

Overview



Home, 2006. Color spit bite aquatint with flat bite, hard ground and soft ground etching, and drypoint on gampi paper chine collé, 26½ x 31". Edition 20. Printed by Emily York.

KIKI SMITH

My first serious encounter with Kiki Smith was in 2004 when she was in San Francisco on invitation from the new de Young Museum, then in construction. She was here to discuss a commission for a permanent work at the museum. I met her at Crown Point and asked if she would like to do a project with us. Now, two years later, both the museum sculpture and our project are completed, and it seems they were conceived together on the 2004 visit during which she spent a lot of time walking around town, looking. I remember that at the time she remarked on the many homeless people she saw on the streets. Our weather is mild, our citizens tolerant, and the

city gives cash stipends to people who are destitute, so we have an abundance of street people.

Smith's piece at the de Young hangs near a ceiling and is an aluminum casting of a cardboard box-like structure sheltering two copper-leaved figures of children inspired by an early American painting in the museum (the children are in 17th century dress). In the background, hanging individually from the ceiling, are more than 250 handblown glass teardrops, nearly as tall as the child figures.

You could call the installation a work of social comment, but it does not have the bitter aftertaste that label implies: light gleams in



Still, 2006. Color spit bite aquatint with flat bite and hard ground and soft ground etching on gampi paper chine collé, 26½ x 31". Edition 20. Printed by Emily York.

the glass tears, glancing off the golden children and casting lovely shadows on the wall. The two related Crown Point etchings, titled *Home*, and *Still*, have a similar aura of pensive, delicate beauty. Like the sculpture work at the museum, one of the etchings shows what Smith calls “homeless architecture,” the cardboard box. The figures in both etchings, like the strange little overdressed children at the museum, are static and formal, though in the etchings the people are mainly in our imagination as we can see only their feet.

There is a sense of *film noir*—perhaps the beginning of a murder mystery?—that provides an outside-of-time feeling to the prints (the odd dress of the children serves this function in the sculpture). The figures are black and white, starkly and realistically drawn, but the backgrounds, the pavements on which the figures lie, are radiant with warmth, color, and light.

Smith told me that she had accepted my invitation because she had had very little experience working with color in prints and felt mystified by color; she had hand-colored several groups of prints after they were printed, she explained, and done a few prints using printed color as if it were hand-added color, tinting an image or

filling in contours. “Crown Point is famous for its color aquatints,” she said, “and I wanted to try to understand color as a physicality.” She said she wanted to explore “color as an entity, co-existing with the drawing.”

Metaphorically there are two worlds in each of the prints: the starkness of the existence of the bodies and the richness of the world around them. From the beginning, Smith kept the parts separate. She worked from photographs that she had brought with her, one of a man’s feet in boots, the other of her own bare legs. To begin, she copied the images onto plates using a traditional wax hard ground. She said she wanted the figures to be literal, deliberate, “relying on me.” The “worldly” part would be separate, made by using the etching process in an organic, natural way. She thought at first that part could be a rainbow, then narrowed the notion to rainbows as they appear in oil slicks.

She and the printers created swirls of color by mixing acid and acid-resistant materials and pouring them on plates prepared for aquatint that, once bitten, were printed in red, yellow, and blue one on top of the other. Meanwhile, Smith laboriously developed the

black and white figures, adding layers of aquatint to the hard ground lines. She bit some of the layers evenly, but often brushed on the acid with spit bite for an uneven bite. After each bite she scraped and burnished the plates. She added tones and took them away, shaping the images gradually, coaxing the boots and the legs into dimensionality. At the last minute she added small tattooed stars to the woman's legs, making them into her own legs. "I wasn't going to do that," she said, "but I did."

As the figures took on life, the "oil slicks," which were developed on plates separate from the figures, began to appear too graphic, too present. Smith was almost ready to abandon them when printer Emily York, poring over the plates, lifting and handling them, suggested that they print the backs of the plates rather than the images on the front that they had worked so hard to create.

As Smith had splashed and swirled images on the front sides of the plates, sheets of absorbent paper on the table had collected acid and it had disfigured the backs. There were also scratches. And, in one of the prints (fortunately, the one with the woman's legs), an etched border showed up on the back of each of the three plates that had been created for color aquatint. At some point, those plates (but not the ones used for the man's image) had gone into a bath of acid, and the backs had been stopped out, the edges left imprecisely exposed so there would be no risk of stop-out varnish traveling to the front. In the bath, on the backsides, only the edges could bite.

Because the backs of the plates had never been dusted with rosin to prepare them for aquatint, there was no tooth on them when they were accidentally bitten, either in the borders or in the irregular, blot-like marks in the fields. In those areas, we have what is called a flat bite (or open bite), not an aquatint. In plates that have been flat bitten, ink wipes out of the centers of forms but holds at the edges. Crown Point's "famous" color aquatints had turned themselves into something else; the "oil slicks" originally desired were transformed into subtle and delicate stains. In the final prints, Smith emphasized the fragility and beauty of the stains by printing with chine colle on warm-toned light-reflective gampi paper.

Although there are no color aquatints here, there are aquatints in the black and white portions of these etchings. In fact, aquatint dominates line, which is unusual for Smith. She loves hard ground etching, and generally builds up light and shadow with fine lines rather than tone, except in the few previous prints where she has used photogravure. These new images, entirely hand-drawn, have a somewhat photographic quality because of the subordination of line to hand-worked tone (the tone is mainly aquatint, but some marks are also provided by fabric textures pressed into soft ground). Perhaps it is only a matter of degree. Smith told me that if she had had another week to spend, she would have used it all for more drawing and modeling of the figures. Would we have ended up with the thicket of lines typical of her etchings? Even she cannot give an answer. So far as I was concerned, she could have worked on the prints as long as she wished, but in the end I am glad she stopped where she did. She arrived at a haunting vision unlike anything she has created before.

Kiki Smith has created many prints before. Though primarily known for her sculpture, she has worked in printmaking throughout her career. She has had a print retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, presently teaches printmaking, and has printed her own art in several mediums. She works regularly with the professional printshops Universal Limited Art Editions, Pace Editions, Harlan and Weaver, and now Crown Point Press. She even has her own publishing imprint, Thirteen Moons, under which she produces prints and multiples. When I asked her about Thirteen Moons she replied, "I need to make prints. It's fundamental to my practice. I invented Thirteen Moons so I could make prints any time without waiting to be invited by a publisher."

When I asked Smith what I should say in this article for *Overview* about her new prints, she said, "Write about WPA prints. That was a brief time of self-reflection in this country, a wonderful time for prints, an opportunity for art to have social content sponsored by the government. It's a big part of American print history. People collect WPA prints now. When I was making these images, I was thinking, 'I'm going to make some WPA-type prints.'"

The printmaking arm of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Roosevelt's sweeping back-to-work plan for America during the Depression, fell under the FAP, the Federal Arts Project, which was initiated in 1936 and closed down in 1943. Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and other important artists worked for the FAP as muralists. There were also artist-printmakers who received salaries to go to work in print studios every day. They kept three impressions of each print they did on government time, and the rest were given to museums, libraries, or any institutions that would have them; the works are still there in collections around the country. In the program, 11,285 different editions were produced and cataloged. One of the most influential printmakers of our time, Robert Blackburn, participated in the FAP printmaking program at the beginning of his career.

On the Internet, I looked at WPA prints. I thought they showed more optimism than misery; there were many images of men work-



Kiki Smith in the Crown Point studio, 2006

ing, jack-hammering, building, operating machinery. I spoke with Liz Seaton of Kansas State University, who wrote a thesis and subsequent book on WPA printmaking, and she said that the Artists' Union and the American Artists' Council "were very vocal about what they wanted to see the prints do." Attitudes that, if not communist, might be described as those of "fellow travelers," were freely expressed in prints, which "slipped under the radar of complaints" that affected many of the muralists working with similar approaches.

Kiki Smith's interest in the WPA prints seems to stem from her feeling that printmaking is an activity that can empower people. Although an artist puts a lot of time into making a print—it is not a simple thing—when it is finished you can have more than one, and thus disseminate information through it. "The group of artists I came up with make work that has an overt social content," she says. "It seemed important to make things accessible and demystify." Early in her career she was a member of CoLab, an artists' cooperative that put on unconventional exhibitions often with social-commentary themes and had a store that sold inexpensive artist-made multiples and accessories, many of which Smith contributed. She worked in silkscreen, and printed a T-shirt in 1980 that bore the word "corrosive." She made posters in the early '80s, and—in addition to work in etching that she began in 1978 with classes at the Lower East Side Printshop—has made prints with modest means like rubber stamps and photocopying.

Smith has always favored a down-to-earth, demystifying approach in her life and work. She lives in New York, and makes much of her art on the kitchen table in her house. She was born in 1954; both her father and mother were widely known and respected in their fields. Her father was the sculptor Tony Smith, her mother Jane Smith, an opera singer and actress. Richard Tuttle was her father's studio assistant in the early 1960s. An aunt taught her to embroider

and crochet, and after high school she studied industrial baking under the Manpower Training Act, worked as an electrician's assistant, and in a factory airbrushing clouds and starbursts onto dresses. She was briefly a studio assistant to the performance artist Joan Jonas. She trained as an emergency medical technician. Her first one-person exhibition was at the New York alternative art space The Kitchen in 1983, her first in a gallery in 1988. The AIDs epidemic influenced her attitude toward life and art, taking from her several close friends and a sister.

Her art's primary focus has been for some time the body: its makeup, its functions, its fluids, and what it feels like to inhabit one. She is also interested in puppets, fairy tales, and animals, and these have made their way into some of her recent work. *Time Magazine*, in its issue dated May 8, 2006, placed her on a list of one hundred "men and women whose power, talent, or moral example is transforming our lives." Her retrospective exhibition, "Kiki Smith: a Gathering," organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, was exhibited there February 28–May 14, 2006. It opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in November 2005, and will also be seen at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston July 15–September 24, 2006 and at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 16, 2006–February 11, 2007.

—Kathan Brown

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Kiki Smith
two new etchings

Summer Choices
a group exhibition

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