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***THE ABJECT MOTHER:
The Projects of Kiki Smith and Julia Kristeva***

**by
Breda Jackson**

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INTRODUCTION

Kristeva's and Smith's Projects

In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task - a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct - amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless "primacy" constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, "subject" and "object" push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again - inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject.
(Kristeva, 1982, pp. 243)

Kristeva and Abject Art

The writings of linguist, psychoanalyst and cultural theorist, Julia Kristeva have been an influential and valuable challenge to traditional notions of gender identity. Through works such as Powers of Horror (1980), "Stabat Mater" (1976), and Revolution in Poetic Language (1974), Julia Kristeva's theories have had a particular resonance among a group of artists practising what has been loosely categorised as "abject art." Kiki Smith is one such artist. Born in Nuremburg, Germany in 1954, Smith now lives and works in New York. Kristeva's theories of abjection are of considerable interest in relation to a reading of Kiki Smith's art; and like Kristeva's concepts surrounding abjection, abject art has been revolutionary, innovative and fascinating. This thesis will explore what I see as the correlation between both their projects - specifically in terms of expressions of the abject as an attempt to explore the possibility of a positive female identity.

The transgressive capabilities of abject art are of primary interest to those artists who may question why "some artists enter the art historical canon while others are jettisoned, or abjected, from historical memory." (Ben-Levi et al, 1993, pp. 7) This important question

was the starting point for the curators of the major exhibition "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1993. The concerns of the curators in this show were not only to include contemporary artists such as Kiki Smith, Louise Bourgeois or Robert Mapplethorpe but to recognise posthumously the transgressive qualities of the art of Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock and other artists who may not have been read previously in terms of transgression or abjection. The catalogue essays examine the political dimension of the contemporary interest in abject art and in doing so index the writings of Kristeva and other major contributors in this area.

Kristeva's Project

Julia Kristeva's project distinguishes itself from earlier psychoanalytic investigations in that it speaks of aspects of the mother as playing a more salient role in the formation of the subject. Her work combines the scientific study of language and sign systems initiated by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand Saussure and Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's projects of developing a psychology of the unconscious and of human sexuality. Kristeva's model distinguishes between the Semiotic (the unspoken and unrepresented conditions of signification) and the Symbolic (the order of social and signifying relations, of law, language and exchange). The Semiotic refers to a pre-oedipal stage in the child's life where language is not yet acquired and where a sense of 'jouissance' or "pre-signifying impulses and drives chaotically circulate in and through the infant's body." (Grosz, 1992, pp. 195) The Symbolic refers to a stage when the child acquires language and where the pre-signifying impulses of the Semiotic are harnessed in social production.

The Semiotic must be renounced in order that the child might acquire a stable social or Symbolic position as a unified subject. Kristeva's reformulates Lacan's emphasis on the Mirror Stage as the initiation into subjectivity. For Kristeva, the beginnings of subjectivity lie in the material body and as such are maternally connoted as opposed to Lacan's paternally connoted version. The mother regulates the material processes of the infant's body by overseeing what goes in and out of the infant's body and therefore the "maternal function, with its law before the law, prefigures the paternal function." (Oliver, 1993, pp. 47) Kristeva sees Lacan's Mirror Stage as insufficient to explain the psychic development

of an infant during the pre-Oedipal stage. Kristeva refers to Lacan's Mirror Stage as secondary repression and distinguishes it from what she refers to as primary repression or the chora.¹ The child must repress the chora and to do so must expel part of itself from itself. It spits out the warm milk, the mother's body, psychically and physically - it abjects itself in order to establish itself as an 'I'. The chora therefore is first repressed through abjection and later, in the Mirror Stage where the self/other difference is created. But this process of renunciation is never complete as the Semiotic is incompletely contained by the Symbolic and is "manifested in the 'physicality' or 'materiality' of textual production: it is a materiality that, like the primary processes or the repressed, threatens to return, disrupting signifying conventions." Furthermore, the Semiotic is maternally defined and is the "prop or support of, as well as the site for, the disruptive transgression of the paternal, patriarchally regulated Symbolic." (Grosz, 1992, pp. 197)

Through an analysis of the notion of abjection, Kristeva questions why the mother is abjected in order that the child might enter the Symbolic order as a subject in its own right. Kristeva defines the process of abjection herself as follows:

[Abjection] is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the impossibility of doing so.
(Oliver, 1993, pp. 55)

As primary repression and the abjection of the mother takes place outside the Symbolic, it has been associated with transgression of the Symbolic order. Kristeva has suggested in "Revolution in Poetic Language (1974), that avant-garde writing emerges from the Semiotic chora. Kiki Smith's work, because of its representation of abject bodies, in effect transgresses the 'clean and proper' oedipalised body of the Symbolic order. It makes us confront the materiality of our abjects and in doing so returns us to a Semiotic state which we have repressed. We are confronted with that which we have repressed in order to be a unified subject and in doing so, we can question the control which operates through Symbolic law.

Section One

In drawing a distinction between the maternal authority (Semiotic) and the paternal Symbolic law, Kristeva argues that it is the function of defilement rites, particularly those relating to menstrual and excremental substances which draw the boundary between the two. Therefore, she argues, these “two defilements stem from the maternal and/or the feminine.” (Kristeva, 1982, pp 261) Menstrual blood signifies sexual difference while excrement is associated with maternal authority in relation to sphincter training.

In section one, I will discuss Kristeva’s formulations of subjectivity in relation to the maternal function specifically in terms of Kiki Smith’s work. Smith not only deals with the abject subject matter of menstruation and excretion but a number of her works comment on the denigration of the female subject in relation to their bodily emissions.

Kristeva utilises the work of Mary Douglas on the distinction between the clean and unclean to examine expressions of the abject in social life. Douglas, in her book Purity and Danger, examines modern ideas of uncleanness and dirt and shows that what is considered dirty in any culture or society is a reflection of that society’s attempts to establish order:

Even jettisoned, the abject can still threaten the social, the Symbolic order. The Symbolic can maintain itself only by maintaining its borders.
(Oliver, 1993, pp. 56)

The Abject is referred to as an ‘impossible object’ which is still part of the subject - in effect an object the subject tries to expel but which is ineliminable. Materially the abject refers to tears, saliva, faeces, urine, vomit, mucous etc. The subject must expel these abjects to establish the ‘clean and proper’ body of oedipalisation. As the abject is articulated as an object which is still part of the subject that cannot be eliminated, it can also be understood in the context of the child’s transition from the Semiotic to the Symbolic as never being complete and always threatening to return:

[The Abject] signals the precarious grasp the subject has over its identity and bodily boundaries, the ever present possibility of sliding back into the corporeal abyss out of which it was formed.
(Grosz, 1992, pp. 198)

In section one, I discuss Smith's work in relation to the fragility of our bodily boundaries. Smith's work questions what has been suppressed in the subject by questioning the border between inside and outside. She does so by claiming that the "outside can't contain the inside" (Smith, 1990, pp. 114) and reflects this claim in a number of her works. As the abject respects no borders, the use of abject subject matter by Smith is a comment on the fragility of Symbolic law which requires what passes through bodily boundaries to be so patrolled.

Kristeva has described the mother's body as the "pivot of sociality" - because the maternal body encloses an other, she claims that it calls into question the boundary between culture and nature and therefore, subject and other. Kristeva uses maternity as a prime example of what she calls a "subject -in-process," thus questioning any notion of the unified subject. (Oliver, 1993, pp. 9) In relation to maternity, Kristeva also seeks an alternative to the abjection of the mother's body, or more specifically, the body of a woman. Instead, Kristeva suggests that the "maternal container" on which the child has been dependent, should be abjected, thus not reducing woman to the maternal function alone. In section one, I will discuss Kristeva's notion of maternity in conjunction with a number of Smith's works on reproduction and the female subject.

Section Two

As an extension of her theory of maternal abjection, Kristeva connects the notion of 'the cult of the Virgin.' The subject matter of the Virgin Mary features many times in Kiki Smith's work. In relation to Smith's religious subject matter, Marina Warner's Alone of All Her Sex (1976) which examines the origins and growth of the 'cult of the Virgin Mary,' offers an insight into why the Virgin stands as a social model of femininity. Kristeva has drawn on Warner's work in this area in writing "Stabat Mater."²

In "Stabat Mater," Kristeva reformulates the 'ethics' of maternity embodied in the Catholic image of the Virgin Mary and instead proposes a reconceived notion of maternity by offering an alternative "herethics" - essentially an heretical ethics. (Kristeva, 1987, pp. 330)

Smith, in her work over the years, has displayed a fascination with the Virgin Mary. Smith was raised as a Catholic. For years Catholic women have been confronted with the idea that the Virgin Mary is the ideal woman and that the virtues which are ascribed to her - purity, virginity, tenderness, devotion, selflessness etc. are somehow virtues that the female sex should aspire to.

In section two therefore, I will concentrate on Smith's work in relation to the Virgin Mary and other biblical characters which interest her. Smith's interest in biblical subject matter is a reflection of her own Catholic upbringing and a comment on the control which operates through the Catholic church, especially in relation to its female subjects. I discuss this in relation to Kristeva's analysis of the cult of the Virgin Mary, which she begins in "Stabat Mater."

Literature Review

Because Kristeva's project challenges Freud's and Lacan's account of the entry into subjectivity by postulating that the mother plays a more vital part in the formation of the subject, she has been a valuable theorist in relation to feminist writing. Writers such as Barbara Creed, Mary Russo, Elizabeth Grosz, and Judith Butler have explored her complex theories in relation to such diverse projects as film theory and body politics. For example, Barbara Creed's book The Monstrous Feminine explores Kristeva's construction of abjection in the human subject in relation to the notion of the 'border,' the mother-child relationship and the feminine body. She applies this to an analysis of the representation of woman as monstrous in the horror film and as cultural critique, her theories are useful in relation to a reading of Smith's art.

Mary Russo's writing on "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," indexes Kristeva's project and explores the political dimension afforded by the "grotesque body" as a central concern of feminism.³ The attributes Russo ascribes to the "grotesque body" are very evident in the work of Kiki Smith. Smith has dealt with the body in a most visceral way, representing it through its bodily fluids, its skin, its organs and primarily its materiality.

More specifically, Kelly Oliver and Toril Moi have critiqued Kristeva's writing, and all its complexity in works such as Reading Kristeva, (Oliver, 1993), The Portable Kristeva, (Oliver, 1997) and The Kristeva Reader, (Moi, 1986). Speaking of the complexity of Kristeva's project, Kelly Oliver observes:

... Kristeva's writing is full of contradictions. But hers is not a discourse that strictly adheres to the logic of noncontradiction. Rather, hers is a discourse that breaks the law of noncontradiction upon which traditional notions of identity are built. Kristeva's writing challenges traditional notions of identity. This is what opens up the possibility of interpretation.
(Oliver, 1993, pp. 1)

It is the possibility of interpretation that Kristeva's project presents that leads me to an investigation of that very project in relation to the artistic practices of Kiki Smith. Kristeva's theories of abjection provides us with an important theoretical framework for analysing Smith's work and allows us to begin to understand why on the one hand her work can be fascinating while on the other it can elicit feelings of repulsion. Smith's work has been thus described:

The work can be experienced as emotional objects, attempts at making real the feelings that are primal, pre-oedipal and pre-genital. There is both a repulsion and attraction.
(Stein, 1992, pp. 89)

Kiki Smith's work focuses on the body and questions how it is represented and in relation to Kristeva, this thesis discusses what I see as an aim of both of their projects, that is an investigation into the notion of identity. The thesis also draws on an interview which I conducted with Smith in January 1998.

SECTION ONE

The Power of Horror:

Abjection in the Projects of Julia Kristeva and Kiki Smith

In Powers of Horror (1980) Kristeva begins to formulate her analysis of the notion of abjection. Kristeva defines the abject not as what is essentially grotesque or unclean, but rather what “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.” (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 232) The abject, as a borderline phenomenon, is both fascinating and repulsive. Kristeva also proposes that the abject is identified with the maternal body because the boundary between the mother and child, especially in pregnancy is not easily defined. According to Kristeva the child must abject the mother in order to separate from her - in order to be weaned it must find the maternal body both fascinating and repulsive. Kristeva challenges Lacan’s version of the entry into subjectivity by refuting that the maternal body is the first object. Instead, she posits, the maternal body is abject - neither object nor non-object - before it becomes an object for the infant and therefore subjectivity is a process that starts long before Lacan’s Mirror Stage.

In drawing a distinction between the maternal authority (Semiotic) and the paternal Symbolic law, Kristeva argues that it is the function of defilement rites, particularly those relating to menstrual and excremental substances which draw the boundary between the two. Therefore, she argues, these “*two* defilements stem from the maternal and/or the feminine.” (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 261) Menstrual blood signifies sexual difference while excrement is associated with maternal authority in relation to sphincter training.

Smith represents the bodily processes of excretion and menstruation and thereby questions traditional notions of feminine purity, as proscribed by the Symbolic order. She attempts to reclaim the female form through representation and to explore the controlling influences which determines how it appears and is perceived by both the individual and society. She achieves this by subverting the notion of 'the clean and proper body' in her use of abject subject matter. Smith herself talks about that which we put aside in order to enter the Symbolic order:

*What about the part [sic] that dangle loose; trail behind; your hair holds on you the
shit and the pee and the chafed skin; the milk and the cum; the placenta.*
(Smith, 1992, pp. 39)

Tale (1992) (Fig. 1) one of the most visceral of Smith's sculptures deals with the subject of bodily excretion. A red wax female figure on all fours crawls away from a trail of excrement which is still attached to her anus. She half looks back as if in hope that it will disappear. But it remains very much part of her and reminds her of her corporeality, reminds her of what she has attempted to abject in order to become a subject. But this abjection is never complete, the border between inside and outside not so fixed. The viewer, in looking at this piece may feel disgust for the exact same reasons, but a sense of fascination, on beholding this abject figure, can also be experienced, along with the disgust. It is a reminder of our baser instincts which have been suppressed to attain the 'clean and proper body' of the Symbolic order.

Work such as **Train** (1993) (Fig. 2) subverts the notion of the 'clean and proper body' by representing a female figure with a trail of red beads descending from her vulva, connoting menstrual blood. The white wax used to model this life size figure suggests a purity or virginity that might be ascribed to the female. The beads on the contrary are red, a colour not only associated with blood but with lack of female purity (scarlet woman etc.). Furthermore, the use of beads, considered a "low art" material and thus lacking in purity further signifies the dialectic between it and the purity of wax which is considered a "high art" material. The female figure looks back at the trail of blood behind her as if ashamed of this emission from herself. She is a vulnerable, half-crouching figure who seems degraded by her own bodily fluids. This aspect of **Train** speaks of the taboo status of menstrual



Figure 1.
TALE (1992)
Wax, Papier-mâché

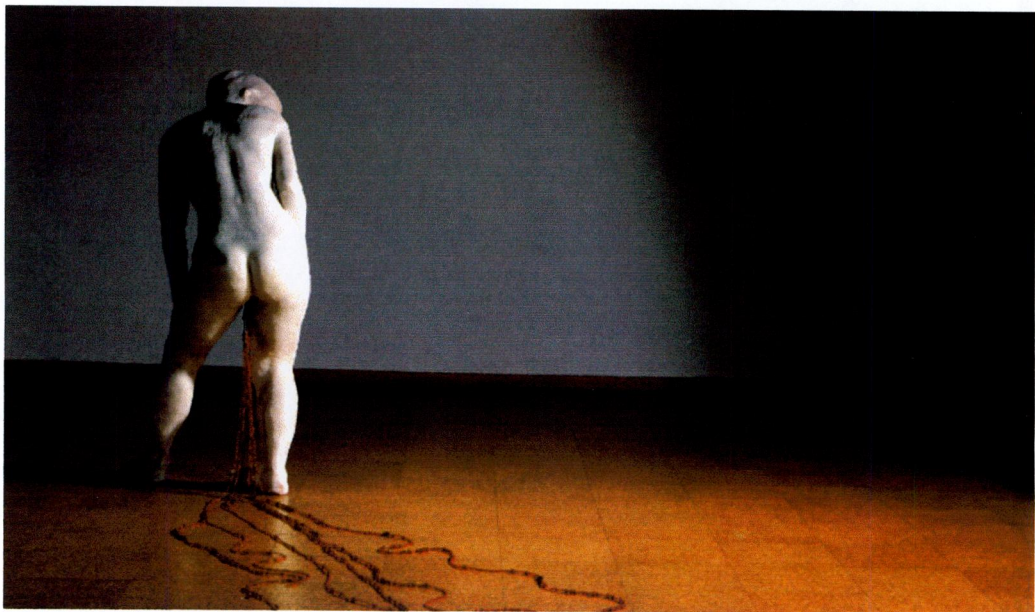


Figure 2.
TRAIN (1993)
Wax with Beads

blood in our society and the denigration of the female in association with their emission of menstrual blood. Kristeva postulates in Powers of Horror that blood has another significance:

.. blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection.
(Creed, 1993, pp. 59)

As such, the abject status of women's blood points to the fertile nature of the female body and connects her closer to the natural world. Therefore, menstrual blood is deemed abject and the taboo status that is bestowed upon it is designed to subordinate maternal power.

Smith, like Kristeva, is very much concerned with the denigration of the female in our society. Kristeva attributes women's oppression to what she calls "misplaced abjection" (Oliver, 1993, pp. 6) which concerns the construction of the individual identity against the exclusion of the abject maternal body and more broadly speaking the construction of a cultural identity against the exclusion of maternity and the feminine. (Oliver, 1997, pp. 226) A large section of Smith's work concerns this denigration of the female. Smith herself speaks about the experience of being female in our culture:

A lot of it is about living through the shame of being female in public. There's an enormous amount of shame attached to your gender; nothing speaks to your experience in the culture. It seems important for me to hang out there with my experience of being a girl-child, to see if I could live through that in public.
(Ahern, 1990, pp.26)

Smith articulates these sentiments in a number of her works. She not only deals with those things that are linked to female shame, menstruation etc. but also depicts the vulnerability that is attached to living through the experience of being female. **Bloodpool**, (1992) (Fig. 3) a red bronze female figure curled up in a foetal position with her spine exposed, speaks of this vulnerability.⁵ The red colouring suggests blood but what type of blood? Possibly menstrual, perhaps even foetal - the openendedness of her work allows several readings. The figure looks as if it is protecting itself from its hostile surroundings. This might suggest, in light of her remarks about being female in public that the figure is protecting itself from the socially proscribed shame associated with her menstruating body.



Figure 3.
BLOODPOOL (1992)
Painted Bronze



THE JAW OF THE
HUMAN SPECIES
IN THE
EVOLUTION OF THE
HUMAN SPECIES

Kristeva speaks of the Semiotic and its abject elements in terms of how it must be renounced in order that the child might acquire a stable social or Symbolic position as a unified subject. But this process of renunciation is never complete as the Semiotic is incompletely contained by the Symbolic and always threatens to return and disrupt the stability of the Symbolic order. Smith speaks of this lack of containment in relation to the body regarding a number of her 'shelf' works:

I made some pieces on shelves, where the shelf was something trying to contain the body, and the body refused to be contained. It was always having bloody noses or its bosoms were falling down, or tears were coming out of the eyes, or it had earaches, or the guts were falling out. It was always having these ways where the body wouldn't be contained.
(Gould, 1992, pp. 69)

Smith's apparent concern that the 'outside can't contain the inside' (Smith, 1990, pp. 114) is reflected in Kristeva's project in her claim that the Semiotic element is never completely contained within the Symbolic order. Smith's shelf works and other works which explore the notion of the border between the inside and outside speak of the Semiotic element returning from its suppression by the Symbolic as it speaks of the subject in terms of a refusal to be contained.

Untitled (1991) (Fig. 4) and **Untitled** (Bloody Nose) (Fig. 5), two paper sculptures of torsos, express Smith's concern with containment. In **Untitled** (1991), a female torso is placed on a shelf with her breasts falling over the edge, refusing to be confined. This piece may be read in terms of the Semiotic element escaping from its confinement within the Symbolic order where the unhemmed breasts not only connote an uncontrolled female sexuality but also constitute the nurturing breast of the mother, a primary object associated with the pre-oedipal Semiotic stage, thus echoing Kristeva's claims that the "Semiotic chora is associated with the maternal body because the infant's drives are structured around the mother's body." (Oliver, 1997, pp. 24)

Untitled (Bloody Nose) is another torso on a shelf, this time with a red trail, signifying blood, falling from the nose. The bodily emissions, testament to the subject's corporeality, express the body's refusal to be contained and unified. By liberating these body parts or bodily emissions, Smith is implying how our "bodies are basically stolen from us" (Isaak,



Figure 4.
UNTITLED (1991)
Paper and Wood

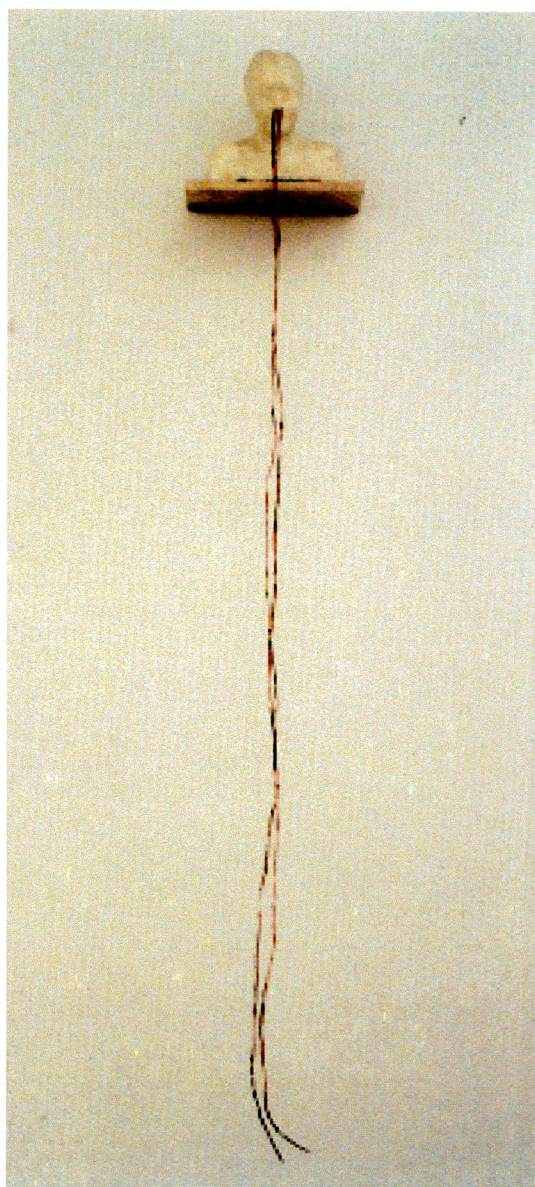


Figure 5.
UNTITLED (Bloody Nose) (1991)
Gampi Paper and Ink



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NEW YORK



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1995, pp. 22) through proscription by religion or government. These sculptures speak of and question the control which operates on the body in our culture. Smith herself discusses these sculptures in relation to questions of how the body is controlled:

It seems like a nice metaphor .. a way to think about the social .. that people lose control despite the many agendas of different ideologies in society which are trying to control the body(ies) .. medicine, religion, law, etc. Just thinking about control .. who has control of the body? does the body have control of itself? do you?
(Winters, 1990, pp. 127)

Smith also questions what has been suppressed in the subject by questioning the border between inside and outside. For five years, Smith worked and fashioned the internal organs of the body in order to allow what is normally hidden to be seen. This earlier work was more concerned with representations of the internal body and its functions of ingestion, nutrition and elimination - her bodies are represented in their most abject sense. The internal organs are shared by everyone and in a sense are anonymous, without a prescribed social conditioning that is associated with the appearance of the exterior body. The internal organs can be seen as:

.. equalizers, without political affiliation, race, creed or sexuality. In addition, the inside of the body serves as a personal sanctuary and refuge, which the artist excavates, reveals and demystifies.
(Little, 1992, pp. 84)

Therefore, her representations of the internal body, such as **Zweite Auswahl** (Second Choice) (1987) (Fig. 6) are attempts to demystify the construction and portrayal of the body in western society. They appear as neutral and without any given gender. Their representation allows an antithesis of the external body which has to negotiate a social space; a space which can be associated with repression and marginalisation.

Smith has referred to the shift she made in the 1980s to examine the exterior body as being "very scary" (Little, 1993, pp. 84). Her earlier representations of the internal body can be seen in the context of a return to the Semiotic maternal body where a sense of 'jouissance' exists and allows a freer expression, unmediated by any social restraints. Her change of direction and the reasons she found it so daunting are documented well by David Little in 1992:



Figure 6.
ZWEITE AUSWAHL (SECOND CHOICE) (1987)
Ceramic and Bronze



Like a child expelled from the womb, Smith was more acutely exposed to fixed linguistic, social and representational structures and to the weight of a resolute historical tradition associated with representations of the external body.
(Little, 1993, pp. 84)

Kiki Smith was aware of the difficulties of any representation of the body, especially of the female body. Despite her reservations, Smith's work underwent the transition from inside to outside the body. And in order to allay any fears of possible misrepresentation, she continued to depict the body in its abject sense. The use of the grotesque body as a representation is unlikely to provoke an erotic reading but rather calls into question why these bodies have been constructed as inherently disgusting and designates them "immune from incorporation into the objectifying gaze." (Wolff, 1990, pp. 128) She speaks herself of moving from fragmented representations of internal organs and systems to representations of the body as a whole on the outside and finally, what she considers as a continuation of both:

Slowly, I went .. to organs, then to systems, and then, at one point, I started thinking of skin as a system, and then I moved from the outside of the body to making figures. Now I am moving back and forth through the skin, going from internal portraiture to making new combinations of internal and external figures.
(Gould, 1992, pp. 66)

Smith's representations of both the inside and outside can be read in terms of Kristeva's notion of the boundary in relation to abjection.

The abject is undecidedly inside and outside the body ... it is what disturbs identity, system and order, disrupting the social boundaries demanded by the symbolic. It respects no definite positions, or rules, boundaries, or socially imposed limits.
(Gross, 1990, pp. 90)

Smith's use of abject subject matter speaks of the border between inside and outside. The borders of our body, specifically the orifices of the body are the points where we guard against any emission of bodily fluids or excretions. Any leakage through these bodily boundaries speaks of the fragility of the border between the inside and outside, between the Semiotic and Symbolic. Kristeva utilises the work of Mary Douglas, the cultural anthropologist, on the distinction between the clean and unclean to examine expressions of the abject in social life. Douglas' Purity and Danger, examines modern ideas of uncleanness and dirt and shows that what is considered dirty in any culture or society is a

reflection of that society's attempts to establish order. Douglas, sees the body as:

A model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures.
(Douglas, 1966, pp. 115)

Smith, likewise, speaks of the fragility of the boundaries between the inside and outside of the body as being reflective of everyday existence:

You always have these boundaries in your daily life, but in your physical life as well. Skin is the surface, or boundary line, of the body's limit. The skin is actually this very porous membrane, so on a microscopic level you get into the question of what's inside and what's outside. Things are going through you all the time ... you just have an illusion of a wall between your insides and the outside.
(Internet, 1997, pp. 1)

Smith uses cast paper to represent the fragility of skin and its failure as "demarcation and frontier." (Ross, 1996, pp. 36) She has expressed a fascination with paper's resemblance to skin and says she "would just as easily use some other material, but [she] like[s] the quality of fragility." (Internet, 1997, pp. 1) It is its inherent fragility as a quality which befits her representations of skin as something which can't operate successfully as a border between inside and outside.

In **Untitled** (Skin) (1992), the skin is hung on the wall, disassociated from the body, separated as a system which is not performing its normal function of protection, or of control of the discharge of bodily fluids. And because the body is without its 'border' of skin, it is open, vulnerable, not as easily defined, but more so transgressive and unstable. Gone is the demarcation between inside and outside, between what can be contained and controlled and what has become open and threatening - threatening like the Semiotic element threatens the Symbolic order. Smith exposes the unrepresented body, the body behind the skin, the covering, the frontier, the very border which controls what passes to and from our bodies. By doing so, she metaphorically exposes the controlling influences which operate on the body in our culture. The skin, in Smith's work doesn't act as a filter between culture and nature but instead exposes the Cartesian duality of the two.

Elizabeth Gross discusses Kristeva's project as similarly being concerned with exploring the dualism between inside and outside in an attempt to challenge our Cartesian tradition:

In place of the mind/body dichotomy, the fundamental connectedness of the mind to the body, the creation of a psychical 'interior' for the body's object-like status, the mapping of the body's interior on its exterior and its exterior on its interior, all need to be theorized. Kristeva's conception of the body's role in psychical development and in signification provides a major .. contribution to such an understanding. Only if the body's psychical interior is projected outwards, and its material externality is interjected as necessary conditions of subjectivity, can the dualism of our Cartesian heritage be challenged.
(Gross, 1990, pp. 82)

In Reading Kristeva, Oliver discusses Kristeva's postulation that the mother's body is the "pivot of sociality," "at once the guarantee and a threat to its stability," and as such a hinge between nature and culture. (Oliver, 1993, pp. 66) Kristeva's use of maternity as a model is significant in that it breaks down the borders between subject and other as well as nature and culture and therefore questions the notion of a unified subject. Because in pregnancy, the maternal body encloses an other, maternity "becomes a prime example of what [Kristeva] calls a 'subject-in-process'." Oliver, in reading Kristeva's work states:

With maternity it is impossible to distinguish between subject and object without engaging in an arbitrary categorization. Kristeva analyses maternity in order to suggest that all distinctions between subject and objects, all identifications of unified subjects, are arbitrary.
(Oliver, 1993, pp. 9)

Because pregnancy calls into question the distinction between subject and object, it can be seen as a borderline phenomenon. The maternal body is abject because "the uncertain boundary between maternal body and infant provides the primary experience of both horror and fascination." (Oliver, 1997, pp. 225) The maternal body is also seen as abject because, unlike the clean and proper body of the Symbolic order, it acknowledges its "debt to nature." (Creed, 1993, pp. 11) The womb specifically, observes Creed, represents the utmost in abjection because from it a new life form will pass from inside to outside bearing "traces of its contamination - blood, afterbirth, faeces." (Creed, 1993, pp. 49)

Kiki Smith has explored the themes of pregnancy and birth in a number of her works. An **Untitled** paper sculpture (Fig. 7) from 1988 expresses both the borderline condition of

the maternal body as well as its abject status. The bottom half of a female body is suspended from the ceiling and is attached by an umbilical cord to a baby who dangles between her legs. This sculpture can be read in terms of the act of birth and its abject status. It can also be considered in terms of the links between the maternal body and the infant; and, in light of Kristeva's claims that the maternal body is abject because it acknowledges its debt to nature, this sculpture illustrates that visceral reality.

The symbolic order constructs the maternal body as abject in order to facilitate the separation of mother and infant, and this in turn guarantees its power and legitimacy. But it does this at the expense of the denigration of the female. Kristeva's project attempts to unravel the oppression of the female, ultimately in relation to discourses on motherhood and what she calls 'misplaced abjection.' Kristeva seeks an alternative to the abjection of the mother by the child in order that it might separate from her. She does this by suggesting that the child must not abject the mother as the body of a woman, but instead to abject the "maternal container" on which it has been dependent. (Oliver, 1993, pp. 6) Quite strikingly, one of Smith's sculptures expresses, whether intentionally or not, this very notion of Kristeva's. **Trough** (1990), (Fig 8), an open plaster cast of a reclining pregnant figure alludes to the maternal body as an empty container or vessel which seems to have been cast aside, like an abandoned chrysalis from which the infant has taken flight.

Trough also evokes the absent body of the mother or her absent subjectivity in the face of her abjection - because she is abjected by the requirements of Symbolic law, her experience is not articulated within that very law. Smith often refers to the body as an "open vessel" and in her work "the body is [often] thematized through absence." (Fuchs, 1994, pp. 20) For her the openness of many of her sculptures speak of self-empowerment that the viewer might experience in the face of these works:

...if you just make things that are kind of open, just something plain ... then everybody adds their own life to it, everybody knows their relationship to it [it's] about giving space so that other people can enter.
(Gould, 1992, pp. 68)

This self-empowerment that Smith refers to begins to enable a reclamation of the absent body, specifically the absent female body in the face of its appropriation by the Symbolic



Figure 7.
UNTITLED (1988)
Paper

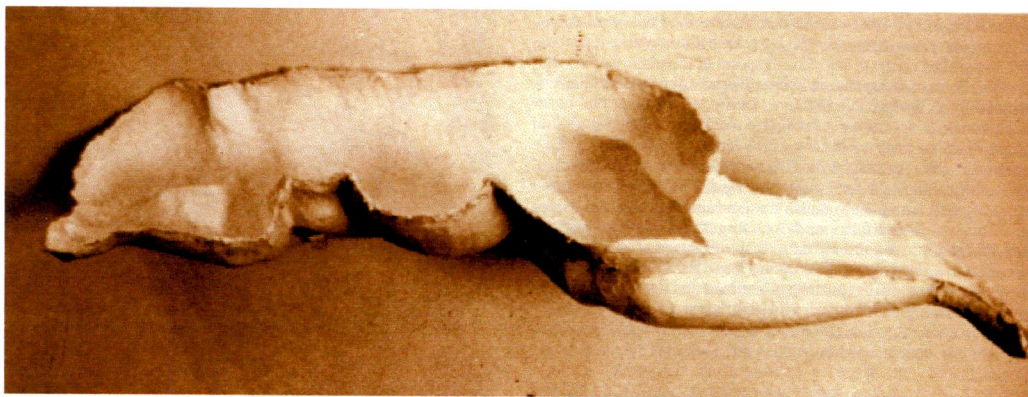


Figure 8.
TROUGH (1990)
Plaster

order. Speaking about Smith's use of the absent body in relation to what she has referred to as the "pregnant but empty" womb, Elizabeth Janus and Paolo Colombo observe in their catalogue essay:

The emptiness suggests both a readiness to be filled with life and the drama of an empty receptacle .. an opposition that is crucial to an understanding of the womb's value in our society. Whereas the penis always retains its potency in a phallogentric culture, the womb's power comes solely from its fullness or potential to be filled ... the womb is deemed worthless as an empty vessel.
(Colombo & Janus, 1990, pp. 142)

To consider the womb worthless as an empty vessel is to reduce woman to her reproductive capacities. Smith's use of the maternal body, in **Trough** symbolises the ongoing struggle for women's reproductive rights. As Oliver has pointed out, Kristeva argues that to reduce woman to her reproductive function or to to constrict her subjectivity to maternity alone is "not only detrimental to women, but since the first relation is with the mother, to all human relations." (Oliver, 1993, pp.6) Kiki Smith, likewise, expresses a concern for the vilification of the female and the body which she feels are deemed "lower on the hierarchical scale" and because of this "everybody suffers in society because they don't know where they are." (Winters, 1990, pp. 128)

Smith's objective, "to make things physical," to speak of the absent body of the mother and ultimately of the female in our society is reflected in Kristeva's project of conceiving an alternative theory of the formation of the subject, based on her notion of abjection. Kristeva's model calls for the woman's body, her physical body replete with appetites and desires would be allowed a positive identity while the maternal 'container' would be the only aspect of the mother which faces abjection.

SECTION TWO

"Stabat Mater:"

Julia Kristeva and Kiki Smith on the Cult of the Virgin Mary

Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater," published in 1977, opens with the words "Stabat mater dolorosa," "Stood the mother full of grief," - part of the Latin hymn of the same name. The text of this influential work is split into two columns - one describes Kristeva's own experiences of birth in a free and openly poetic way while in the other, she writes theoretically on the need to reconceive maternity. Kristeva suggests that we need a discourse of maternity which will allow for "a new understanding of the mother's body; the physical and psychological suffering of childbirth and of the need to raise the child in accordance with the Law." (Moi, 1986, pp. 161) Western images of maternity, especially what she calls the "cult of the Virgin Mary," do not allow for the mother to be represented as a speaking social being. In writing "Stabat Mater," Kristeva draws on the work of Marina Warner in Alone of all her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary. Religious discourses uphold the cult of the Virgin Mary and this can be seen especially through the teachings of the Catholic church. Warner explains the origins and growth of the cult of the Virgin and examines its moral and social implications:

Although the ancient prejudice is of course heartily denied in ecclesiastical circles now, it continues to underpin the Christian ideal of woman. The legends of the Bible are translated into ethics; myths become morals; stories precepts. Just as the virgin birth provided an argument for virginity, so the creation of the first Eve and the wondering acceptance of her successor to the Annunciation corroborated a social order that deemed women underlings.
(Warner, 1985, pp. 179)

Kristeva believes that the image of the Virgin covers up tensions between the maternal (or Semiotic) and the Symbolic - although she claims that while the myth of the Virgin can control the Semiotic, it cannot contain it. The Virgin birth does away with the 'primal

scene' and the jouissance of the mother and, in doing so, eliminates the threat of a return to the Semiotic. This allows for a more stable Symbolic order:

The Mother is a threat to the Symbolic order .. her jouissance threatens to make her a subject rather than the other against which man becomes a subject. Man returns the Semiotic threat to the maternal body through the cult of the virgin. The maternal body is allowed joy in only pain. Her body has only ear, milk and tears .. the sexed body is replaced by the 'ears of understanding,' the Virgin Mary of the catholic church.

(Oliver, 1993, pp. 50-51)

Kristeva argues that Christian women's identification with the Virgin Mary is essentially masochistic because it denies an identification with the Semiotic maternal body. Identification with the Virgin instead associates Christian women with the ideal, and therefore paternally Symbolic, mother. Kristeva recognises in "Stabat Mater" that the myth of the Virgin can no longer stand as a model of femininity for 20th century women:

While that clever balanced architecture today appears to be crumbling, one is led to ask the following: what are the aspects of the feminine psyche for which that representation of motherhood does not provide a solution or else provides one that is felt as too coercive by twentieth century women?

(Kristeva, 1987, pp. 237)

In "Stabat Mater" Kristeva presents a manifesto of sorts that outlines a reconceived notion of maternity. Alternative to the ethics translated from the Bible, she presents an alternative discourse on motherhood and seeks to provide both women and men with what she calls an heretical ethics, "herethics;" an ethics that does not reduce women to "milk and tears." (Oliver, 1997, pp. 297)

The "Cult of the Virgin Mary" is a preoccupation of Kiki Smith also. The subject matter of the Virgin Mary and other biblical characters features many times in Smith's work. She is very much concerned that "the Virgin Mary got robbed of her sexuality." (Isaak, 1995, pp. 25) The Virgin, for Smith, pays a heavy price for her compassion and Smith feels anger at this; not only for the Virgin, but for Catholic women who have to aspire to her chaste example:

..on one hand, she has to be this open and compassionate creature and that costs a lot and there's a kind of anger involved. I'm angry because I don't want to have that as my image and I don't know if I can adhere to it.

(Jackson, 1998, pp. 36)

In a full size figure called **Virgin Mary** (1992) (Fig. 9) she fashions the body of the Virgin without skin showing the distribution of muscles of the body. The figure's arms are outstretched which, along with the fact that she has no skin, deems her compassionate but also exposed and vulnerable. At the same time, the exposed muscles and veins on this wax figure testify to the Virgin's carnality and materiality. In conversation with Claudia Gould in June 1992, Kiki Smith talks of Christianity as "a body-hating cult - it hates things that are physical." (Gould, 1992, pp. 72) This sculpture of the Virgin Mary acknowledges her body as an actual, physical body and thereby subverts the notion of her 'absent body.' Smith refers to this version of the Virgin as "just meat - because she's the vehicle of the word made flesh ... the flesh body of God, but her sexuality gets lost." (Jackson, 1998, pp. 36) Kristeva, in "Stabat Mater" also refers to the Virgin in terms of the flesh and thereby reintroduces the Semiotic maternal body which has been repressed in the Catholic discourse of maternity:

*Let a body venture at last out of its shelter, take a chance with meaning under a veil of words. WORD FLESH.
(Kristeva, 1987, pp. 309)*

Another sculpture of the **Virgin Mary** this time from 1990, speaks too of the absent body of the Virgin Mary. It consists of a torso, made of paper which hangs from the ceiling. It is headless, but its arms extend from the body similarly to Smith's wax version of the Virgin. From the torso, the Virgin's entrails tumble onto the floor. Smith speaks of the vulnerability of the Virgin Mary which is evident in her supplicated, open armed stance:

*The Virgin Mary always extends her arms, making the body vulnerable. Vulnerable and compassionate, but to be vulnerable is to lose insight. It makes you exposed. For me, to be that vulnerable, I think you could lose all your insides, lose yourself.
(Gould, 1992, pp. 71)*

The Virgin Mary sculpture, fashioned in wax (1992) is an altogether more ambivalent piece in terms of expressing the Virgin's vulnerability. Its visceral nature in terms of its carnal appearance seems contradicted by her open armed welcoming gesture. Accordingly, any thought of an embrace from her would probably evoke feelings of repulsion. Her stance therefore represents not only what is welcoming but also what is threatening. This piece is a prime example of Smith's use of paradoxical elements in her work. Paradoxical because

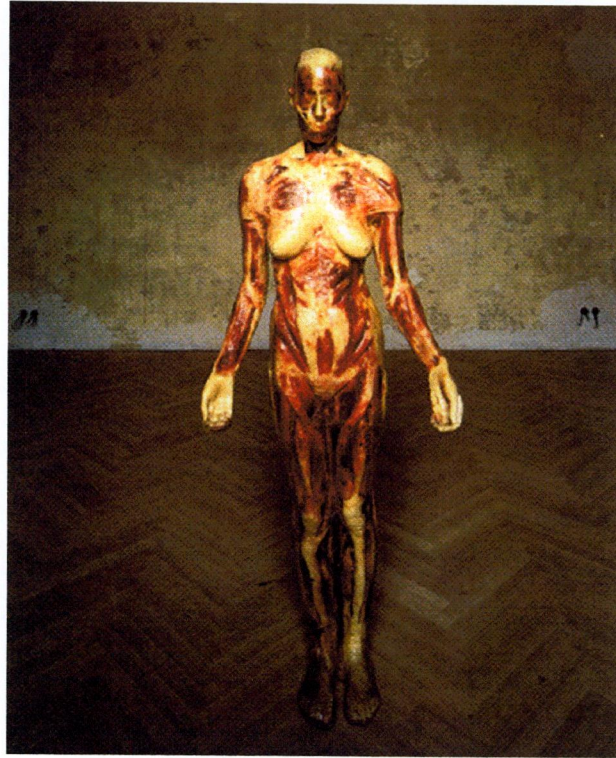


Figure 9.
VIRGIN MARY (1992)
Coloured Wax

they are essentially abject - both attractive and repulsive at the same time. This apparent ambivalence could point to the Virgin Mary's impossible position - as mother of the Catholic church and at the same time, robbed of her sex. In "Stabat Mater", Kristeva says that the image of the Virgin Mary is no longer seen as an "adequate model of maternity; with the Virgin, the maternal body is reduced to silence." (Oliver, 1997, pp. 296)

This sculpture also reiterates Smith's concerns regarding the border between inside and outside the body. The Virgin is without skin, and similar to work such as **Skin** (1992), this is a comment on the fragility of demarcation and control that the Symbolic order tries to exercise - specifically this time regarding religious discourse.

Kiki Smith's comments on religious discourse extend to other biblical characters other than the Virgin Mary. Works such as **Lilith** (1994) (Fig. 10), **Lot's Wife** (1992) (Fig. 11) and **Mary Magdalene** (1994) (Fig. 12) speak of these biblical characters in terms of a transgressive identity. Smith's aim in representing these women from the Bible is to comment on the control which operates in the "eternally warring arena of purity, lust and shame" that epitomises the Christian view of the body, especially the female body. (Stapen, 1994, pp. 3) Furthermore, Smith sees in all these characters, the possibility of representing a more sexually defiant female model than is possible with any representation of the Virgin Mary.

The depiction of **Lilith**, traditionally the first wife of Adam who rebelled against his authority over her, is especially interesting because, as a subversive character, she is essentially abjected from the Bible.⁵ Lilith could also be referred to as the first feminist in view of her insistence on equal status to Adam as they had been created at the same time. Adam, it seems, demanded that she lie under him in consummating the sexual act but Lilith refused and accepted no such subordinate position. When Adam tried to force her, she fled to the shores of the Red Sea where she fulfilled her sexual fantasies with demons. (Phillips, 1984, pp. 39) Lilith, though practically removed from Scripture, has, by association, tainted Eve's character and provided her with a 'shadow side' that has stood as confirmation of her inherently evil nature. (Phillips, 1984, pp. 51)



Figure 10.
LILITH (1994)
Bronze with Beads

Smith's bronze sculpture of **Lilith** portrays her clinging to the wall, upside down, poised and ready to attack in order to defend her position.⁶ Her glass eyes survey her surroundings, as if expecting her self directed fate to be threatened. She clings to the wall as defiantly as she clings to her independence. Lilith's animalistic characteristics are apparent in this piece and Smith has compared her to "a fly - somehow defying gravity." (Jackson, 1998, pp. 37) As such, Lilith can also be seen as an abject figure in light of how Kristeva associates the abject and the animalistic:

The abject confronts us, on the one hand , with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.

(Kristeva, 1982, pp. 239)

Interestingly, the myth of Lilith tells of her eternal demonic existence after her escape from Adam. It is said that she continues to roam nightly as an erotic figure, snatching newborn children (particularly males) and is responsible for the erotic dreams of men by her violation of their sleeping bodies.

Lot's Wife, a character from the Old Testament whose "lusting for the flesh pots and then turning into a pillar of salt" (Isaak, 1995, pp. 25) is interpreted by Smith as a return to her physicality. Smith, again, admires her as a insurgent individual who "disobeys her husband and looks back to the body and the past and her own people." (Jackson, 1998, pp. 37) Smith's admiration is such that she makes a dedication in her "Silent Work" exhibition to Lot's Wife. This wax figure squats with her head lowered as she passes a stream of urine, represented by a trail of yellow glass beads. As part of her "Silent Work" exhibition, Smith makes a notebook entry about this sculpture which sums up her intentions for the work:

She looks back to the physical .. returns to the flesh .. Disobedient .. defiant ..insistent .. present. She's the physical returning to the flesh .. celebration.

(Smith, 1992, pp. 21)

Not unlike **Train**, her sculpture of a woman menstruating, **Lot's Wife** depicts the body of a woman in a most visceral and physical way. By doing so, Smith returns her to a more 'mortal' reality, far removed from her representation as a biblical character whose fate

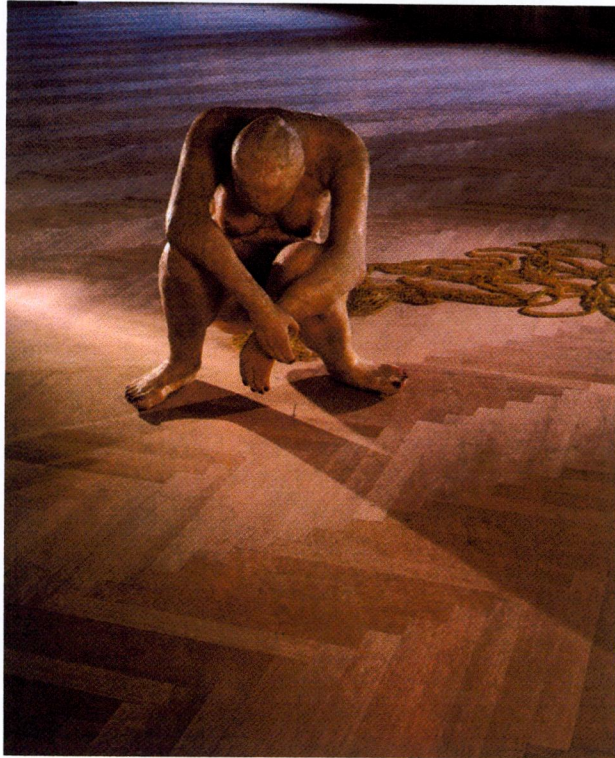


Figure 11.
LOT'S WIFE (1992)
Wax and Beads

2000



is set in place as a parable to suppress any desire for the flesh.

The use of cautionary tales of Mary Magdalene's life, told to suppress the sexuality of young girls became a starting point for another biblical sculpture of Smith's. **Mary Magdalene** (1994), a bronze female figure, covered in hair who drags a broken chain behind her, attests to a now wild element having escaped from some form of captivity.⁷ Like Lilith, Mary Magdalene seems to have evaded incarceration from the confines of proscribed religion and has found another path, if not a somewhat lonely one, to carve out for herself. Smith's version of Mary Magdalene, is inspired by German folk tales which portray her as a wild woman who has a hermit like existence having gone alone to the French mountains to "atone for her vanity." Accordingly, Smith represents her "with a chain, like a dancing bear." (Jackson, 1998, pp. 37) Smith, quoting Emily Brontë, in a notebook entry, could be referring to Mary Magdalene's "soul to feel the flesh and the flesh to feel the chain." (Smith, 1992, pp. 59)

This sculpture was originally a site specific work made for a park in Dusseldorf where the only religious sculpture of the Virgin Mary exists. In the original installation, Smith intended that "these two impossible versions of being female" (Jackson, 1998, pp. 37) should speak to each other, so she made the Mary Magdalene to look up at the Virgin Mary as if to communicate with her.

Ultimately, Kiki Smith's portrayal of the Virgin Mary and other biblical characters are an attempt to free these figures from the constraints and dogma of the Catholic ethos. She does this by placing her biblical subjects in their most abject or defiant positions. Similarly to Kristeva, Smith is aware that the Virgin Mary is an historical construction that has been put in place as a model for Catholic women. As such, she sees "it has inherent in it the possibility for manipulation and change." (Jackson, 1998, pp. 37) Her desire that the biblical characters which she represents might be somehow returned to a more material existence is reflected in her views on the Catholic religion:

I don't like dogma but I like the physical and psychological spaces created, places for meditation and introspection. I'd like ... [a] non-denominational chapel - but with blood and guts.
(Boodro, 1994, pp. 130)



Figure 12.
MARY MAGDALENE (1994)
Silicon Bronze and Forged Steel



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CONCLUSION

The artistic practices of Kiki Smith in relation to Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection, maternal subjectivity and the 'cult of the Virgin Mary' have been the subject of this thesis. Smith variously has used the abject to draw attention to the vulnerability of the female subject in relation to the bodily functions of menstruation and excretion and has thus questioned the taboo status connected to same. Smith, like Kristeva, has also questioned the fragility of the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the body and thus metaphorically exposes the controlling influences which operate on the body in our culture and allows an interrogation of our Cartesian heritage regarding the separation of mind and body. Smith's explorations of the maternal subject and pregnancy not only comment on the control that operates regarding women's rights over their own bodies and reproduction but also Smith's "ambivalence towards motherhood and to what that means socially - that traditionally, at a certain point, women are expected to reproduce." (Jackson, 1998, pp. 34)

Smith's use of the Virgin Mary and other biblical characters as the subject matter for a number of sculptures has given rise to representations of these characters as defiant and transgressive. Their representation can be seen as some form of catharsis for Smith who was raised Catholic and feels that the church continues to operate some kind of control in terms of her psychological life. (Jackson, 1998, pp. 36) Smith is angry that the Virgin Mary stands as a role model for Catholic women but, understanding the 'cult of the Virgin Mary' as an historical construct, has used that fact to manipulate and change the Virgin's portrayal as the compassionate mother of the Catholic church to a more transgressive representation as an abject and impossible figure, robbed of her sexuality. Smith has represented her other biblical characters as being more sexually transgressive and, as such, celebrates their insurgent nature.

Smith more than often represents the bodies of women which ultimately have to do with her own socialisation as a female. Some of these works, specifically **Bloodpool**, have been described as “reductive images [which] represent “women as victim.” (Kubicki, 1995, pp. 33). Smith refutes this by saying:

I think that comes from a more didactic reading and not from people's lives. I think things do happen to you in your life that do leave marks on you and to acknowledge that seems a lot better - not to romanticise it particularly but just to acknowledge it as a possibility in your life.
(Jackson, 1998, pp. 30)

The use of abject subject matter in itself has been questioned by critics such as Frazer Ward in his essay “Abject Lessons.” Ward challenges whether the abject can actually be represented or if, in fact, it is in danger of re-inscribing a certain pro-censorship (Ward, 1994, pp. 49). He suggests that if the viewer is in a position of power, specifically part of government, that any representation of abject elements will not question what is being controlled in terms of the Symbolic order but instead will confirm that these elements are repulsive. This will have the affect of going against the grain of any intended reading. (Ward, 1994, pp. 48)

Smith sees things differently. In an interview I conducted with her she stated that her use of abject elements is an “attempt at defiance” (Jackson, 1998, pp. 31) and when asked about any problems associated with their representation she sees more the possibilities rather than the difficulties:

It always seemed like a way out because it's always what's unspoken - it's what is teaming in your life - active and at the same point rejected in terms of representation. It's what's ignored socially and it has this enormous power in terms of one's own life ... so it is always one of the functions of art to speak or speaking to what's unspoken.
(Jackson, 1998, pp. 31)

Furthermore, Smith's representation of that ‘unspoken’ portion of our lives is an attempt to articulate “that which art calls absent.” (Jackson, 1998, pp. 32) She feels that the absence of any representation of the abject is more detrimental than any problems that might be associated with its representation:

... to me, it's much more empowering to show it than it is to hide it. In a certain sense, it loses power in showing. In any kind of abusive situation, you see that it's only because things are unspoken that they have power ... and it's only through the spoken and through those images coming up again and again that they no longer become taboo.

(Jackson, 1998, pp. 33)

The 'unspoken' which Smith refers to is reflected in Kristeva's theory on the maternal Semiotic and abjection. Kristeva has suggested that the repression of the maternal Semiotic is never complete and may "threaten to return, disrupting signifying conventions." (Grosz, 1992, pp. 197) So, while the Semiotic is the 'unspoken' portion of subjectivity, it is never completely contained and has inherent in it the possibility for transgression. Kristeva has attributed to the Semiotic the concept of avant-garde artistic practice and sees that "the art of revolt" is a necessity in our culture:

Revolt is an integral part of the pleasure principle. We can feel no pleasure without first overcoming an obstacle, some prohibition, authority or law which allows us to measure our autonomy and freedom.

(Kristeva, 1995, pp. 32)

Smith's representations of pregnancy and birth have been open to criticism as being anti-choice in terms of the political question of abortion. (Gould, 1992, pp. 70) While Smith claims that she is pro-choice, she feels that there are many issues that have been dealt with inadequately by the pro-choice lobbyists, not least of them that abortion doesn't offer a great solution to birth control:

I don't think abortion is a great thing ... There are consequences - both emotional and psychical consequences and within the feminist movement, in America at least, there has been a lie - as if there aren't consequences. I'm raised Catholic and I've had abortions and I have to think about it the rest of my life - I don't have children the rest of my life ... I think there has to be a period of mourning and a sense of loss and an acknowledgment that there are consequences; and that's the part I hate - where it's didactic.

(Jackson, 1998, pp. 34)

Smith's political beliefs are far from didactic. While she considers her work to be political in many ways she believes that there are few differences "between one's social politics and one's private life." (Jackson, 1998, pp. 33) Her political beliefs come first and foremost

from her own "environment," from her own personal beliefs and she believes that sometimes large political groups can neglect to take that kind of standpoint into account:

A belief system can be a map on how to understand your life but a lot of the time it can be confining and when I've been in political groups, I find that there are enormous blank spaces that don't take into account people's lives and I can't work from that. I think it makes more sense to work from some point of necessity. I'm not a public relations person - I'm working because I think it's going to save my life. I don't know what necessitates someone to have to do something - like make a physical manifestation in public. And it certainly has many different forms but I think it has to have a deep connection with yourself.
(Jackson, 1998, pp. 33)

Smith talks about self-empowerment in relation to her work and in relation to the viewer of her work. Smith has said that she is not on a crusade or that she doesn't wear her politics on her sleeve, but while her intentions are very personal, her work nevertheless has political resonance. Kristeva, similarly is concerned with dogmatism and lack of recognition of personal particularities that exists in large political groups:

... if artists or psychoanalysts act politically, they act politically through an intervention on an individual level. And it can be a main political concern to give value to the individual. My reproach to some political discourses with which I am disillusioned is that they don't consider the individual as a value political struggles for people that are exploited will continue, they have to continue, but they will continue perhaps better if the main concern remains the individuality and the particularity of the person.
(Coward, 1984, pp. 347/8)

Smith's and Kristeva's projects are valuable contributions to the debate on representations of the female subject in our society. Ultimately, both of their visions are based in a deep connectedness with their own personal experience. It is the particularity of this individuality which lends both their projects a resonance that defies any closed readings. For Kristeva, the subject is always in process and for Smith, the bodies she represents, are equally, always in process.

FOOTNOTES

1. From Plato, meaning "the receptacle."
2. See "Ethics, Politics and Difference in Julia Kristeva's writing," pp. 84 where Kristeva says that "The War between mother and daughter [was] masterfully but too quickly settled by promoting Mary as universal and particular, but never singular - as 'alone of her sex.'"
3. "The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world."
(Russo in de Lauretis, 1988, pp. 219)
4. Smith tells a story in an interview with Claudia Gould about an incident where she came across a dead cat in a pool of its own blood which may be connected to this piece:
"...there was this dead cat lying in a pool of blood, and the cat was perfectly still and kind of quiet looking, but it was in a pool of blood, and I thought this is the most beautiful thing in the whole wide world, in that kind of stillness and blood all over the ground."(Smith in Gould, 1992, pp. 69)
Smith's recognition of something beautiful in what would normally be considered repulsive is testament to her fascination with the abject side of life.
5. John A. Phillips observes that "with the exception of Isa. 34:14-15, where she is said to inhabit desert wastes, Lilith has been completely exorcised from Scripture." (Phillips, 1984, pp. 180)
6. **Lilith** was made originally in papier mache for an exhibition in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem (1994). Smith has since cast it in bronze and it is the latter version which appears in the "Convergence" exhibition at IMMA.
7. Smith has said that **Mary Magdalene** was a starting point for her more recent representations of the animal world, as seen in her most recent show in IMMA. (Jackson, 1998, pp. 37)

APPENDIX

Interview with Kiki Smith

*by
Breda Jackson*

This interview took place over the telephone with Kiki Smith, in New York on the 14th of January 1998.

BJ Some of your new work in the "Convergence" exhibition at IMMA can be seen as a shift from your earlier representations of the body. Do you see your more recent work concerned with representations of animals as an extension of your earlier work?

KS One's work is a reflection of one's life, so your own circumstances in your life change and your interests change. Before I made bodies, I made images from botany and nature and I decided to go back to doing this other thing. In some ways it's a split but not in terms of usage of material or in that I'm doing anything radically different than before.

BJ I see some connections in that some of your female bodies are represented as abject and animals have been abjected and separated maybe in some similar ways....

KS In a way it's a similar territory in terms of how it has been used and I'm probably using it in a somewhat similar way.

BJ You spoke in your IMMA talk about the relative freedom which an art career eventually gives you - what does this freedom mean to you?

KS In what context?

BJ You said it in the context that sometimes you are expected to do body work

KS As an artist you always want to keep it open. People like familiarity because it's more comfortable. My intention is to have a new experience for myself. Having an art career at a certain point - the only place that you don't know the parameters of it, is your own work. You know what it's like to have a museum show, and a catalogue or a gallery show and being able to pay your rent. While I'm enormously appreciative of having an art career and being able to pay my rent and have my work out - but at a certain point you know what's going to happen within a given time period. In your art work - you don't know what's going to happen and that makes it more interesting and you always want to keep it open - to change all the time.

BJ You've said in the past that having an art career makes you think about the longevity of your work - is this an influence on your increased use of glass and bronze and other less ephemeral materials than paper or wax?

KS Well ... sure but more like now, for instance, I'm making something in papier mache and I try to make it now with paper that has a good PH balance, whereas before I used to make them out of newspaper. It is not that I'm stopping to use papier mache but I try to do it in a way that I don't have to listen if a museum or someone who buys my work - I don't want them to call me up in three years time and say 'this is falling apart' because then you have to go back and fix your old work - you don't want to babysit your old work. Sometimes, certain things, you care about lasting and others - you don't, and you just have to do what the work wants.

BJ *Your work, especially your earlier work concerns the fragmentation of the body; by separating parts of the body, are you drawing attention to the separation which exists in our culture - mind/body, culture/nature etc.?*

KS It's something that is a big concern of mine - separation, the mind/body separation. In my own work, I made lots of separations of things to look at it as part of a whole but to look at an individual system in the body or an aspect of the body in order to think about what it means.

BJ *You mean how it stands alone?*

KS Well, what your digestive system is - what kind of emotional or intellectual things you have surrounding a system and then to differentiate that from another system - to separate it because of that.

BJ *You have spoken many times of the notion of "the shame of being female in public" - is this connected to the vulnerability that is attached to many of your representations of females? I'm thinking about works like **Bloodpool** or **Train**.*

KS Well, all that work, I made at one particular moment and so it was all to do with what kills you psychically. They were described as victims but I never saw them like that - the problem is you survive everything but you're battered up a bit - there isn't a whole or there's a battered whole and it's delicate - it's not that life doesn't take its toll on you but it was one show in particular and at the time it was something I had to think about.

BJ *You mentioned there about them being described as victims and they have been read as reinscribing the "victim" stereotype" - what do you say to that? [Kathy Kubicki review on Whitechapel show]*

KS I think that comes from a more didactic reading and not from people's lives. I think things do happen to you in your life that do leave marks on you and to acknowledge that seems a lot better - not to romanticise it particularly but just to acknowledge it as a possibility in your life. To say that things that happen to you - good and bad - any aspect of it do have consequence.

BJ *You have said that you don't know anything special about your own work and that sometimes your intentions for the work become apparent to you after the fact - does this allow you to work more fluidly, more intuitively?*

KS Yeah, well all my work is intuitive - for the most part I think I'm doing something on a given day - I think about what it's going to look like - but it all comes from a kind of subjective place.....

BJ *And you talk about your work as being very open - in terms of the viewer*

KS Well yes, in terms of reading. I think that certain things have personal meanings to me and sometimes some pieces might be more didactic in a certain way than others. But it's more to make a possible experience. I mean, I have my interests in making things and a lot of times those interests are really about art - about formal aspects and representation or even curiosity about materials, but at the same time in terms of how they read to people - you know everybody brings their own experience in looking at things and I don't need to control all of that.

BJ *Are critical readings of your work important to you in the sense that they are attempts to read your intentions?*

KS Sometimes it's interesting what people read in it and what they don't read in it - in terms of how it brings new information to you - things you never thought of. I've realised things about my work that never occurred to me. And some of it has ramifications later and sometimes it doesn't.

BJ *You mean it might spark you off into doing something else?*

KS Yeah, you might get an idea from it. And if people write about your work or bother to think about it, you have more people involved with what you're interested in, even if it's critical of it - it's helpful. I think why one makes work is much more complex so what it does in the end - who knows? Whether it really affects it or whether one's just driven by their own necessity - it's hard to tell. And also, when you go to the museum, it's important to get as much information as possible to help you.

BJ *Many of your works deals with the control which operates on our bodies and you often use abject subject matter to express that which we have cast aside to be part of our ordered society. Can you speak about your representations of abject subject matter in works such as Tale or some of your more visceral sculptures and what you feel the viewer will take from these representations?*

KS To me it's some type of attempt at defiance or making more of space for myself. Oftentimes things feel so constrictive in what's proscribed as your social role

BJ *But why abject subject matter?*

KS It always seemed like a way out because it's always what's unspoken - it's what is teaming in your life - active and at the same point rejected in terms of representation - it's what's ignored socially and it has this enormous power in terms of one's own life ...

BJ In terms of transgression?

KS Yeah, and so it's just about showing that which art calls absent. So it is always one of the functions of art to speak or speaking to what's unspoken. But it's not that it's less active in your life - it's totally active in your life.

BJ So you think that art can express that side of ourselves ...

KS Sometimes, yeah. I mean, let's say I'm called a feminist sometimes - but I don't want my work to have agenda - because I want it to express all different aspects of one's life - even if they are contradictory and complicated and fuck up your life. Because they have power - that's the whole thing you learn from everything - that all the things that are unspoken have tremendous power in your life and the more you speak them and can give voice to them, the more possibility you have for freedom. I mean it's not that I want to wallow in shit and have a shitty life.

BJ In terms of it expressing some type of control, do you think that the representation of abject elements can somehow reinscribe that control

KS I don't know - I think for women there has been very little possibility for representation - period. So, I think, from that there's been representation that has been culturally allowed or culturally that we've grown up with. And it's very narrow and it's part of the necessity ... I mean, for me the abject in a way was to get away from the sexual body - in the way that society has given us to express sexuality. So maybe it's sexual in a different way but it's also a way of trying to speak about other aspects of life other than just being pretty in public and there's been very little possibility for that socially - period. So it seems to me that you have to have this enormous period where if people are to make representations that they try to make representation of a whole person not just one small aspect of a person. Also a female doesn't get to act out - male transgressiveness is always culturally romanticised in a way.

BJ Do you think then that your work would be read more so by a female audience in terms of empowerment

KS No - I never think that - and I always think that the abject stuff was only really one show. I think that my work has tried to have a range of experiences just because I'm reacting to a range of experiences. I think the way that I read things has to do my socialisation as a female and maybe some of the materials I use are certainly to do with aspects of me being a female but I don't think that what happens to me in general is unique as a person particularly - or as a female person; and certainly all females are also having all sorts of different experiences within socio-economic and cultural differences. I'm basically not trying to make out that there's some kind of universal "me-ness." I'm just trying to talk about my life but I also don't think that what happens to me is particularly unique.

BJ In terms of abject elements reinscribing control, is it possible that the viewer's disgust in the face of blood or shit might just confirm that shit and blood are repulsive and therefore not question why disgust is experienced - especially if the viewer is in a position of power - let's say part of government or religion.

KS It might - but I don't really care about that. The thing is the absence of it is much more detrimental to me - you can say that about anything. I'm not making things for whoever has power - I'm making things to make a wholeness - to admit the wholeness of my life and stop being owned or used by a narrow consensus. You know in the US you have all these right - wing religious people who always try to prescribe what life is about and it's always terribly flawed and contradictory in their own being - but to me, it's much more empowering to show it than it is to hide it. In a certain sense it loses power in showing. In any kind of abusive situation, you see that it's only because things are unspoken that they have power and you see that culturally in terms of movements all the time and art has been part of some of those movements in terms of say gay or racial liberation movements - and it's always because things become spoken and comes into the consciousness. You can say all the gay and lesbian movements over the last 20 or 30 years in America have been constantly reiterating "this is a possibility, that is a possibility" - and it begins to lose power in the sense that all the popular TV shows in America have lesbian stars on them and it's only through the spoken and through those images coming up again and again that they no longer become taboo.

BJ *You were talking about self-empowerment there and you often speak of it in terms of your work and in a way that has a political resonance. Are politics in general something you consider for your work or do you find that it is a much more personal or individual politics?*

KS I don't think there's much difference between one's social politics and one's private life. I think that was one of the big parts of feminism in America - that understanding that people in their personal and domestic situations played out all their belief systems equally as they did as citizens. So, I guess I believe that life should be holistic - that each aspect contains everything - so as a citizen you are constantly confronted by the different belief systems and you are constantly adjusting and trying to figure out where you are in it and you can be very good in one aspect of your life and very shitty in another - a possibility of being human. You can be blind to the contradictions of some belief systems.

BJ *Compared to your time at COLAB [Collaborative Projects Artist Group], your work now would be coming more from an individual point rather than from a group set-up ...*

KS The group really was just a group of individuals - it had no ideological base other than that a group of artists could make expressions together in a very open way. In some senses, I always say that my work is political or at least concerned with my environment, whether that environment is ... it's where you term where your environment is.

BJ *It just doesn't seem to be a didactic thing*

KS Oh no - it isn't - I don't believe in it - I think it's evil. A belief system can be a map on how to understand your life but a lot of the time it can be confining and when I've been in political groups, I find that there are enormous blank spaces that don't take into account people's lives and I can't work from that. I think it makes more sense to work from some point of necessity. I'm not a public relations person - I'm working because I think it's going to save my life. I don't know what necessitates someone to have to do something - like make a physical manifestation in public. And it certainly has many different forms but I think it has to have a deep connection with yourself.

BJ *Can I go on to a number of your works which are concerned with issues of reproduction. You have said that the bronze womb you made in 1986 alludes to the womb as a trap - in that sense, is it a comment on the control which operates regarding women and their rights over their own bodies and reproduction.*

KS Yeah - that and also just fear of motherhood basically and my ambivalence towards motherhood and to what that means socially as something that traditionally, at a certain point, women are expected to reproduce. And I haven't - because it makes me nervous. I also see it as the opposite to my desire that the mother be all encompassing - to be everything. I see lots of my stuff as a comment on my own ambivalence - like wanting to think about what it means not to have children. And it is an economic and physical trap for many people in the world. Sometimes I see it as a need for my mother to be endless to me. If you think about birth, there's so many things about one's own birth, about spiritual birth and rebirth in one's life - and you just make an image that is a starting point that you just spin off on.

BJ *You did another sculpture, **Trough** in 1990 where the pregnant body is represented as an empty container - does this have similar intentions to womb?*

KS Yes, that's the same thing of having ambivalence or anger at thinking about motherhood as this insatiable space to feed upon like a pig trough. And the desire for the child to have the mother encompass everything and therefore a rejection of that in my life. It's a conflicted and not a necessary reading of motherhood. It's not that I'm anti-motherhood.

BJ *Well, in relation to that, your work has been read as anti-abortion - do you find this extreme in that any representation of birth or reproduction could possibly be deemed anti-abortion?*

KS I don't think abortion is a great thing. I do think you're killing your children in the sense that you don't have them - if you have abortions - you basically don't have children. There are consequences - both emotional and psychic consequences and psychical consequences and within the feminist movement, in America at least there has been a lie - as if there aren't consequences. I'm raised catholic and I've had abortions and I have to think about it the rest of my life - I don't have children the rest of my life. I also know that those are the decisions I made and probably at the same time again, I would make the same decision. But I think there has to be a period of mourning and a sense of loss and an acknowledgement that there are consequences. And that's the part I hate - where it's didactic

BJ *And the reading of your work as being either pro or anti abortion is quite didactic*

KS I think it's certainly something that people have the right to do and I'm happy to live someplace where I have that right and I fight for that right but I don't think it's a great solution to birth control. And there are other issues - I can say for myself that I was pregnant because of not feeling entitled to speak up for myself and take responsibility for my reproductive behaviour. I can say that it had a lot to do with being female that I got pregnant to begin with. It's very complicated and I want to acknowledge the complication of life and anything other than that seems to be a lie. Life is an incredibly precious thing that we are all incredibly cavalier about and everyday people are getting killed and we say

it's all perfectly fine but life is also a tremendous force. And you can see it from the people around you that it's a precious commodity. So, it's about acknowledging that sometimes - and it's also just acknowledging that it's so weird that there's this enormous diversity and individualism - where one is connected to other beings and where one is separate from other beings. Also, in our society, we have people living in incredible isolation, disconnected from families - so it's complicated. Part of making art is having a place to think about these things. People have all sorts of different versions they're doing that come out of their own curiosity or their own necessity. What motivates people is their own individual circumstances and how they choose to express that in art. It's not that all art has to be social work but it's not that, let's say, Donald Judd's work is less political even though it doesn't take on a particular kind of representation.

BJ And a lot of the time, it's the way it's read - your work has been read so diversely

KS Yeah - and even how it gets read 10 years from now will be very different. I also realise that I said things when I was 30 that were quite different - so all the stuff you say is just temporary.

BJ In that respect, because there have been certain moments in the history of art, you've been associated with a group that have been described as 'abject artists'

KS Yeah, just because people were talking about that at a given moment.

BJ But what do you think about that association?

KS I have a big interest in that so I don't mind it, but I also always say that my work is as much about decorative art - as much about many aspects.

BJ And do you subscribe to the theory that is written about abject art in catalogue essays and so forth - for example in the "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art" catalogue for the Whitney Museum in 1991?

KS It depends on specifics ...

BJ Well, abject art has been written about specifically in relation to the theory of George Bataille or Julia Kristeva - Kristeva has been called the theoretical 'matriarch' of abject art.

KS Well, I read it and it's interesting to me. I'm not so much working from theory particularly - I read a little of it and I get the slightly trickled down version of it.

BJ And do you think that theory can add to a reading of your work?

KS Yeah - you know, I always think that there are so many possible readings. And I realise that I'm making a very old fashioned version of a body compared to many other

artists working with body images. Many things that you're interested in change all the time for you. For a couple of years, I really liked looking at pre-classical sculpture and 19th century fake antiquities and figuration. One day, it's interesting to you and you make lots of things like it and it becomes a space that you're trying to learn something about.

BJ You've actually expressed a lot of interest in the decorative arts

KS Which, to me, is political also - all the 20th century anti-decoration has also a lot to do with anti-female and anti a lot of other things. I was talking to someone the other day and they were saying that some artist was really American and therefore anti-European and anti-decoration and I was asking him if he thought that decoration was inherently European or inherently an evil thing. Because there's this belief system against the decorative which I always think goes back to this hierarchical dualism in European history. To me, it's always important for me to interject that as a possibility in my life - but I'm not against things not being decorative - I just want that possibility.

BJ Can I talk to you now about your representations of biblical characters including the Virgin Mary. Works such as Lilith or Lot's Wife or Mary Magdalene are quite different to the Virgin in that they lack her vulnerability or seem more defiant. What prompted you to use these particular characters - can you tell me something about them?

KS The way that I've made the Virgin Mary and the way that I make the others - I see them all as defiant characters. The Virgin Mary's situation cost her a lot so the first Virgin Marys I made were just where she has her arms open and from that, her intestines are all falling down - on one hand she has to be this open and compassionate creature and that costs a lot and there's a kind of anger involved. For me, I'm angry because I don't want to have to have that as my image and I don't know if I can adhere to it. So, in some ways, I'm a failure at being that and in another way, I don't want it - you're constricted. At the same time, getting older, I think that being compassionate is an important thing in life. In the wax version I made of the Virgin, she's just meat - because she's the vehicle of the word made flesh. So she is the flesh body of God but her sexuality gets lost. Some religions don't separate divinity from sexuality and Christianity does, and you always pay for that in your private life.

BJ The Virgin has been robbed of her sexuality and, at the same time, has been put up as a role model for catholic women - do you see that the Catholic church continues to have control over women?

KS Yeah! It does in your psychological life. You always have these weird thoughts in your head about what goodness is. I mean, I don't go to church except with my mother on holidays ...

BJ And did you have a strict Catholic upbringing?

KS No - my father was raised by Jesuits, so he wouldn't let us go. So, I don't have a strict Catholic background but I was raised Catholic and sort of feel that I'll be Catholic 'til I die. All those sort of splits make people's lives bad. You have to try to mend them or talk about them. But the Virgin Mary is just a historical construction so it has inherent in it the possibility for manipulation and change - they're just stories and, at the same time, we

have a deep necessity to have a compassionate intermediary with God - with a God figure - to have someone who speaks on our behalf to a God. If we think of a God in some way as loving and in some way as harsh - it's in our interest to have this intermediary and also to have a female deity. So she's an important figure in a lot of people's lives all over the world and it changes from culture to culture - exactly who she is. I think Christianity has been successful because it did take a female deity.

BJ At the same time, she is controlled in terms of her sexuality ...

KS Yeah, it's a complicated one.

*BJ And your other biblical characters - **Lilith**, **Lot's Wife** and **Mary Magdalene** - they are seen as more sexually defiant*

KS Yeah, they are because **Lot's Wife** disobeys her husband and looks back to the body and the past and her own people and she defies her husband - so I always like her for that. **Mary Magdalene** - the images I made of her have come from German stories where she goes to France after Jesus is dead and lives in the mountains to atone for her vanity. And there's all these stories about how the rivers of Provence were created from her tears because after 7 years, she looks in the water and sees her beauty. She is portrayed, in the German sense, as a wild woman because she became a hermit. So, I made her with a chain, like a dancing bear. That was a specific piece that went in a park in Dusseldorf where there is the only religious sculpture of the Virgin Mary on a pedestal. I made the Mary Magdalene to look up and talk to the Virgin Mary. It's like there are these two impossible versions of being female - or two aspects - so they need to talk to one another - because they make my life impossible! **Lilith** is the same thing - she's this defiant figure. But the **Virgin Mary**, the one that I made in wax is too.....

BJ Yes, that is ambivalent in that it's both threatening and welcoming at the same time

KS And insisting on being in the flesh. In Catholicism, we are the "word made flesh" - it's through the flesh that we have spiritual life and I'm not against that particularly. But, it's complicated. I think that probably all people have love/hate relationships with their religion and I think it's important that one's spiritual or moral life and how one makes decisions doesn't have to be attached to God. And especially in the US where everybody is dropping dead all the time, you have to think about all that stuff. Here, we're influenced so much by Hinduism and Buddhism - our beliefs are so mushy! Buddhism is very big in America at the moment.

*BJ Could you talk about the animalistic characteristics of both **Lilith** and **Mary Magdalene** - are you expressing their wild side?*

KS For me, at a certain point, that's how I got into the animal stuff. I got really interested in Sirens and this whole thing of morphing where historically animals and humans are put together. The bird thing became interesting to me and in some ways the **Mary Magdalene** is the beginning of that. **Lilith** is like a fly - is somehow defying gravity. It was interesting - me thinking why things get put together and then letting go of the human part.

BJ *What do you see for your work in the future?*

KS I'll just go where it takes me. Because I don't want to be didactic, I don't have a place I want to get to - so I just go with it and see what happens.

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