

*Untitled* (1989)

This piece, *Untitled* from 1989, is demonstrative of Smith's unique manipulation of paper and her interest in the human figure. While this piece can hold various meanings for each individual viewer, it evokes larger social themes associated with the female body; such as a lack of bodily autonomy or the physical strength of the female body. Either interpretation of the work, however, can be read in relation to the female body's reproductive capabilities.

*Untitled* (1989) is a vertically hanging five-foot tall sculptural piece, suspended a few inches off the ground. Though made of paper, the piece is not flat. It rather looks like a hollowed mold—somewhat resemblant of Smith's bronze figures. Made from the durable and fibrous gampi paper, Smith has formed the lower half of a human body. It appears as if the top half (from the hips up) has been ripped off, leaving the viewer with an exposed lower body. Although the top is missing, and there are no social indicators of gender such as hair, dress, or makeup, the viewer still recognizes the figure as female. Dangling from what is perceived to be the umbilical cord, emerging from a simplistic rendering of the female genitalia, a baby (made from the same paper) hangs by the feet of the half-bodied woman.

The fragmented body is a subject repeatedly found throughout Smith's work. Smith's representations of disjointed bodies, as well as isolated body parts, are often ambiguous in their meaning. In *Untitled* (1989), Smith is clearly calling the viewer's attention to a function specific to the female body (giving birth) by physically reducing a body to the lower half and by

displaying a hanging baby. Although the work may exhibit a particular moment, perhaps when the mother has just given birth, it conveys broader social messages associated with the female and her body.

This work doesn't appear to be celebrating the female body and her reproductive capabilities. Where traditional depictions of women sometimes convey valued fertility through large breasts or wide hips, this piece does not visually suggest idealized notions of life-giving abilities. Although the baby is still literally attached to its mother by the umbilical cord (the two bodies are also visually connected, being made of the same off-white gampi paper with a crinkled texture), clearly calling attention to the female's birthing potential, the viewer does not know if the baby is alive or dead, or if the mother is alive or dead.

With the lack of an upper body, particularly the lack of a head, this body may allude to the female as a vessel—used specifically for carrying and birthing children. And given Smith's Catholic upbringing and interest in religious figures, this female body as a vessel could reference the Virgin Mary. With no brain and no mouth, this figure's only purpose seems to be that of procreation. The figure's incapacity to develop her own thoughts or spoken opinions may refer to the social devaluation of women more broadly. In thinking of this female figure as a vessel, it suggests the lack of autonomy women have over their own bodies—an unfortunately still debated topic in today's political and social climate. It could also be suggestive of abortion rights. If the female has no control over her own body, this figure could have been forced to carry a pregnancy she did not want, or forced to give birth to a stillborn baby, or even forced into sexual activity in the first place.

Although the piece may suggest patriarchal social control over the female body, it could also be evocative of the female body's strength through its upright stance. It is interesting that

Smith would place this mother figure in an upright position, given that when we typically think of females giving birth, we rather think of them lying down. Throughout visual culture, traditional poses for women often indicate their submission to men or their sexual availability through a horizontally reclining pose with an eroticized gaze. As the figure has no head, she cannot partake in a visual exchange with the viewer; and given her stance, it seems unlikely that the figure is meant to be a sexualized interpretation of the female body and its reproductive capabilities. Visually, this work contradicts those typically gendered poses as it hangs vertically, as if the female has given birth standing upright. Smith may also be representing the figure's strength by using gampi paper—a material that is strong enough to be molded into human forms and hung without tearing.