

Flying and Falling

Kiki Smith's 2008 piece *Flying and Falling* calls out to be interpreted as a work in conversation with the other prints surrounding it. Featuring several recurring signifiers present in the exhibition *Kiki Smith and Paper: The Body, Muse, and Spirit* -- windows (both open and closed), birds in flight -- it initially appears as a continuation of the death and spirituality motifs seen more vividly in *Visitation III* and *Open Window, Chair with Flowers*. Notably, however, it is the only piece among this series that makes use of sequentiality to achieve its impact. Rather than presenting a single image for viewers to unpack, Smith gives us a slice of time to consider, and it is through this temporality that *Flying and Falling* is able to address loss and grieving in a way all its own.

The lithograph is over five feet in height, forcing the spectator to first observe it at some distance in order to view it fully. Rendered entirely in shades of black, *Flying and Falling* features two windows side by side. In the lefthand window, a tumbling figure is seen in the frame's bottom half, clad in a nightgown, long hair streaming upwards and obscuring the face. Notably, in an exhibition that at many points centers around the human body, this person's form is largely covered, whether by the flowing, long-sleeved nightdress, or by locks of hair. Present in both windows' top halves is a black bird, soaring upward -- ostensibly representing the "flying" half of the work's title. The streaky, unfinished shading of the window frames combine with the crumpled look of the Nepalese paper to give the structures depicted in *Flying and Falling* a run-down and even architecturally unsound appearance, compounded by the pasting together of several pieces of paper to form Smith's background. The lines throughout the piece, including the outermost borders, are not uniformly straight, making the windows appear as

though they are intended to represent several different spaces, joined together as a whole. This effect, combined with the lack of detail on the human form (distinct from the specific faces seen in Smith's other works from this series), lends a universality to this print -- it depicts many places, every place, and no place in particular.

The audience's position when viewing *Flying and Falling* remains somewhat mysterious -- are we looking into the room occupied by the falling figure, where a bird has somehow gotten in, or are we in fact inside a space delineated by Smith's placement of window frames, looking outward? Also called into question is the size of the space she seeks to place the viewer in. Initially, the viewer may feel as though the windows are meant to be looking out onto a single, larger area, rather than depicting the same window at two different moments. This reading robs the print of its impact, however -- the placement of these two views side by side implicitly points out the major change that has occurred between them: the figure has fallen completely out of the frame.

The blankness of the space in the righthand window where the falling person once was is indicative of the flattest of truths anyone dealing with loss must cope with: everywhere that someone once was, taking up space, is now empty. Removed from all emotion, a death represents itself visually in the everyday world as vacancy. Smith balances this emptiness between the two windows through the repeated figure of the bird -- notably a black variety, rather than utilizing a more traditional mourning symbol such as a dove -- which is removed from the human form. The presence of the falling figure has no apparent effect on the bird's flight pattern from one window to the next, reiterating the way in which the loss of a single person is completely unremarkable to the larger natural world. It is unclear how much time has

elapsed from the window's view on the left to that on the right -- perhaps only a few seconds, perhaps hours or even days. Despite the opposites laid out in the work's title, and the strict use of black lines against blank space, *Flying and Falling* is a piece that eludes simple binaries and easy explanations. Smith prefers instead to visualize the death and grieving process as multifaceted, open-ended, and above all else, one that exists for each viewer along an undetermined amount of time.