Smith and David Wojnarowicz receiving major accolades at the Whitney's 1991 *Biennial Exhibition*.

The Matrix exhibition offered an overview of some of Smith's work of the past five years, primarily sculptures made of diverse materials including paper, linen, terra cotta, plaster, and wool. Working deftly with her fragile and eminently tactile materials, Smith's work probes the fragility and awkwardness of the human body and anatomy. Most of the pieces suggest traces left behind, of bodies now absent or decomposed. For instance, a life-size sculpture of a partially dismembered male body (*Man*, 1987) hangs on the wall; made of handmade gampi paper printed a deep reddish-brown, the figure suggests an empty skin-like shell that has been soaked in blood or tempered through heat. With its associations of death and decay, the piece has an oddly medieval quality, located somewhere between mysticism and pseudoscience.

A possible inspiration is suggested by *Offering*, a 1986

Cibachrome of two naked bodies touching, which documents two partially decomposed bodies pulled from a northern European bog. The piece has some story behind it—apparently the male-female pair was a murdered couple—and its quasi-archival method, semi-abstracted forms, and romantic life-into-death motif informs many of the later works. A mobile-like sculpture of a human rib cage made of thread and terra cotta (*Ribs*, 1987) hangs loosely, as if made from a

crushed and partially restored skeleton. The use of materials refers to both anatomical preservation and home crafts; the form hints at past violence or a partially-buried narrative. A large wall piece of dyed and linen sheets suspends an empty dress complete with cloth feet and hands. With its linen squares tinged red and sewn together, the piece suggests mopped-up blood and menstruation, merging registers of the domestic and the biological.

Smith has described her work as a kind of "housewife" art, a cottage industry of domestic crafts of sewing, dyeing, spinning wool, and making dolls. She has also described her work as being "about living through the shame of being female in public," and this quality of living through it, or of having been used, seems central to her work. The touched, handled, and distinctly individual surfaces of her work proclaim a resolutely anti-industrial aesthetic, work



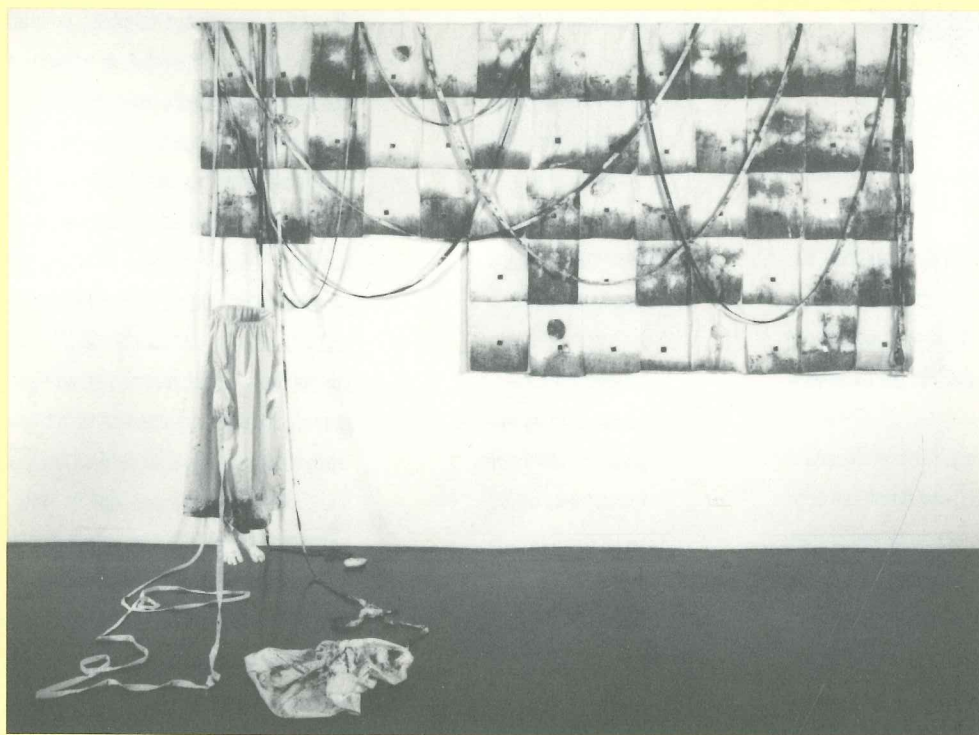
“following the path of Nancy Spero rather than Andy Warhol,” as the art critic Christopher Lyon put it. Yet what relation it has to this tradition is unclear. With their material and figurative evocations of “femininity,” her works invite comparison with a 1970s feminist crafts aesthetic. While the distinctly crafted works man-

age to diverge from a more conventionalized blood-and-milk, stereotypically 70s body art vocabulary, the literalness and realism of Smith’s figures defy a questioning of representation that would more clearly mark them as contemporary. With an apparent faith in some primal level of organic, bodily experience, Smith seems linked to a 70s feminist tendency to construct the body as a privileged site of knowledge and experience, outside of history or culture.

Clearly Smith’s strengths revolve around her inventiveness with materials, not theory. Her use of this home/crafts aesthetic and biological motifs to undercut or reorient sculpture is highly provocative; hanging and draped, Smith’s lightweight, malleable pieces

make us rethink what is sculptural. At times, however, their two-dimensional orientation suggests a strategy more of illustration than embodiment. Often flat and wall-bound, they photograph well but are not always visually compelling—at least not as installed at Matrix, where the gray cement walls make many artworks look awkward and insubstantial. While this very awkwardness and insubstantiality may precisely be the point of Smith’s works, hung together here they tend to look cluttered, less than the sum of their parts. A folded blanket of wool and human hair

was fantastic in its simplicity and understatement, yet it was lost amid the melodrama of the other works; alone in the gallery, it might have been more effective. With Smith’s tendency to reference fashion, domestic materials, and an almost hippie aesthetic of hand-crafts and tie-dyes, the Matrix exhibition had something of a boutique feel to it that undermined the intensity of the works.



Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1991. Muslin and glass



