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Representing Women: The Work of Kiki Smith

by

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Introduction

For many years now women have engaged in critical debates around the body. Our culture has coded and defined women's bodies as objects, submissive and passive to the male gaze. The difficulty for some feminists thus surrounds the use of the female body in art and the culture generally under any circumstances. The critical question arises: can artists reconstruct prevailing modes of representation?

Historically, the imaging of women has been the prerogative of men. Men have portrayed women as passive, submissive and available. This does not correspond to women's current perceptions of themselves. Over the last few decades women artists have been re-examining the problems encountered regarding the imaging of women. Various approaches have been adopted. Certain artists have focused on an essential femaleness as a form of empowerment. Others have avoided figurative representation altogether. More recently, some feminist artists *have* imaged the body. This can be seen as asserting women's need to control how women are imaged.

An important aspect of the debate around female subjectivity is the use of psychoanalytic theories. Freud and Lacan are seminal figures in this debate. Mulvey's articles on the male gaze have been probably the most influential psychoanalytically grounded contribution in the controversy around the imaging of women.

The debate regarding imaging the body encompasses many elements. One strand concerns the question of essentialism and the reaction against it. Another strand deals with imaging versus self-censorship. A third is the psychoanalytic contribution, in particular the concept of the male gaze.

Within this context how should the contemporary artist approach the imaging dilemma? The practice of Kiki Smith is considered here. Her work is concerned with the integrity of the body and issues of state, legal, medical and religious control. This thesis includes an interview with the artist. Her practice represents one possible "solution" in what is still a very controversial area.

Chapter 1

Representing Women - Why Women Should Represent Themselves

The naked female body is a politically, socially and sexually 'loaded' subject. A study of the history of art will bring the student face to face with a myriad of images of idealised women. In the past male artists had, more or less, total access to women's bodies. The study of the nude was essential to the training of any young artist. Aspiring women artists, from the Renaissance until near the end of the nineteenth Century were not permitted to study from nude models, either male or female (see Greer, 1981, p. 64). This automatically precluded them from the highest form of art, the History Painting. Women were therefore restricted to the minor fields of portraiture, genre painting, landscape or still-life (see Nochlin, 1971).

If we consider the multitude of works which depict the female nude surrounded by nature, for example Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* or Gauguin's *Idyll in Tahiti*, we can see that woman, naked and in the landscape, has been a potent and popular image. The natural curves of women echo those of the landscape and all it signifies, for example fertility and ownership. When Manet painted the nude female lounging with clothed men, all enjoying a picnic, the implications are obvious. She was in her *element* and therefore did not need the conventional trappings of culture. The men, being more cerebral and rational, less in tune with nature, remain in contemporary dress, ready for the *real* world. Indoors or out of doors the art world has presented women as muse, the symbol of male potency and the spirit of nature.

It is clear from the history of art that men have been dominant in the representation of women. It is only in the last twenty-five years or so that women have taken on the task of redefining representations of themselves. The purpose is to arrive at depictions of women which are more compatible with how women believe they should be represented.

The task is not straightforward. Social customs define the image we have of the body and its functions. Excreta, blood, sweat and urine are considered to be threatening and part of a person's private domain in western society. In some cultures hair or nail clippings, for example, can have magical qualities or be part of religious rituals. We choose to control and patrol our bodies and women are tightly girdled by a need to be de-fuzzed and deodorized. Feminism may have undercut the fiction of women as happy home-maker and natural child carer. We may have shaken off some of the constraints in terms of social freedoms but we have also imposed others which refine and re-define what it is to be a woman.

In *The Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf suggests that we have swapped one set of problems for another we are "shaped, cut and subject to physical invasion" (Wolf, 1990, p. 8) She argues that now more than ever, a woman's face is her fortune. If she looks a million dollars, then she is worth employing, marrying or taking care of. We have yet again bound ourselves to the idea that it is what men want that counts. This form of currency has been around for a long time and the idea that we are still buying into it is what galls many feminists.

Unreal or idealised images of women and our sexuality also suggest a fear of women. Moira Gates (1992, p. 129) writes, for example,

Recent feminist research suggests that the history of western thought shows a deep hatred and fear of the body. This somatophobia is understood by some feminists to be specifically masculine and intimately related to gynophobia and misogyny.

While it may be difficult to accept that 'western thought' shows such deep discomfort, there are certainly grounds for suspecting that there is unease around women's bodies.

Different approaches

In her essay *Women, Art and Power*, Nochlin states,

The question whether it is possible at this point in our history for women simply to "appreciate" the female nude in some simple and unproblematic way leads us to the question whether any positive visual representation of women is possible at all. (Nochlin, 1991, p. 27)

I would now like to present a brief description of how some artists have approached the problem of representing women. The examples can be gathered under two broad headings, depending upon whether the physical or the psychological aspect of womanhood appears to be emphasized.

Emphasising the physical

The difference between male and female approaches to the representation of women is illustrated effectively by starting with a work by Piero Manzoni. In 1961 he printed his surname across the body of a female nude model, during a performance entitled *Living Sculpture*. Although his intention may have been to criticise the art market and the significance of uniqueness by signing his name on the woman he was in fact objectifying her and establishing his "ownership", giving her traditional patriarchal approval. This approval gave her a name, a home and some kind of social status.

By contrast, in 1979, Cate Elwes did a three day performance (the duration of her menstrual bleeding) called *Menstruation 11*. She enclosed herself in a glass fronted box. Dressed in white and seated in this white box, she could be seen bleeding and writing answers to the audiences questions on the walls and glass of the box. The work confronted the secrecy attached to the natural bodily function of menstruation.

In the first of these examples, woman is treated as object. In the second she acts as subject. During the seventies, time-based work or performance art became an important part of feminist discourse. Performance provided women with an important vehicle for discovering and presenting the meaning of being a women. It was part of a learning process. Given the traditional ways in which women were objectified, women looked for ways to present themselves without the dangers of objectification.

Another performance artist who used her body to create a positive critique of her femaleness was the artist and writer Carolee Schneeman. Schneeman wished to reclaim "women's voice and women's wisdom" (Withers, 1994, p. 160). In one of her performances (*Interior Scroll*, performed in New York in 1975), in a trance like state she made herself 'sacred' by slowly covering her naked body with paint. After this process was complete she started to remove a tightly rolled scroll from her vagina. She had written a poem on it called, *Cezanne: She was a Great Painter*. It told of all the ways women were written out of history. As Schneeman unravelled it from her body she read this poem aloud to an all female audience.

Schneeman here uses a very nontraditional method to describe what it is to be a woman. Her work also refers to fear of women's bodies. According to Chicago and Shapiro,

To be a woman is to be an object of contempt and the vagina stamp of femaleness is despised. The women Artist, seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as a hallmark of her iconography establishes a vehicle by which to state the beauty and truth of her identity. (Chicago and Shapiro, 1987, p. 205)

Many artists have worked to counteract such negative attitudes towards women and their bodies. Vaginal imagery and a 'cunt-positive' attitude has been used as a challenge to men's representation of female sexuality. It is used as a political rather than purely erotic symbol (and was thus a rejection of the Freudian concept of penis envy).

Judy Chicago's work, *The Dinner Party*, employs vaginal imagery to celebrate women in history and their achievements. It relies on metaphor to convey women's progress through history. It is a representation of both key women in history and the unsung heroine. The piece uses thirty nine place settings and represents nine hundred and ninety nine women grouped together according to their life experience. By using vaginal imagery Chicago makes it evident that to her female genitals are a symbol of power and potency not castration. This is an important point. Her message is that the vagina is a positive symbol for women.

The work of Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago treats women's bodies as both feminine and powerful. They believe that there is a core element of womanhood shared by all women across culture and race. Shapiro uses the vagina or vulva as a central element in her work. She focuses therefore on the physical and biological make-up of women.

Another strong example of redefinition of women is evident in the work of the artist Monica Sjoo. When Sjoo exhibited her painting *God Giving Birth* at the Swiss Cottage Library in 1973, it aroused enormous controversy. She was threatened with legal proceedings on charges of blasphemy and obscenity. Regarding the experience of childbirth Sjoo wrote,

I could not reconcile the experience of extreme strength, dignity and violence with the feebleness, weakness and lack of creativity which is expected of women in society. In fact to give birth is an unfeminine act the way femininity is defined in our society. (Sjoo, 1972, p. 28)

Sjoo was here presenting a positive concept of female sexuality which in the past was considered private and secret. Sjoo's powerful image referred to more than just the act of giving birth, but also to the whole process of reproduction and all our biological functions. Her 'God' is not an object of male desire, Her work does not correspond to conventional notions of femininity.

Emphasising the psychological

Sjoo's approach can be compared with that of Mary Kelly. Language and meaning are central to Kelly's practice, which always has a strong theoretical content. Her *Post Partum Document*, for instance, uses imagery which avoids literal figuration of mother and child in order to by-pass this previously colonised imagery of women while examining her experience of mothering. She documents her relationship with her son over a four-and-a-half year period, finding that mothering is a learned process, not an instinctual response. Kelly uses multiple imagery. She combines soiled nappy liners, diary entries, the child's first attempts at writing with references to Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to deconstruct the way in which society defines motherhood. She presents the material in such a way that the hidden experience of the mother/child relationship must be confronted by the viewer and reassessed. Kelly's work comes in the footsteps of some of the few artists in the past who have combined the dual roles of mother and artist and who have referred to them in their work, artists such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot.

As an artist she forces into the public view the unacceptable combination of roles, mother/artist, - a slap in the face for the old guard concept of artist as free-wheeling genius. (Mulvey, 1987, p. 203)

Kelly's practice incorporates both text and imagery. Much feminist practice could be said to range from pure text to pure imagery. An example of pure text would be the work of Jenny Holzer whose work consists primarily of slogans (e.g., "Protect me from what I want"). The textual aspect of Barbara Kruger's work is similar, but she combines text with imagery. At the far end of the range is Cindy Sherman, perhaps the most well-known and controversial of women artists imaging women - in this case, by photographing herself.

Sherman has always been interested in the more perverse side of dressing up, sometimes making herself look old or ugly rather than the

pretty ballerina or beauty queen. The potential for narcissism is undercut by bizarre images of emotional instability, distortion, violence and decay. It is interesting that, whereas many women artists have tried to avoid objectification of the female, Sherman seeks it. She is both the subject and object of her photographs. Her ambiguous and negative images force the viewer to reflect on the effects for women of social conditioning.

Problematic practice?

It is undoubtedly the case that the works of many of the artists mentioned above have been very important in the evolving feminist debates. A very positive aspect has been women's attempts to reappropriate the task of representing women. The portraying of female subjectivity is a matter no longer left in the hands of men. As Frueh (1994, p. 192) says, "Seeing the body through women's eyes was a crucial aspect of self-determination and self-actualisation."

However, as the feminist project has developed, problems have emerged. With respect to the visual representation of women, two difficulties need to be identified. Firstly, there is "essentialism". This emphasises the way in which psychological differences between men and women are based upon fundamental physical differences between the sexes. Secondly, there is the problem of self-censorship. Should images of women be used or avoided? These two topics will now be discussed.

Essentialism

Much debate within feminism has centred around the extent to which women's psychology is determined by their biology. Do women behave the way they do because there is such a thing as a female psyche, or have they been conditioned by society to behave in certain ways? For example, Woodley (1987, p. 97) says of Chicago's *Dinner Party*, "The representation

of each group of women by a plate beautifully crafted as a vagina conjures up the same old misconception of women's sexuality, that of offering not taking." Chicago's work is very based around the idea of an essentially female psychological make-up which needs to be reclaimed by women artists.

While the reappropriation or presentation of female imagery by women artists may be seen as positive, there is also a danger. The linking of psyche and biology may in fact reinforce patriarchy by restating its central argument: that there are important, fundamental psychological differences between men and women which are set down by nature. Historically, this has often translated into women and nature on the one hand and men and mind on the other. Male production becomes responsible for history and evolution. Women become responsible for reproduction and the family, tasks that are seen as closer to nature.

Gates (1992), for one, questions set ideas of commonality and difference. A common feature of western sociopolitical discourses is the concept of dualism; nature-culture, body-mind, passion-reason. As Gates says, "these dualisms often translate as distinctions between reproduction and production, the family and the state, the individual and the social" (Gates, 1992, p. 121). That women may differ greatly from each other is overlooked, *The Dinner Party*, or Sjoon's *God Giving Birth* could be subjected to such a criticism.

Stacey (1993) points out that others have seen the problem from a different perspective:

Rather than assuming 'woman' to be a given category of feminist analysis which is considered to be a problematic form of essentialism, [some] feminists highlight the fluidity of the meaning of that category across time, place and context. Thus the assumption of a shared collective identity amongst women as a group who have a certain shared set of interests in common, which has been a part of so much feminist analysis and activism, is questioned. (Stacey, 1993, pp. 64-65)

In conclusion, therefore, it may be that the emphasis on biology can have the effect of ghettoising women. It may reinforce patriarchy's negative views of women, rather than break them down. The debate continues. At the very least, women artists should be aware of the pitfalls that may accompany representations of women and nature. In contrast, Kelly's *Post Partum Document* emphasises conditioning rather than woman as natural carer. But even here, because she is employing the concept of mother and child the biological link is again being made.

Self-censorship?

Historically, the representation of women was the prerogative of male artists. In the last decades, women artists have begun the task of re-representing female subjectivity. Because of the historical baggage that attaches to actual representations of women, in particular the objectification of the female, some women have shied away from portraying the female form. Holzer would be a prime example.

Two problems with such an approach are immediately apparent. Firstly, this is a form of self-censorship which is in effect indirect male control of female imaging practice. Secondly, it becomes very difficult to produce appropriate images of women if women are not imaged by women at all (the field is left, as before, wide open to male fantasising).

Is there a way out of this dilemma? Cindy Sherman, for example, avoids complete self-censorship in that she does portray women. However, her images have distinctly negative overtones (in itself a different form of self-censorship, perhaps). Is this a step forward, or is Sherman just a dupe of patriarchy? Shor, for example, says of Sherman's work:

Negative representations of women are disturbingly close to the way men have traditionally experienced or fantasized women. Sherman's camera is male. Her images are successful partly because they do not threaten phallocracy, they

reiterate and confirm it. (Shor, quoted by Lemn, 1989, p. 16)

There are going to be no easy answers to the self-censorship problem. To understand the complexity of the arguments involved, it is necessary to turn now to another perspective on sexuality, namely that represented by the psychoanalytic approach.

Chapter 2

Psychoanalysis

In order to examine feminist debates around the body, and in particular the representation of women, it is important to refer to Freud, Lacan, and later feminists who refer to or utilize psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis has played an important role in helping feminists come to an understanding of the complexities of subjectivity and sexuality. For feminists, the debate surrounding psychoanalysis has produced the important notion of the male gaze, with its implications for how women should or should not be represented.

Freud

In his 1905 and 1925 essays on sexuality, Freud describes how sexual difference is arrived at from an early age. He believed that sexuality is the primary life force and the way in which the libido is organised in childhood determines sexual stability and whether we suffer from neurosis in later life.

Initially the child enjoys having its primary needs and comforts taken care of by the mother. Through the experience of breastfeeding it derives great pleasure and is unaware of the outside world. As the child's consciousness of reality develops its ego grows. The ego is the site of struggle between the pleasure demands of the unconscious and the reality of the external world. In the struggle between the ego and the unconscious aspects of mental life may be suppressed and may manifest themselves in later life as areas of conflict or unresolved desires and repressions. This can be the cause of "inappropriate" behaviour.

Because the relationship with the mother is primarily pleasurable, Freud felt that pleasure and love were eroticized by the child. A misdirected alternative to mother-centred sexual feelings was masturbatory auto-eroticism. The crisis for a boy happens during the age of three or four when he realises that he must share the mother's love with his father. Initially the boy has no sense of rivalry with the father as he feels attached to both parents. However, it becomes clear to him that the father has a more explicit relationship with the mother. This crisis leads to the *Oedipus Complex*. In order to pass through this phase the boy must identify with the father. The boy has seen that unlike his father and himself his mother has no penis. The penis is a symbol of potency and narcissistic pleasure. Realising his mother's lack of penis and fearing his own castration by the father, he dismisses his mother as sexual love-object. He is horrified by his mother's mutilated genitals and seeks to make her complete again. He does this by using something that may have been near the mother's mutilated body at the time of his discovery. This fetish object could be a piece of cloth, hair or an alternative body part. From then on the mother is restored and complete again as long as the fetish object is kept in view.

The fetish object becomes both a *permanent memorial* to the horror of castration, embodied not in the male but the female, as well as a *token of triumph* and safeguard against the threat of castration. (McClintock, 1993, p. 4, her italics)

Freud believed that the situation for girls was more complex and obscure. He suggests that the complication arises when the girl is confronted with the mother's castrated genitals. As with the boy, the mother is the original love-object but she is incomplete and lacks a penis. The father has one and the girl experiences penis envy. Freud (1925, p. 335) states that girls recognise the penis, "as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time fall victim to envy for the penis". The little girl holds her mother responsible for her lack of penis and turns to her father, taking him as the object of her love and sexual desire while the mother becomes the object of jealousy.

When she has passed beyond her first attempt at explaining her lack of penis as being a punishment personal to herself and has realized that that sexual character is a universal one, she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect... (Freud, 1925, p. 337)

Woman, according to Freud, takes her place in society feeling disappointed and she represses masculine traits and takes on feminine (passive) traits. Freud emphasised the boy's belief that the woman is a castrated version of himself. Freud believed that the desire for a penis by women signifies that sexual desire is sited at the penis.

Problems with Freud

It was Freud's failure to successfully analyse *Dora* in 1905 that led him to accept that the nature of sexuality could be fragmented. *Normal* heterosexuality was a strict ordering process and females did not follow this process. This ordering process is part of human subjectivity and the unconscious.

According to Chodorow (1978, p. 157),

...the Freudian edifice stands on shaky ground. The assumptions it begins with are questionable, and it ignores or defines away clinical evidence and reasoning which contradict it. (Chodorow, 1978, p. 157)

Freud never came to terms with women. He described woman as a "dark continent". Woman is considered to have an underdeveloped superego, to be overly narcissistic and psychologically inferior (Freud, 1925, p. 342). He says,

I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego

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is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. (Freud, 1925, p. 342)

Lacan

Such excesses on Freud's part may be one of the reasons feminists have tended to turn to Lacan. Another reason Lacan is interesting to feminists is his stressing of language and the symbolic order as determinants of our psychological make-up. Compared to Freud, biology in Lacan's work is of much less importance.

In Lacan's account "the unconscious undermines the subject from any position of certainty" (Rose, 1982. p. 29). In order to discuss subjectivity and the development of a child's identity Lacan (1936) refers to the concept of the *mirror stage* which occurs during early infancy. He believed that everything feeds back to the child and that this constructs the child's self image. The mother is the major source of information. Initially, the mirror reflects what the child wants to hear, touch and see. The child sees a unitary image which is a misrecognition because of its own inability with motor co-ordination. The presence of the mirroring function (be it the reaction of the mother to the child), implies the separation between mother and child. As it recognises its separateness the child enters into symbolic order. Language is part of the symbolic order so the child starts to deal with the notion of presence and absence. In terms of desire, the child becomes aware of its own ability to express wanting what is not present (therefore desire and subjectivity are implicated in the symbolic order).

Since the symbolic order always involves desire and separation one can never attain complete satisfaction. Satisfaction is the feeling of unity which a child loses when it recognizes it is separate from the mother. Language incorporates absence, separation and desire and one's sense of self

is constituted unconsciously through language. There is always the problem of separation within the definition of self; completeness is not attainable.

Lacan stresses that sexuality and the unconscious are linked. This unconscious is a constant challenge to our identity. According to Lacan the little girl's penis envy is her desire to have what patriarchy has ordained to be the symbol of power and privilege: she wants what the penis (and phallus) stands for. The Oedipus Complex, as interpreted by Lacan, means that the girl realises that what the boy is threatened with - castration - is effectively what has happened to her. She is forced to realise that lacking the penis means also lacking the "phallus", the locus of power and desire. Under patriarchy she takes up a position of passive dependency - women only exist with reference to the phallus. Lacan believed that the experience of patriarchy is ingrained in language, representation and knowledge. Within the symbolic order, therefore, language is phallic.

There are of course problems with Lacan's theories. In suggesting that the individual is a production of the unconscious and language, he places no importance on social and historical change. According to Crowley and Himmelweit (1992, p. 234),

This structuralist mode of analysing relationships between a set of necessary elements (for example, subject/object, mother/father, signifier/signified, male/female, conscious/unconscious) is very abstract. It tells the story of the subject without any reference to history as if it were true for all time and historical change were of no consequence to the story. (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992, p. 235)

In other words, Lacan offers no hope for change (see Wilson, 1986).

Moreover, it could be said that, like Freud, Lacan never comes to terms with female sexuality. On the one hand, he reduced all women's sexuality to her bodily function of reproduction: "Nothing distinguishes woman as a sexual being, if not precisely her sex, her sexual organs" (Lacan, quoted in Jardine, 1985, p. 164). On the other hand, female sexuality is referred back to the phallus; in essence, therefore, his theory is just as male-centred as Freud's.

Mulvey

Having introduced Freud and Lacan in general terms, I want to bring the argument back to the representation of women in visual culture. Two of the most influential articles in this area have been Mulvey's (1973) essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and her later *Afterthoughts* (1975). Mulvey states that Hollywood film is a codified way of looking at the fetishised female body.

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey, 1975, p. 809)

Mulvey challenges feminists to re-address how mainstream cinema patrons respond to Hollywood productions. Mulvey discusses, through the use of psychoanalytic theory, the male use of fetish and voyeurism in their interaction with women. Both notions involve castration anxiety. The voyeur or 'Peeping Tom' observes women from a safe distance, looking without the look being returned. As Kuhn (1985) puts it,

the voyeur's conviction is, that the riddle of femininity will ultimately yield its solution if he looks long enough and hard enough. Since his desire is pinned to the actual process of investigation/scrutiny, though, the maintenance of desire depends on the riddle's solution remaining just out of sight. (Kuhn, 1985, p. 30)

For the fetishist to receive pleasure a replacement object is used to disguise the female's lack of penis. For Mulvey the cinema is the repeated re-enactment of the castration crisis. She describes how the male gaze became the systematic fetishisation of the female body.

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen

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story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium. (Mulvey, 1975, p. 809)

According to Mulvey visual pleasure is based on two processes, the objectification of the female and the identification with the male protagonist. She describes these process through the analysis of three 'looks' in popular cinema.

1. *The look of the camera(man), the director and the editor*, who choose a particular selection of shots, edits, close-ups, and angles. They are therefore obscuring and selecting, limiting and controlling how we look at the scene.
2. *The look within the film*. This refers to the look between the actors in the film; the male characters sexually objectify the female characters through their active, desiring and powerful look. Men in film gaze at women on behalf of the audience.
3. *The spectators' look*. This look is largely predetermined by the previous two. The male spectator identifies with the powerful male character. His assumption of this role is orchestrated by the look of the camera(man)/director/editor.

The female characters thus become objects of sexual stimulation. As Berger (1972, p. 47) states, "men act and women appear". Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at. In the patriarchal system of visual representation the spectator has a position of active scopophilia. This active/passive demarcation is the way western society defines sexual difference.

When the female viewer identifies with the male character Mulvey (1981) states that this is due to the female spectator's "inability to achieve a stable sexual identity" (p. 30). In order to underline her argument, Mulvey quotes Freud, who believed that women throughout their lives, have periods of oscillation between femininity and masculinity. Women can draw on a

pre-Oedipal, active gaze in order to identify with the male character. This argument suggests that women take on the role of a transvestite. They slip in and out of different costumes, masquerading as male with practiced ease.

How can women be represented?

Is Mulvey's analysis too narrow? Her theory of the male gaze is based on Freud's descriptions of fetishism and scopophilia. As Freud presents them, these are exclusively male preoccupations which stem from the time of the Oedipal crisis. There appears to be no mechanism by which an active female gaze could come about. In other words, there is no notion that women could derive pleasure from looking.

There are strong reasons to suspect an active female gaze. Take, for example, media images directed at women which use the male body. It seems that we are increasingly invited to gaze at beautifully groomed and tastefully (un)dressed men. Furthermore statistics on pornographic consumption suggest that women are becoming seriously active 'voyeurs'. McClintock (1993, p. 1) states that "it is estimated that women in the US now account for 40 per cent of all X video rentals, while two thirds of women polled in Germany and France regularly watch video porn."

The points just raised suggest that Mulvey's analysis may be flawed, or at the least incomplete. Mulvey's attack on the visual pleasure in narrative cinema has been taken by some artists as a prohibition upon any image of a female lest it fall under the gaze of desiring males. This may be going too far. It raises again the spectre of self-censorship. It could prevent many artists from imaging women in a positive, interesting and/or empowering way.

Mulvey's analysis therefore begs the questions, may artists image women's bodies, can they redefine prevailing methods of representation?

Chapter 3

The Artist Kiki Smith and her Practice

Kiki Smith can be identified as one of a group of younger artists whose work concentrates on the body. These artists see the body as under threat from various outside forces including church, state, medicine and law. Amongst her like-minded contemporaries could be listed Rhona Pondick, Sue Williams, Annette Messenger and Robert Gober.

These artists consider it vital to their practice to image the body as a way of confronting social and political issues. Rather than censoring the body, it could be said that they give their work greater resonance by presenting the body in all its guises. In the last two chapters the focus has been largely on the question of whether or not women's bodies should be represented. Historical misrepresentation of women together with the idea of the male gaze have made artists wary of direct physical representations.

One way in which Smith and her contemporaries deal with the representation dilemma is through the use of fragmentation and negative imagery. Smith's bodies seem unlikely to elicit an erotic gaze, rather a mixture of anxiety and questioning. Amongst contemporary artists, Smith is particularly interesting for the vigour and directness with which she has engaged with the body. She is one of the leading representers of women both as victim and as empowered. Her work is an "answer" of sorts to the self-censorship debate.

Background

Born in Nuremburg in 1954, Smith grew up in New Jersey. She was the eldest of three daughters. "Her mother Jane Smith is an actress and opera singer, and the household was a cultured place where visitors included

her father's Abstract Expressionist buddies..." (Solomon, 1992, p. 142). Her father was the Minimalist sculptor Tony Smith. Kiki Smith came to art late.

...I didn't want to be an artist. My father was an artist, my sister is an artist - she knew very young she wanted to be an artist. Just when I was 24 I decided to be an artist but it was really just out of because I didn't have anything else to do. (Smith, interview with author; see Appendix)

Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, she was very influenced by the feminist movement, hippy culture and anti-Vietnam protest. In the 1980s she joined a New York group called *Colab*. This was a collective of artists who wished to find new ways of making their art visible to a wider public than the gallery system allowed.

As a group they were committed to social and political change, organizing artist-initiated theme exhibitions in hard-to-find storefronts and unused spaces, notably in the lower East Side. (Shearer, 1992, p. 11)

Initially, her practice included printing on T-shirts and making hand-crafted objects. "They included dolls, teapot cozies, paintings of guitars and life-size canoe sculptures." (Solomon, 1992, p. 193). But crucially, Smith had training as an emergency medical technician in the 1980s. Her concerns with regard to the body and its control can be seen as bound up in this experience.

At the time I was very anti western medicine or anti medicine...The western medicine model seems really fragmented and not holistic and seemed to have bad repercussions in people's daily lives. (Interview with author)

Around this period, Smith took her love of craft and making things and fused it with her concerns around the body. The result was pieces such as

Tongue and Hand (1985; plaster; Illustration 1) or *Untitled* (1990; lithograph; Illustration 2).

Representations of the body's internal organs like *Zweite Auswahl* [second choice] (1988), involving such processes as ingestion, nutrition, and elimination, were the focus of Kiki Smith's *oeuvre* from 1980 to 1985, and continue to appear in her work today (*Intestine*, 1992). (Little, 1992, p. 84)

The 1980s and 1990s have seen a growing concern with the body, traceable to worries such as AIDS, women's rights, human rights, ecology and holistic medicine. It is in this context that Smith's work was brought to prominence.

Present practice

Looking back, Smith is aware of her indebtedness to many artists. Louise Bourgeois and Joseph Beuys would be obvious points of reference. As she says,

Women artists in the '60s and '70s kicked out a certain amount of space that enabled me to exist and kick out more space. (Interview with author)

She describes herself as an expressionist and as trying to make evident her life. She is a lover of craft and the hand-made object; her work brings the notion of women's-work/home-made into the realm of "High Art". The work takes on a different focus at different times and sometimes it is more subjective than others. She does not try to limit or justify her work through language or media.

Certain things I have very specific intentions about, in a way didactic, moralistic, or some bull-shit. This is my version of life. It's not that I say that you should live like this, I think that's dangerous, it's just like this is my version. (Interview with author)

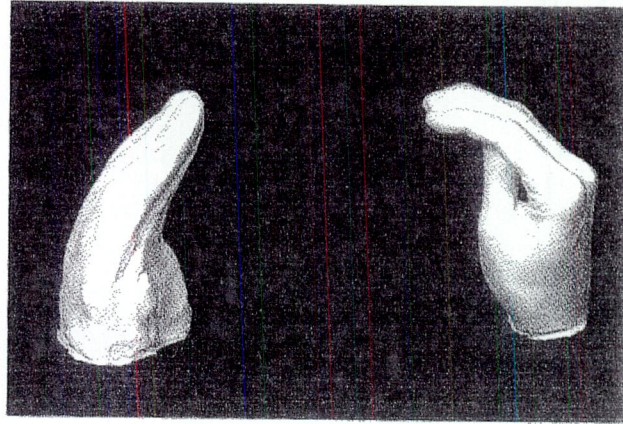


Illustration 1: *Tongue and Hand* (1985)

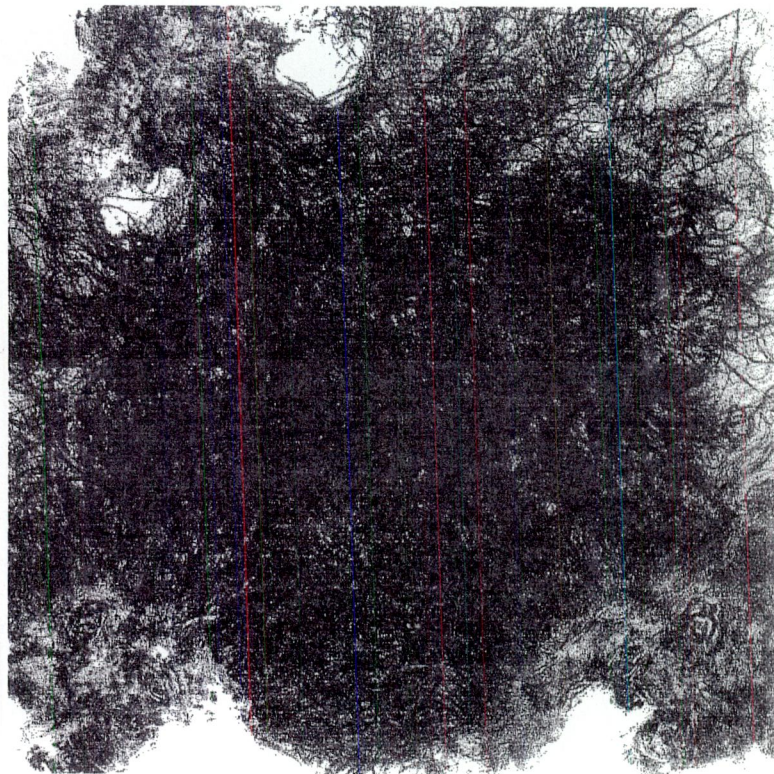


Illustration 2: *Untitled* (1990)

Smith's work is now primarily focused on the body and its internal mechanisms. She believes the body is endangered and is concerned for all its parts. Her work is a reaction to her own experience of life. She creates physical examples or models of her experiences. She describes the process of her practice as unmediated.

One's intentions in one's work change radically over periods of time because your life changes. I have been making stuff about the body since 1979, and like, in general how it functions and how it functions in my life, are very similar, but the overall concerns over periods of time really change.... Part of it at different times is about self-empowerment. (Interview with author)

Materials

The materials that Smith uses are quite significant to her practice. She is excited by their possibilities and the experience of using and manipulating them. They are inherent to the meaning of a piece. She chooses materials which will suggest how a work should be read. Tissue paper lymph systems will have a different meaning to gold lymph systems. "Certain materials are really live materials and in a way...mimic certain things that the body does." (Interview with author). She refers to paper and glass having a translucency like skin. She feels different materials have memory, for example wax, and regardless of manipulation they tend to slip back into their original state. "To me bronze or metal tend to be dead materials, I really try to struggle with them, whereas gold is a very live material." (Interview with author). The materials are a metaphor for the body's fragility; often she will create a sculpture in a rough or crude manner to undercut our desire for physical perfection.

Themes in Smith's work

Essentialism

In Chapter 1, essentialism was discussed as being one type of celebratory device. It appears, for example, in the works of Chicago and Shapiro, where the female body is imaged primarily through its sexual organs. The aim is women's empowerment. A difficulty arose for some women who felt that women were, on the one hand, being represented as universally the same, and on the other reduced to their biology. Such works may have reinforced rather than combatted patriarchal views of women.

Smith's work is about the body. She images all of its parts, both inside and out. An interesting dimension is the representation of both male and female. Works such as *Intestine* (1992) represent the inner workings of a gender-neutral body. There is no sexual connotation, and though the piece is beautifully made, it manages to convey humanness without exciting voyeurism.

Little Holes (1991) is another example of where Smith short-circuits any salacious response. The piece is particularly interesting - especially after Chicago - because it shows sex-related material without being sexy:

In the work *Little Holes* she prints individual sheets of paper with subtle, photographically derived images of the orifices of the body, which are then assembled into a random gridded display. (Cypers, 1991, p. 96)

As Cutajar (1991, p. 12) says, "Smith's ambition seems to be to reveal the body's primacy and the necessity of negotiating an accord with it." In *Untitled* (1991; Illustration 3), which is a series of twelve water-cooler bottles bearing the names of different body fluids, including urine, milk, blood and mucous, Smith again confronts the essential but private.

Smith's work is organic and visceral and compels the viewer to re-assess their attitudes to aspects of bodily function that are usually kept hidden and seen as unclean and forbidden subject matter. At the Whitney

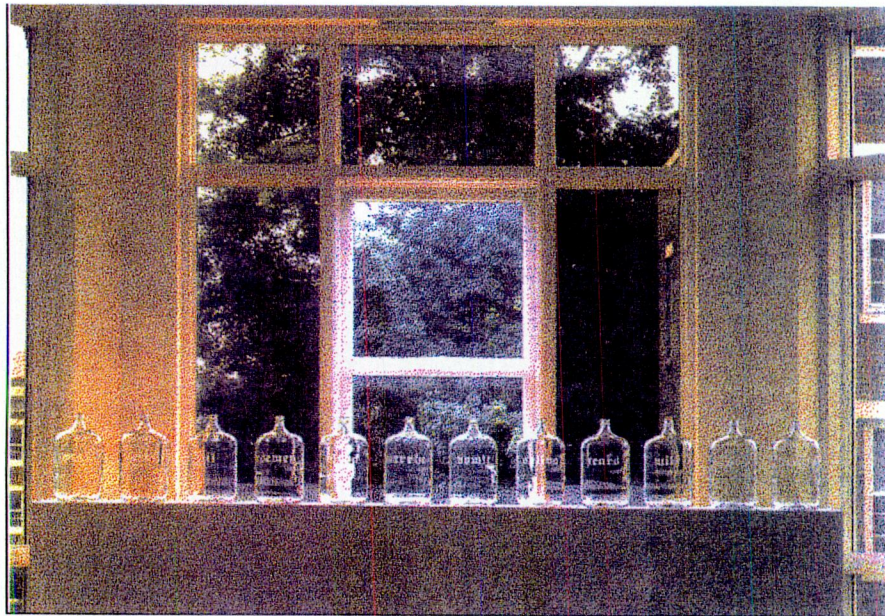


Illustration 3: *Untitled* (1991)

Biennial in 1991, Smith exhibited two hanging wax figures (*Untitled*, 1990, wax, cheesecloth and wood). The female figure had breast milk dribbling from her breasts and the male had semen leaking down his leg. These works (while implying martyrdom and religious themes, for example the stigmata) are about loss of control and the bodies involuntary actions. Breasts leak when women lactate, tears flow when we are emotionally involved. These subjects were mainly invisible in the art world of the past.

By the mid 1980s the work turned to the process of birth and being reborn; through her work she sought to re-locate herself in the world. A work from this period is *Womb* (1986), a textured bronze sculpture in the shape of a womb. It is a vessel with a hinge, which when opened evokes the unborn child's vulnerability and preciousness. It also suggests a casket for some precious object. The fact that nothing is actually there is indicative of Smith's attraction to contradiction. As Tallman (1992, p. 152) says,

Through her art, Smith means to prod people into greater awareness of their own individual experience of the body, and into the realisation of the ways in which that experience is manipulated by external forces.

Although the main focus of Smith's present practice is concerned with how we treat the living body, she has at times referred to death. Some of her work evokes death, loss and separation. *Hand in Jar* is a piece typical of the period following the death of her father. The hand is made from clay and submerged in water in a chemistry jar. The piece suggests the anatomy room or laboratory where specimens of body parts become timeless and hide their history. As Lyons (1990, p. 103) comments, "Smith is comfortable with the fact that the body parts should suggest such a variety of associations, even contradictory ones."

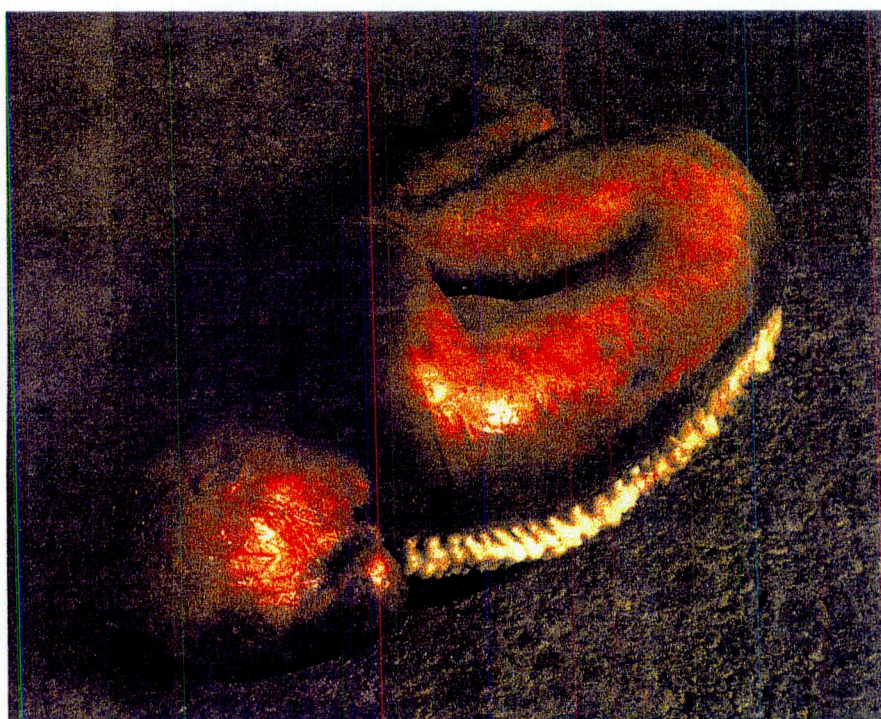


Illustration 4: *Bloodpool* (1992)

Representing the body

Smith could be said to have come to a very pragmatic solution to the question of whether or not the female body should be represented. She employs a number of methods. For example, she images both male and female. Also, she uses negative imagery to undercut eroticism. Furthermore, through fragmentation and metaphor she destabilises the received notions of an integrated body.

An example of negative imagery is to be found in the work shown in 1992 at the Faubush Gallery in New York. This consisted of six life-sized wax or papier-mâché female figures. One figure, *Bloodpool* (1992, wax and pigment; Illustration 4) is the huddled shape of a young girl with her spinal cord exposed, suggesting the horrors of torture and violence. In a posture which describes vulnerability and pain, the figure lies in a foetal position. "At once sensual and horrifying" (Wallach, 1992, p. 113), the figure is bruised, distorted and tortured. This abject figure suggests degradation and according to Wallach (p. 113) she appears "in her mortification to have attained a higher spiritual plane." This work is another example of Smith's concern as much with "the psychic fragmentation caused by abuse as with the actual violence itself" (Posner, 1992, p. 28).

Another figure, *Untitled* (1992, wax and papier-mâché) depicts a figure on all fours with what appears to be faeces trailing from its body. Such works could be said to raise the issue of how the body is policed by our society. Despite the rhetoric of rights for women, our bodies are still places for the enactment of violence and abuse. But these works also reflect Smith's concern with "the integrity of the human body and how different factions, from religion to law to the medical establishment, vie for control." (Smith, in conversation with Solomon, 1992, p. 193).

Untitled (1992, steel and paint) was shown in the exhibition *From Beyond The Pale* in the Irish Museum of Modern Art (1994-95). The sculpted form is crouched in a foetal position with her head facing the viewer. The supplication of the figure is insidious and highly suggestive. The woman is narrow and small, perhaps referring to Western culture's

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preoccupation with dieting and thinness. Her unnaturally long arms extend open-handed, asking the viewer to identify with and reflect on her situation within patriarchy.

Fragmentation

Chapter 2 described the psychoanalytic idea of the fetish. Both Mulvey and Freud believed this to be a male activity which inevitably arises through the resolution of the Oedipus Complex. It involves the substitution of an object or body part for woman's missing penis. It is interesting to compare the (narrow?) psychoanalytic conception of fetish with the fragmentation found in some of Smith's work.

Hair, symbolic of power, sexuality and hysteria, is a favourite element in her practice. *Untitled* (1990; Illustration 2) is a lithographic print of hair, wild and unruly, "curling, interlocking skeins, bunched up to a dense thicket in the center" (Tallman, 1990, p. 32). The hair could clearly evoke a fetishistic gaze. The piece would appear to derive its power from the fact that the viewer does not know what type of hair is represented (in particular, head or pubic). In psychoanalytic terms, there is therefore an oscillation of emotion between desire and rejection.

Man (1988; paper; Illustration 5) is a dismembered, skinless collection of body parts made from gampi paper. The work, according to Little (1992, p. 84), "prompts myriad emotional, even confrontational, responses ranging from pure disgust and anger to eros and sympathy." The ripped body of *Man* denies fetish in two ways. It is of a man, and its grotesqueness inhibits any sense of eroticism.

Religion

Reina (1993) comes directly from Smith's fascination with ritual and attribute. Smith says of herself,



Illustration 5: *Man* (1988)

I was raised catholic...and I always like the Virgin Mary and all the saints...I don't like the Catholic church...but I very much like the rituals. I believe in lighting candles and all that junk and I like the saints and I like the Virgin Mary.
(Interview with author)

In *Reina* the viewer is confronted with a train of sackcloth which is dotted with ready-made sequined stars. The train hangs from the ceiling and at one end two arms and two legs dangle from threads, precariously. *Reina* evokes the kitsch of the 'Homecoming Queen' and the ritual of the beauty pageant. Smith is probably also making reference to the feast of Our Lady and to the pageantry which surrounds this religious celebration. *Reina* is floating with euphoria and excitement, she is out of this world. Her train sweeps majestically upwards, her limbs dangle and never touch the ground. The glitzy train suggests the embroidered cloths of heaven; the sackcloth underlines this queens delusion that there is a heaven on earth.

The work pokes fun at the Miss America and Miss World beauty pageants.

Virgin (1993; Illustration 6) demands that the viewer look up and stand back from a piece of work that echoes the history of centuries of women. High up on the wall the *Virgin* becomes untouchable. She stares at us from her wrapped and mummified body. Our eyes focus on the mark of her femaleness, her vagina. The wrapping is a metaphor for a caul or membrane, both suggestive of birth. The limpness of the form and the way it implies a metamorphosis that is not quite complete evoke feelings of death. The piece is made from glass, paper, plastic and metho-cellulose. The figure is suggestive rather than representative of a young pubescent girl. Her hip bones are boyish and the stomach is flat and under-developed. Smith says of the Virgin Mary that,

...there is this enormous cult worship of her, people taking this empty vessel body and stuffing it with any kind of meaning they want. And so it's like this very fluid body and then you can change it, manipulate it, turn it around. (Interview with author)

May 11

San Francisco

San Francisco

San Francisco

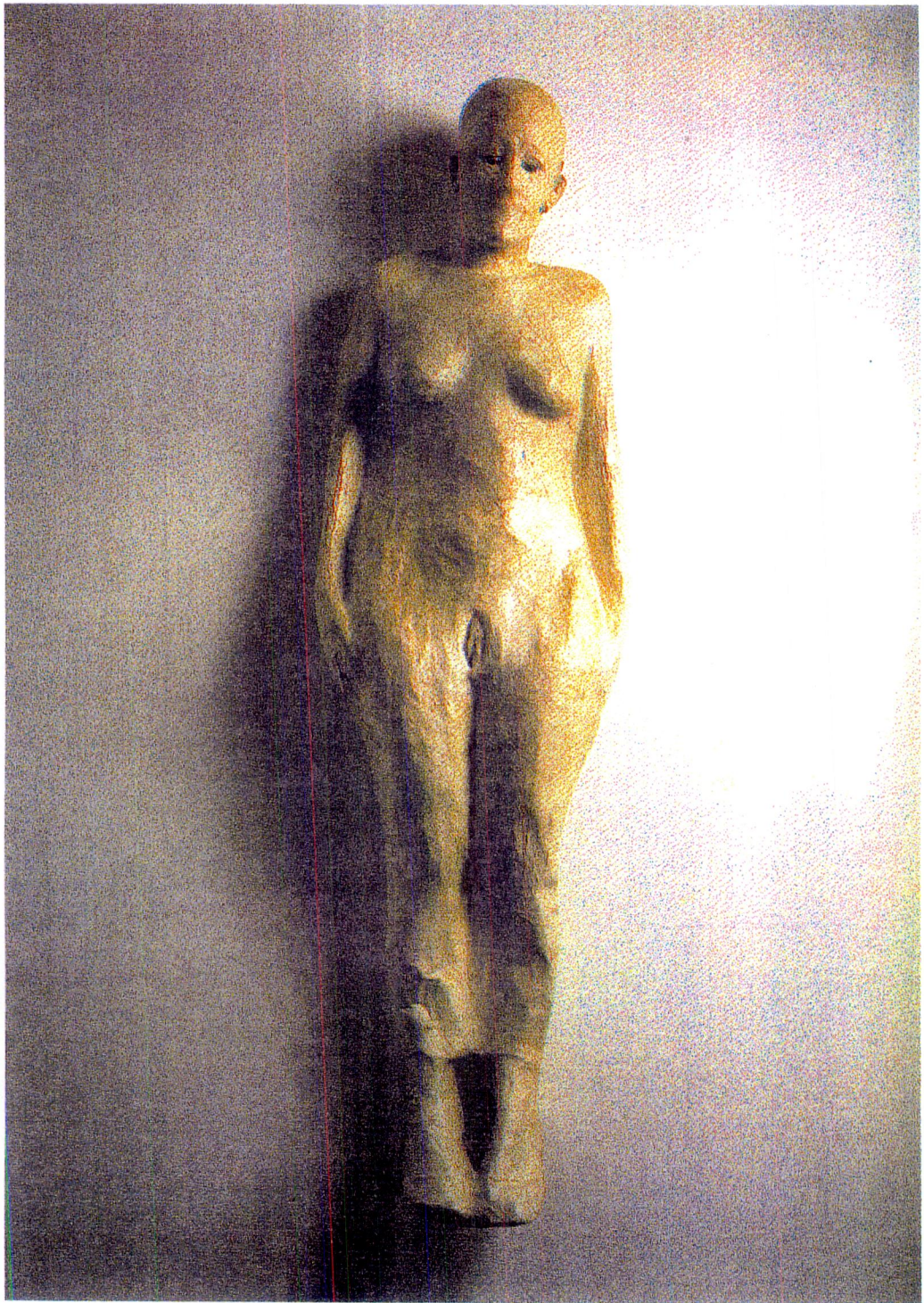


Illustration 6: *Virgin* (1993)

Virgin suggests a thwarted symbol of sexuality and fertility. The piece may refer to the oppressive stance the Church takes on sexuality and reproduction. Another aspect to the work is its reference to fetish and control. By binding the body of the *Virgin* Smith alludes to the Chinese custom of foot binding or to Victorian corsetry. Both these traditions transformed or mutilated women's bodies.

Smith has recently completed a site-specific piece for a park in Germany. It is a large figure of Mary Magdalen, who, in German medieval and Renaissance literature, is depicted as wild and covered with hair. Smith's *Mary Magdalen* has a chain around her leg like a dancing bear.

I was asked to make sculpture for a park...in the park there's a big column and there's a big Virgin Mary on top of it (it's really a religious pilgrimage place). So I said, "O.K., I'll make a sculpture of Mary Magdalen, 'cos she's this counterpart to the Virgin Mary and she's this wild woman". So to me it's like your this dumb fuck standing on earth, having to look up at this God version and there's this enormous space between the two and you're still this wild animal and owned by those visions. (Interview with author)

What better way to illustrate how Smith's work is earthy and iconoclastic?

Smith and theory

Smith, it seems, may have found a way to represent women's subjectivity in a way that circumvents many of the problems associated with the imaging of women. Her practice reflects a concern with some of the feminist debates, for example, the male gaze. Her images do not invite a sexual or lascivious look; they could be said therefore to short-circuit one of the modes by which women are objectified. Smith could be said to explore fetish. In her work, however, 'fetish' has a broader sense than that described by Mulvey (1975, 1981), incorporating as it does her love of

materials, the pleasure of making, and the use of both gender-specific and gender-neutral fragmentation.

Conclusion

The main focus of this thesis has been the important question: is it possible to represent women in a way that undercuts rather than reinforces traditional modes? Chapter 1 outlined the historical depiction of women. Women artists were not encouraged to draw the nude and the imagining of women was a male prerogative. Women were idealized and represented, submissive and close to nature - take, for example, the works of Gauguin. In the last 25 years or so, new approaches to representing women have been vigorously addressed. The task has been to find ways of representing women which reflect how women wish to see themselves imaged.

Many contemporary artists have sought to find new methods in order to deconstruct patriarchal values and create empowering images - woman as subject, not as object of male desire. As well as traditional methods, some have turned to less conventional media. For example, Schneeman used video and performance as a way of creating images which were closer to women's reality. Chicago's work centred on vaginal imagery and was perceived by many to be a powerful, positive view of female sexuality.

Women wanted to make personal images of their lives and at the same time remove the wall behind which bodily functions (menstruation, reproduction, illness, or social issues) were hidden. Some artists, for example, Holzer or Kelly, avoid literal figuration and employ imagery, text and/or psychoanalytic discourses to convey their ideas.

The different approaches used have not been without their problems. The essentialist approach to representing women, typified by Chicago, suggests a universal woman. Rather than creating images that empowered women, some commentators felt that they reduced them to their sexual function.

The essentialist approach derives in part from a desire to avoid traditional ways of representing women. But not representing women's bodies has led to two particular problems. Firstly, self-censorship, which

amounts to indirect male control of whether women should or should not represent. Secondly, false imaging will persist. If women do not produce powerful images of themselves, the status quo - men dominating the production of images of women - continues.

Psychoanalysis represents a source of added complexity in the imaging debate. Chapter 2 introduces the notion of a male gaze via Freud, Lacan and Mulvey. Mulvey linked the representation of women in popular culture to male sexuality, in particular to voyeurism and fetishism. Her articles were seen by some as providing serious grounds for avoiding literal representations of women. Such representations, she suggests, would inevitably elicit objectification of the female through processes ingrained in the male psyche during the resolution of the Oedipus Complex.

Again, this brings women back to the problem of self-censorship. Should women image themselves, and, if so, how?

Kiki Smith's work may be taken as one potential solution to this dilemma. Chapter 3 focuses on her practice, on the methods she employs in representing the body. These include the use of metaphor, fragmentation, and negative imagery. She considers the body - both male and female - to be under threat from different outside forces such as church, state, medicine and law. Her methods of representation are unlikely to evoke a sexual response. Women are imaged both as victims and as empowered.

Smith's work is a personal response to the experience of the individual and the body within contemporary Western society. Strands of the various debates outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 run through her practice. The points made in Chapter 3 are reinforced by selections from an interview with the artist.

There are no easy answers to the problem of representing women. The debate must and will continue as it raises consciousness and forces the search for new means and methods of representation. Whether or not the issues raised in this thesis ever resolve themselves in her favour, Smith's practice is a powerful contribution to this debate.

Interview with Kiki Smith

(In July 1994, I met with Kiki Smith at the Groucho Club in London. We began by speaking about how she became interested in imaging the body. What follows are extracts from an interview recorded on videotape. My questions are in italics.)

...I studied to be an emergency medical technician.

What was the reason for taking the course?

My work is based...it's just totally primarily experiential. It's more like I'm just reacting to my circumstances and reacting in my private life to what's happening and making physical examples or models or something of it. Like external physical things to kinda, then look at to see are they accurate or inaccurate or deluded or whatever and, you know, my sister wanted to become an emergency medical technician and she asked me if I wanted to go too, so I just said "yes". It's more just like to go study the body. At the time I was very anti western medicine or anti medicine.

Why was that?

The western medicine model seems really fragmented and not holistic and seemed to have bad repercussions in people's daily lives. Like you have this thing and then you have disease at a certain point and you separate the disease from the body, rather than treating it systemically that that is just like a symptom of the whole and so you have the same model as used in the hospital or the prison.

The prison is the same model - you take people in the social situation and you say they're transgressive and you separate them out. In the U.S. you have over a million people in prison because of this model and it's a medical model basically of separation. And also in terms of information it's like people have very little authority when it comes to care of their bodies in relationship to illness. For me I'm also really not interested in illness...you know as like the only way of looking at the body is if something has deteriorated, if something's the matter with it basically.

Develop that a little bit: what is it that you really want to focus on?

For me I was just interested in the experience of being here in a body and so at the time I didn't like the emphasis on what's gone wrong with it. It seemed more interesting. If you look at medical books it's very difficult to find whole systems, you're always looking at very fragmented versions, like sectionalisation of bodies and stuff like that. You rarely get to see whole systems and partially it's difficult to articulate in terms of physically taking out your nervous system all over your whole body or something like that.

I'm sort of at war with medicine and stuff like that but then I thought it's good to go and pay attention to it and know how, as self-empowerment, to know how to take care of it and part of that was that at the same time we were at war with Nicaragua, the U.S. was at war with Nicaragua, and the people of Nicaragua had to become self-empowered at taking care of themselves in terms of learning how to fix wounds or broken bones, tissue, stuff like that...

Certainly everyone should know how to do C.P.R., it's empowering. If you just have medicine as this thing that controls your body, medicine or churches or law or whatever it is that has control of it, it's good to take some of that power and go "oh yeh, well I know how to do that too" or "oh yeh, I know what my kidneys look like or what the function of them is or where the spleen is".

So for me, part of my work was in a way just like saying this is what the inside of your bodies look like so that you could take some kind

of ownership. Also, they have psychological, metaphorical, all the different stuff you associate to different organs and then that's like historical and cultural, different people all the world are associating different meaning to their pancreas or develop different mythologies that are very important to it.

So do you see that through your work you're making power visible?

Yeh, sometimes... One's intentions in one's work change radically over periods of time because your life changes. I've been making stuff about the body since 1979, and like, in general, how it functions and how it functions in my life are similar, but the individual concerns over periods of time really change. At some points you have this real clarity about what you're doing, you can give a kind of rap about "this is what my intention is, my artwork is"! And sometimes it falls apart, it's more reflective. Part of it at different times has been about self-empowerment. I always think it's really good if your art can have the variety your life has. It can have as much stupidity as your life and as much profoundness as your life, that it's an expression of you but without a kind of didactic purposefulness, without ideology involved in it. It's not like I'm trying to push some line. At individual times I'm trying to push some line, but there are a lot of different ones that change.

How do you feel at the moment about your work?

I'm in this religious trip now.

What does that mean?

For the last year, basically for the last three years, I've started making large-scale figurative sculpture, figure. The second you get outside into the physical you get age and sex and race and you get into archetypes immediately. You're making statues and statues are to a great extent in

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University of Chicago, held at the
University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

European history and culture, they are religious - whether mythological, Greek or Roman or Egyptian religious objects or Christian religious objects. To me my associating to making figurative art is basically religious or it's dolls. Those are your primary experiences of stand-ins for people, fake people. When I first started, I made dolls and now I've been making religious sculpture. I was raised Catholic...and I always like the Virgin Mary and all the saints...I don't like the Catholic church particularly, many thing, how it plays itself out in terms of power in relationship to people's lives and certainly in relationship to people's bodies, it seems very detrimental, but I very much like the rituals. I believe in lighting candles and all that junk and I like the saints and I like the Virgin Mary.

Do you like the stories?

No, 'cos they're not even stories. Something like the Virgin Mary is basically a total historical construction. There's practically nothing about her in the Bible whatsoever. There's this enormous cult worship of her, people taking this empty vessel body and stuffing it with any kind of meaning they want. So it seems like it's a really fluid body, and then you can change it, manipulate it, turn it around and go - I don't like this junk about it, it's not useful to me in my daily life - so like cut all those parts off and put in some other stuff, stick on some new limbs and say "O.K., now these limbs are useful to me". It seems like gods and things are spaces, it's just a space and then you add what attributes and believe or reject what you want. Figure out how historically you're owned by ideas, how they own you in your daily life and get their claws into you in ways that aren't useful. What kind of baggage have you got that isn't good for you? You have to try to keep hacking it off you.

I've just made a sculpture of Mary Magdalene for something in Germany. In Germany she's always depicted in medieval and early renaissance as a wild woman. She's all covered with hair and this is very intriguing to me.

What are you sticking into her vessel?

I was asked to make sculpture for a park, it's a temporary sculpture exhibition, and in the park there's a big column and there's a big Virgin Mary on top of it (it's really a religious pilgrimage place). So I said "O.K., I'll make a sculpture of Mary Magdalen, 'cos she's this counterpart to the Virgin Mary and she's this wild woman". So to me it's like your this dumb fuck standing on earth, having to look up at this God version and there's this enormous space between the two and you're still this wild animal and owned by those visions.

I don't know yet...until she's put there and see what happens, how it functions. But I wanted her with a chain around her leg like a bear, like a dancing bear, like you're just like this beaten circus animal in the midst of these God-fantasies. It's about some discrepancy between reality/fantasy (of trying to live up to gods).

Do you think that you are trying to live up to some ideal?

I was thinking, you want to be gods basically. One has the desire to be. I always have been basically interested in religious or spiritual life. I don't know exactly how one defines that, but also in God-worship. My mother is a very spiritual person and I suppose a multi-god-worshipper. I've also always been very attracted to ritual and to attribute and to somehow the physical. All the martyrs and making physical the nonphysical. One's attracted and repulsed by it.

How have you kept the momentum of your work going? Has this always been something you wanted to do?

No, I didn't want to be an artist. My father was an artist, my sister is an artist - she knew very young she wanted to be an artist. Just when I was 24 I decided to be an artist but it was really just out of because I didn't have anything else to do.

Did you go to college?

No, a little bit but not much. I was very bad in school and so I generally was undisciplined and lazy and I always say that I'd rather be an historian or medieval scholar, Egyptologist, rather than be an artist. It's just more out of default. I always liked craft. I still do. I like craft the best or handmade things.

Your work is very close to the tradition of woman's work.

Yeh. I like home-made things and I'm crummy at it. As a child I wanted to be an archaeologist and then a potter. But then I tried doing pottery and it's way too hard. I was terrible at it because you have to be very centered and center the piece on the wheel. I'm a crappy craftsperson but then I figured out how to use being bad at it to my advantage. I think you have to use all your deficits and take advantage of them. So I think, "O.K., I'm lousy at it, so I'll make this part of my work, to make this rougher version."

To emphasise the fragility of the piece?

Yeh. And rather than it's something you're punished for, use it aggressively.

In another interview, you talked about the disabilities of being a girl.

It's the same thing, using what's used against you. Certainly in terms of art history as a women your experience has not been represented very much. Certainly in terms of figurative art. Like there's many pictures of women, there are fewer pictures from an experiential, first-person point of view. It's more like men making pictures of naked women or women doing something or other. Women become a space of desire or a space of somebody else's projection. In terms of children or girl children there is very little representation, what that experience feels like or seems like. So it seems

there are these enormous gaps or spaces that can be filled up. And they're all different, it's not like there's a general experience of being a girl, it's very specific to you but it's not totally incomprehensible to other people. In the U.S. in the last five or six years gender issues have been very prevalent in work - it's because there were these big holes - like nobody talked about that stuff in their subject matter or their work directly or overtly and so it always seems like art is filling in the gaps. Another generation comes up and they're filling in where they see that they are not represented or that their experience isn't represented or doesn't have voice. The same thing with race issues in the U.S. There are whole segments of the population that haven't had representation within mainstream art culture so that people go "Oh O.K." and this is the next necessity to happen. So that things keep getting filled in.

You use that phrase a lot. I notice that your work is about internal mechanisms and you use external experiences, so there's a duality in the work.

I'm just trying to make evident my life...one of the big things from feminism was that the personal is political. You don't have to make things very far away from your life or experience to talk about life because it's happening smack in your face. Everything that's happening is basically pretty much happening in front of you if you have your eyes open. There are many different social conditions that influence your daily life and influence your thought processes and your experience of yourself and your community.

Is there any medium that you have a greater affinity towards?

No, I really love print-making, I really love paper. Before I started making sculpture I did paintings on cloth and then I was very into muslin. Probably for about five or six years I was really into muslin. I would have these "holy romances". I would be thinking how muslin and certain kinds of paper

are spiritual or holy materials then I think "Oh this is a total bunch of crap, next year you'll be using plastic and think it's some inherent material from god. How you just romanticize your life to make it sound good to yourself."

In general I like materials that have no form or that have a neutral form and then make them into a form rather than taking things from daily life and then arranging them. So I have a preference for materials that don't have much shape...and then you can do something to them.

You have talked about people's work being sexy. What did you mean by that?

I always think that things are sexy or not, like objects are. It's not only sexual in a way just having energy, that certain things have more energy than other things. Certain materials are really live materials and in a way maybe it's just that they mimic certain things that the body does; like paper has the kind of translucency the body has; glass has this translucency the body has. To me they are always very active materials, not all of paper but certain kinds of paper. And certain things like wax. Different things have memory to them. They go back to the same shape: you can mash them around but they tend to want to go back. It's not specific, it's totally subjective, one day one thing is interesting, then something else is. I think in choosing materials I try to...to me bronze or metal tends to be a dead material. I really try to struggle with them whereas gold is a very live material. I'm crazy about gold.

Have you used gold in your work?

Yeh. I actually started using it. I really like gold.

In what way?

Just do repoussé work, like smack, or hammer it around and make little things out of it.

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Is the material suggesting the piece or is the piece suggesting the material?

Well, I mean part of it's just me looking at museums. I'm crazy for sheet gold...where you take a lump of gold, you hammer it out till it's thin and bang it into some form. It picks up patterns like Greek and Egyptian stuff or that. You hammer it into a figure like South American or Central American gold, where they have incredible figures or like Celtic gold all over Ireland or Northern Europe where they had all those hoards. I'd never seen what hoards looked like so I went to Copenhagen last year and got to see all of this metal that I think came from the Mediterranean just all hammered around and then put into the ground. It drives me crazy just to look at it and I think, "Oh, I want to imitate that, I want to do that too" or "I want to have that experience." To me that's a lot of making things. So I just gets some gold and some hammers and start smashing it around. I taught at a school where one of the students was a metal artist and she was interested in how to make big sculpture and I was totally fascinated that she could make jewels, also because I'm crazy about jewellery. Since I was a kid I used to have dreams about jewels. So just wanting to understand technically how people have used it and then just wanting to have that experience too. Then turning it into my work. So instead of making acorn wreaths I'll make veins or lymph systems.

It's also about picking materials that are appropriate to how you want things understood. When you make veins out of gold or out of paper...it means very different things. What's different about them.

Do you think it matters what people say about your work?

Certain things I have very specific intentions about - in a way didactic, moralistic, some bullshit. This is my version of life. It's not that I say that you should live like this, I think that's dangerous, it's just like this is my version. Other times it's much more subjective, I've been making all these small bronze heads and they're all...you get some idea in your head and you do it. I guess for me is, I don't try to limit through language or media, I

don't like to have to justify what I'm doing through language. There are many things you know about and it's not like they have profound social meaning, but you take pleasure in it. It's not really like having one version...

I'm trying to make space for myself. You can feel constricted or restricted by the possibilities you're given so you keep trying to push out more and more... You've got to hack out some space so that you have enough space to walk around in. You see where you feel constrained or where you feel owned or you feel used by a situation you try to, like, turn it around, look at it in some other way so you don't feel so constricted.

Other parts, it's just your expression of your joy of being here or misery at being here. It really varied.

So do you think your work is your emotional response to the whole business of living on the planet?

Yeh, in general. In general I'm an expressionist basically but I think that at different times it has different focuses... I fit into a certain historical moment the way I'm working, the way I think about things, how I want my work to function at a given moment. It's specific to now. I do a certain kind of work because people before me did a certain kind of work, or people before me kicked out a certain amount of space. Women artists in the '60s and '70s kicked out a certain amount of space that enabled me to exist and kick out more space.

I'm totally from the '60s. The things that have influenced me the most are the feminist movement, the Vietnam war or the Civil Rights movement in America and the hippy movement in America. That's my generation or time period. I was a teenager in the '60s so that is still probably my biggest influence.

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