

Kiki Smith, "Born," 2002

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One of my favorite pieces within the exhibition *Kiki Smith: The Body, The Muse, and the Spirit* at the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art is *Born*. It is immediately striking because it is the only piece with such brilliant colors in the show.¹ *Born* is inspired by the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, and it shows the moment in the story when Grandmother and Little Red are freed from the belly of the wolf. It is at once beautiful and rather violent. Through her multiple self-portraits in *Born*, Kiki Smith offers a way of thinking about herself as containing many complex identities that communicate with each other to strive for a sense of self-connection and completeness, and she then invites us to engage with our own multiple selves too.

Both the young girl and the old woman are self-portraits of Kiki Smith at different times in her life, which makes all forms of contact between the selves immediately significant, especially eye contact. Old Kiki's eyes are directed toward the face of her younger self, but Young Kiki looks directly into her older self's breasts. It is only when we near the end of life that we can look back and see the younger versions of ourselves. When we are young, we cannot see clearly ahead to who we will be in the future. At the panel discussion at OU in September, I asked Smith if she believes in a way that our different selves can communicate with each other, and if so what that looks like for her. Part of her response included her idea that sometimes we get little glimpses of our future selves, and we are also creating our future selves every day by the decisions we make now.

The title, *Born*, provides a tremendous jumping-off point for many interpretations about how the figures in the work are related to each other. Blood seeps upwards from the wolf and the two women stand in its belly, so the first obvious interpretation is that the women are born of the wolf. And based on that interpretation, the wolf is then female. This is especially possible because blending wolf and girl identities is nothing new to Smith. In this exhibition alone, she has a print of Saint Genevieve whose arm is connected to and becoming the arm of the wolf next to her. And of course there is the blue print of *Wolf Girl*. The hair of the wolf is almost identical to the hair of the two women, and the wolf's eye is silver just like the women's eyes. The arch of Old Kiki's head mimics the curved body of the wolf to create a circle, suggesting a cycle of birth and life and rebirth. It is possible that the wolf functions as a third self-portrait of

¹ (Fig. 1) Kiki Smith, *Born*, 2002, lithograph with silver leaf additions on mold-made T.H. Saunders paper, 68 1/8 x 56 1/8 in. (173 x 142.5 cm). Stillwater, Oklahoma State University Museum of Art.

the artist. The wolf gives birth to different representations of identities of the same central being, the elusive core of ourselves that we are always trying to define and hang onto. Old Kiki seems to be supporting the arm of her younger self and protecting it from the wolf's right paw, or is the wolf trying desperately to engage with the more concrete iterations of herself, to no avail? The wolf's eyes look out to the viewer. By engaging the audience with eye contact, Smith uses the wolf to draw us in and reflect upon how we too create and communicate with new or past versions of ourselves.

Young Kiki has two keys with her that further explore the concept of her access to different identities. Two keys implies two different doors or boxes. Again this goes back to when we are young, we make choices that define our future selves. So the younger Kiki may have the most concrete choices about how she can engage with her later identities, but the older Kiki still has agency in how she looks at past versions of herself. Again the eye contact reinforces this idea. Smith said at the OU panel discussion that our present selves can look with more kindness on our past selves than we may have had at the time.

Traditionally, Little Red Riding Hood is a rather one-dimensional female character, a little girl who gets into trouble for being naive and learns a lesson about talking to strangers at the end of the day. Smith takes that character and transforms her into a complex individual with many existing versions of herself that are not only able but eager to engage with each other, to strive for some sort of core truth that unites them.



Fig. 1 Kiki Smith, *Born*, 2002, lithograph with silver leaf additions on mold-made T.H. Saunders paper, 68 1/8 x 56 1/8 in. (173 x 142.5 cm). Stillwater, Oklahoma State University Museum of Art (artwork © 2017 Kiki Smith, New York)

Bibliography

Smith, Kiki. *Born*, 2002. Lithograph with silver leaf additions on mold-made T.H. Saunders paper, 68 1/8 x 56 1/8 in. (173 x 142.5 cm). Stillwater, Oklahoma State University Museum of Art.