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ART 5693 Gender and Visual Culture, Dr. Borland
Kiki Smith and Paper: The Body, the Muse, and the Spirit

Kiki Smith and Paper: The Body, the Muse, and the Spirit, an exhibition of works on and of paper at the Oklahoma State Museum of Art, suitably describes Smith's ongoing investigation into female identity through the corporeal, symbolic, and spiritual body. Smith's work, *Saint Geneviève*, 1999, is a subversion of the historical depictions of the nude female body by showing a self-possessed naked body. In Smith's portrayal of Saint Geneviève, she asserts a feminist position in depicting Geneviève's confidence, vulnerability, and sensitivity through a merging of the medium, formal elements, and a multiplicity of narratives.

In the second gallery of the exhibition, *The Muse*, we are confronted by a life-size portrait of a naked woman and a wolf printed on wrinkled Nepalese paper, itself reminiscent of skin. Each figure is accompanied by a bird overhead with their beaks pointed downward, suggesting a saintly or ethereal disposition of the subjects. The figures are floating in an indiscernible space, there are no other forms surrounding them; they are in effect hovering in the picture plane. While the placement of the wolf's feet suggests a grounding, the feet of Saint Geneviève are in an unnatural position, like a ballerina on point, signifying a rise into the heavens.

Depicting an act not of antagonism but of bonding between the animal and female subject, they are engaged in a moment of delicate and gentle conversation with mouths open and faces looking towards the other. Both figures are treated similarly, drawn with a sketchy staccato line; while Saint Geneviève's body is defined by an unbroken contour, there are parts to the wolf that have disappeared into the background, showing the construction of his collaged composition. Upon closer inspection, we see that the lithograph is a collage of various planes of prints pasted onto each other to complete the composition. The print seems to be made from

three vertical sections and four horizontal sections; a combination of seven planes create the figures into total beings. The seven panels of paper that make up the work reference Geneviève's age when she first consecrated herself to God as a virgin, and to the seven days of creation. This relationship to the number seven elevates her body towards spiritual enlightenment while her visceral body, showing mature genitals connect her body to its capacity for fertility, reproduction and nurturing.

The title of the piece clearly identifies the subject as Saint Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris, young girls, and the French security forces, a gesture that honored her many efforts to secure Paris from impending conquest and famine. Identified by the bishop Germanus as a special servant to God at the young age of seven, Geneviève dedicated her life to prayer, acts of penance and practices of devotion. Associated with virgins, lambs, and wolves, Saint Geneviève is a powerful example of a self-possessed Catholic woman.

The historical and religious story of Saint Geneviève is also conflated with that of *Little Red Riding Hood*, an allegory that anthropologist Jamie Tehrani revealed in 2013, has roots in oral traditions dating to the first century A.D.¹ Besides the story being a cautionary tale about the dangers of the wild forest, not listening to one's mother, and talking to strangers, various other interpretations of the story abound. Little Red Riding Hood can be seen as an allegory for astronomical or natural cycles, the transition from girlhood to womanhood, the process of rebirth, or charged with negative connotations of rape or abduction.

¹ "What Wide Origins You Have, Little Red Riding Hood!" National Geographic, November 30, 2013, accessed October 07, 2017, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/11/131129-little-red-riding-hood-folktale-tehrani-anthropology-science/>.

Central to Smith's work is the feminist approach of merging narratives that favor an openness to multiple meanings. Using imagery and symbolism from varied sources, be they religious narratives, mythological stories and figures, or historical and popular folktales, Smith forms new associations that provoke the viewer to engage individually with the work and not through a definite or fixed position of interpretation. The female subject in the work is shown in close relationship with a wild animal, suggesting a reverence for the natural world. A relationship that we recall with violence and trickery in the story of Little Red Riding Hood is substituted with a tamed and tender depiction of two subjects gently touching the other. The female subject we see is a woman who has moved through the phases of prepubescence and adolescence, she is no longer a child lost in the woods or a young virgin girl devoid of her innate sexuality.

Subversion of the nude, a theme central to the history of art, is at work in this piece as Smith depicts Geneviève in a relatively unnatural naked state for a female saint in the Catholic tradition. Geneviève is vulnerable and strong in her nakedness; she has tamed the beast with nothing more than her heavenly touch and presence. Her gaze towards the wolf instead of the viewer obstructs the historical possession of her body, it is unconcealed and one with nature. As John Berger asserts, "to be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself [...] Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise."²

Paper seems a natural fit for Smith, as its physical properties evoke the changing nature of a woman's experience through her life. Paper can tear easily, it can be stained, it ages over

² John Berger, *Ways of seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 2008), p 8.

time, and is a precious and vulnerable material while also containing a surprising durability. The material connections to the composite figures that Smith envisions only aid the vastness of the image's meaning, standing before us, undisguised.

Bibliography

Berger, John. *Ways of seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 2008.

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