

Kiki Smith Interviewed by Jamie Levine

2013

Jamie Levine:

I'd like to start with your artistic roots. Namely: you're the daughter of a famous sculptor, Tony Smith; and your mom was a famous opera singer; it sounds like a great lineage, but I wonder if you could talk about what's been most nurturing or affirmative in your practice? Who or what gave you a sense of permission to be an artist, and, in turn, to engage with so many personal and social issues as you do?

Kiki Smith:

I can say that it was my parents who gave myself and my sister Seton a sense of permission to be to become who we needed to be. They didn't have any expectations for us to be anything other than ourselves; they just let us find our own way. We also saw them at work, their commitment to it, and that was sort of daunting, too. [Making art] was something I had a lot of ambivalence about, because it was all-consuming. At the same time I saw that art was something that was there for the taking: you just had to want it enough.

JL: So your father was encouraging?

KS: Yeah, my father encouraged my sister, Seton. She wanted to be a painter when she was 13; he got her paint and canvas. I was more attracted to craft. I didn't think about being an artist until I was 24, and he died when I was 26. He was supportive of me during that time. As a famous teacher at Bennington, he was used to looking at people's work. There was a lot of pottery there, and he had students that were potters—I thought that was wonderful.

JL: I read somewhere that you said that if you stick to your work, that it will take care of you somehow. That you have to trust it.

KS: That's what I got from my father: you don't have to know what the work "is," and it doesn't have to be anything. You could just have the experience of it and it would reveal itself to you over time. I believe that in earnest: if you go into it just with your curiosity,[the work] will be generous to you.

JL: I have read that you had a learning disorder. How has that affected your work,your process?

KS: I couldn't read at all; I had zero reading comprehension. But people just develop in other ways, and in some ways they're more sensitive. They figure out what works, ways to get around their hinderances. For myself, I liked looking at things and making things.[The visual] was a language I could express myself through more than spoken or written language. I think

it's important to say that it wasn't like I was 'good' at anything! I just liked doing it. I liked the struggle. I don't mind being bad at something. I use the struggle to get someplace.

JL: Working, with your hands in particular, is kind of redeeming, isn't it?

KS: It helps your brain to work by moving, to engage in some activity that might seem like a distraction. I have friends who write when they're listening to music because it helps their brain to focus. For my mind, doing housekeeping while I was talking to people would give me a kind of mental space where I could focus. It sort of works the opposite for me: what may be distracting for other people gets my brain to work.

JL: Your work is so direct. How did you start to forge your forms, your formal language?

KS: Generationally speaking, I came to New York in the 70's. It was during a time when the second or third wave of post-conceptual work, and then shape painting, was coming in. A lot of people my age felt they wanted to make something that had a direct accessibility to people. By using representation they were able to address the commonplace or ordinary and be more populist. I guess I'm known for a lot of work that engaged body stuff, but I did that first in my 20s and early 30s. Now I'm 59. Your life just changes, and so does your work. I don't want to be a burning flame...

JL: What do you want to be?

KS: Nothing in particular! I just don't want to be exhausted. I'm much happier being older.

JL: Me too, at 55 I'm much more centered and relaxed. But that said, you have so much courage to continually challenge people with what you do, confront them, make them see themselves. Do you think that given your experience and confidence, that you can access some kinds of deep fears in people?

KS: I don't know; I don't think about what other people are afraid of. It's not really my business. I'm not trying to control other people's thoughts or manipulate them I'm simply doing what occurs to me, and it's not about trying to evoke anything from anyone else. I think [a form] works when there is a space created for it to resonate for somebody else. But I don't set out to elicit reaction. What may seem disturbing or disruptive can have very different versions: like right now my work is so sweet, but before it had more abjectness to it. These things change over time because you change as a person.

JL: I do a lot of resin casting, and people say it's rather disturbing to look at—so real and yet kind of deathly. I've read that in your earlier works you made casts of both the living and dead and tried to be respectful. Can you talk about the death masks of your family and the castings of yourself?

KS: I made death masks of my family, but they're not my artwork. My father had his mother's face cast when she died. He was born 1912, and his parents were Victorian people. So when my father died my sister and I made a mask of his head and his hands, and then my sister died, and I cast my sister's head and hands, and then a friend, and then someone else asked if I could make a mask...and I said aww forget it! I don't need to be doing this, the funeral parlor will go out of business. Now they're up in the attic on shelves, and I'm sick of looking at them. My sister and my grandmother never met. My grandmother died 30 years before she was born and their profiles are the exactly the same. You see genes and life bind through time, so it's interesting to look at them for that.

JL: I deal a lot with fusions of human and animal elements. How do you see animals figuring in your work?

KS: I see our identity being intrinsically connected to animals, through our cohabitation with animals. That's sort of the most important thing happening in the world at the 60 moment: changes in Nature, the way we are impacting living beings that are the same kind of beings are we are. One's own survival, and one's fantasy about Nature's survival. In terms of hybrids, I like a Sirens a lot as an image, and small birds. Some were Sirens, some were Harpies, women-as-birds. [Such forms] have a mobility that they wouldn't normally have, and there are all different sorts of historical and cultural meanings that abound. There are a lot of birds in my work. I like birds.

JL: In your installation Jersey Crows you spread bronze carcasses of crows on the gallery floor. What was your influence in that piece?

KS: There were a lot of crows that fell out of the sky in New Jersey, [and there was a particular incident] when birds died en masse, probably from noise shock and this was the first time that people really observed it, so I made a commemorative piece.

JL: Do you have any thoughts about animal experiments conducted in laboratories in the name of science?

KS: I don't think about it so much, but it's certainly dreadful—to put any being through suffering.

JL: If you could be any animal, what animal would you be?

KS: I'd just be myself. [laughs] I'm fine being myself.