

An Interview with Kiki Smith

Laurence A. Rickels

According to the Melanesian Cargo Cult, the ancestors slave away in the Land Down Under to build for the survivors the media technologies or cargo through which both parties, the quick and the dead, communicate. But the long-distance relation is disconnected in the mode of unmourning by the white man or vengeful phantom who keeps the cargo and the messages passing through to himself. The language of the dead thus withheld, displaced with regard to the static on the air, everywhere, is German or "djaman."

Kiki Smith: I actually really am very influenced by German art, in particular thirteenth century wood sculpture from Nuremberg. I'm really crazy for those Madonnas.

Laurence Rickels: Did you come back to that or were you in Germany long enough for it to be part of your...

KS: No, I think I left Germany when I was 6 months old, so I don't have anything conscious behind it. For me it's my favorite kind of sculpture to look at, figurative kind of sculpture. I like the way they build their bodies. French gothic sculptures are always so happy-looking with simple faces. I like the northern look better.

LR: The different form too, and shape.

KS: Yeah, I like the shapes of their bodies. They made all these Mary Magdalenes with hair all over their bodies, wild women, their hair all wilded up, with wild men, too. They have great virgins and Jesuses. They're not idealized, they're just these dumpy people that are beautiful I think.

LR: So when did you start liking them?

KS: I was in Berlin in '82, and I went to the Dahlem Museum. For a while I went practically every day, because it was the first time I had gone to Europe; I was twenty-eight or something. Everytime I went back to Berlin--everytime I go back again--I look at all those things and try to think about them.

I have a friend, Raimund Kummer,¹ a sculptor, who used to live in Berlin and we met in New York and then I went to visit. The first day I broke my foot, so instead of staying a week I stayed a month and a half....

LR: And this was your first return to Germany.

KS: Yeah.

LR: And you broke your foot?²



KS: I got to know German sculptors a little bit. It was really great at that time because sculpture there was much more open than in the United States at the time; it was more about the possibility of what sculpture could be. And while my sculpture tends to be traditional in its form, in terms of being able to think about things, it was much more interesting for me to see what German sculptors were doing than what American sculptors were doing at the time. In Germany the furniture, everything could be sculpture, light fixtures, the whole 3D world could be sculpture rather than you making things. And even though that's still how I do things, I sit and make them, just in terms of your thinking the other approach is much more interesting. Kummer was thinking much more about site, what presentation and site specificness meant in sculpture, which are things I don't think about so much, being more a studio artist. I just make it and then it has its own life and goes out into the world. So they're a big influence on me, the Germans.

LR: Is some of this influence in the new pieces that are dedicated to the Santa Barbara show?

KS: They're this weird combination of trying to figure out what I like about medieval sculpture. I like some of the sweetness of the medieval things but I'm also drawn to the overboard romance and involvement with mythology of nineteenth century sculpture. I went to visit Liz Brown when she was at Oberlin and in their basement they had all this nineteenth-century sculpture, of Diana, women's busts with moons on their heads, so now I'm in some sort of combination of the two.

LR: Wagnerian.

KS: Yeah. I'm wanting to make things have decorative elements. It's just sort of playing around with things, but I don't know where it's going yet. Like the butterfly one. I made the butterflies last summer. They're sort of like light catchers or stupid things people would put in their windows. You make them and they're the kind of things that would end up in tag sales, that you don't really want in your house. That's the butterflies on the figure. And then I wanted to make things that move and flutter. So when I came here I heard about the Monarch butterflies coming here. Besides, I'm really into butterflies, butterfly tattoos. The sculpture should be on a wooden floor so that when you walk towards it the floor bounces a little bit and then the butterflies flutter on springs. I wanted to start making kinetic sculptures where some element is moving. I love Survival/ReSearch; they made reanimated animals where they would force this motion in dead animals, like they had these cats and these metal hands but it was like reinforcing animation.

LR: *Pet Semetary*.

KS: Yeah. But they do it really mechanically.

LR: Is there that kind of association with this too?

KS: Well, I wanted to make things that move, like when you play “freeze” when you’re a kid and that kind of freezes things, well sculpture, especially casting bodies, tends to get tighter and tighter and closed down and then I thought it would be nice to have this kind of nervous fluttering around it.

LR: But is there something uncanny about it too, like the ReSearch jumpstarted animals?

KS: I don’t know, if you look at it it’s kind of sweet. For me in the last year I’m trying overtly to make decorative things. People always hate decoration in art, it’s always dismissed, but it seems then that it has a lot of power which makes me want to figure out what’s interesting about it.

LR: The repressed in the art world?

KS: Yeah.

LR: It’s amazing how kitschy these butterflies are when they’re alone but are already something else when they’re more than one. The mistake people make is that they only get one of them and try to control release it. This way it’s quite generous and gorgeous.

KS: All these things are kind of dismissed because they’re associated with girlishness so you’re not supposed to like them, they’re second rate. In sculpture there are noble things to make sculpture about and then there are inappropriate, uninteresting things to make sculpture about. You can make good sculpture about any aspect of your life you can think about, but it traditionally hasn’t been so many aspects of people’s lives. There are a lot of things that don’t get represented.

LR: The object is always where you least expect it to be. It comes at you from another corner. You’re able to draw so much beauty out of abjection.

KS: I also made this flower piece for the Santa Barbara show. I took all these pictures when I was here at Christmas time, and there were all these Christmas lights and I’m always into Christmas trees. I went to this homeopath who told me that the original Christmas trees came from the Rosencrucians and that they were originally 32 roses and 32 candles with different symbols, and I thought I’d make them come out of her spine. Somehow that has something to do with being in Santa Barbara too. And these bird things came from being here but I can’t explain why. I like having a show like this that for me is older work that I haven’t seen in awhile, so it’s really nice seeing it again and then I go, “I like my work,” but then there are the new things too, and you can play them off of one another.

LR: How do you see them playing together?.

Speaking Djaman

KS: This goes nicely together with the rest. This was from when my sister died and it was just things she wrote down of what was happening to her physically. Someone said yesterday it looked like a prayer shawl. It's next to the butterfly woman and next to the woman with the bloody nose. So they put a damper on her so she doesn't go flying off into endless nineteenth-century romance. They kind of weigh it down.

LR: Well, butterflies are ancient symbols of the departed soul.

KS: Yeah, they have all these really heavy, incredible things associated with them, like metamorphosis. I am super low tech. This is my attempt at technology: kitchen art.

LR: Are the dead birds on the sheets a silent reading of Max Ernst? Birds that refer to a dead or undead sister?

KS: I love Max Ernst. I had a dream once that I said "Oh I've got to get the bird out," and I made a sculpture of my head upside down lying on the floor and then it had a string and a bird on the end of the string, like a dead bird. First I made that one and then I made one that is kind of the soul leaving, leaving the body, and then I made one with the bird hanging above the mouth and then I made one with a butterfly on your tongue and then I made these bird sculptures and cast them last summer and anodized them blue, and then I thought I'll make bird puppets or something. Somehow we were talking about pubic hair, you know women have all this manicured pubic hair now so I thought oh they're like muffs, they're like pubic hair kind of, with these birds' heads hanging under them. I have a whole series of them hanging above my bed. They're kind of how my things used to be about fifteen years ago before I started making things about the body. It's like I made all these small microscopic things and then I started making organs and systems and bodies and things coming in and out, like fluids, things going in and out of the body. When I first started making art I just made things on cardboard and then I went to muslin and spent about five years painting and sewing things on muslin, so it's like going back to making hotter things after making cool things, conceptual things which protect you a little bit and now it's just more subjectively me. I don't know, I'll just see what happens. And I thought maybe no one I know will see it here.

LR: What are you worried about?

KS: Because then they go, "Why are you doing this?" It all has to rely on me. It doesn't rely on there being so many square inches of skin on the body. Like this is much more just me being in public making pubic hair birds. It's different in your house, because in your house you know that that's exactly what you should do, but then in public you're supposed to have some reason why you're doing it.

LR: Do you tend to keep a lot of work at home that you never show?

KS: I have a bunch. I don't know if I'll ever show it, but I haven't so far.

LR: Does it get metabolized for other kinds of work? Like studies towards something?

KS: No, I don't know. It's because I like them and I just want to keep them.

The butterflies and flowers coming out are sort of like self-appreciation, self-involvement or self-happiness... I made all those other sculptures with things coming out, spines, like nervousness, like the nervous system that spines hold together.



LR: In relationship to the body, flowers and hair have something else in common, they grow out of the corpse.

KS: When I was a kid they had this story in *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* and it was about a woman or man who had a peach pit put in their hand when they died which grew out and broke open their coffin. This was totally my most favorite story when I was a kid. The butterflies and flowers coming out are sort of like self-appreciation, self-involvement or self-happiness or flowering. I made all those other sculptures with things coming out, spines, like nervousness, like the nervous system that spines hold together. Now there's this other stuff growing out.

LR: They're more relational, too. The earlier work was more preoccupied with the limits of being in a body, what leaks out. But this new work seems to have a larger scope.

Speaking Djaman

KS: They're kind of happy.

LR: How about the sunflower head?

KS: There were tons of sunflowers at the market and I thought that would be a nice thing to do. Then it was an attempt to make the head the color of the sunflowers and the flowers just be the form, I like doing that, separating form from matter. I really just wanted to put glass and metal together.

LR: To me it looks like something of a deity or someone being sacrificed to a father god.

KS: I think people often make things that have already been made, but they just forget it. You make something and you look at a book and see that's what everybody makes all the time. You're stuck with doing what it wants you to do.

LR: Did the Santa Barbara show just fit with what you were doing or was it an inspiration to think of ways of being decorative or getting into that kind of abjection?

KS: Yeah. There were wonderful things that I saw here. It confirms that you're doing what you're supposed to be doing. That's what you keep going towards. It's like if you think of something it keeps coming towards you, at you in all different aspects of your life, keeps saying yes. This is your path. And you're supposed to follow your path.

LR: Or at least have it confirmed. From Nuremberg to Santa Barbara you seem to be attuned to a kind of ethnographic frequency. I mean, is the Santa Barbara show an ethnography of the other, one that began for you in Germany?

KS: Yes, but it's totally subjective.

LR: Ethnography proper is probably no other way. I'm reminded of the Melanesian Cargo Cult ...

Notes:

¹ "Kummer" = "sorrow"

² "Oedipus" = "swollen foot"