

Nicole Schutte

*Wolfgirl*

*Wolfgirl* by Kiki Smith was created in 1999 and portrays, as the title may suggest, a wolf like girl with hair engulfing her entire face. *Wolfgirl* is a part of Smith's 12 Blue Prints described by her exhibition catalogue as, "Fifteen etching, aquatint, and drypoints on mold-made Hahnemühle paper... 20 x 16 in." (Weitman 39) As a feminist artist, Smith toys with gender ideology and conflict throughout her work. Without looking at the title, one may come to the conclusion that this creature is some kind of monster; a person with a disability such as Ambras syndrome. Once skimming over the title *Wolfgirl*, it becomes evident that Smith has invented or at least altered an original story-like plot behind the fuzzy faced girl. This work of art resonates with symbolism based around the concept of gender and its norms, power struggles, and toxicity.

Smith pokes and prods at our gender normative roles with this work of art. At first glance a viewer may be intimidated or at the least, unsettled by this young girl with such perplexing features. Her teeth are uncomfortably stacked on top of another, creating quite an awkward facial expression not typically associated with little girls. However, if we categorize her features into human girl traits and animalistic or generally masculine traits, the only actual wolf like trait is the hair decorating the entirety of her head. Besides this solely uncommon characteristic, a female with a fuzzy face, the rest of the figure's characteristics are that of a typical girl. She seems to be dressed in a traditional prairie girl dress and bonnet like headgear. Her garments are lined with proper pearls or beads of some sort. The collar of her dress is a feminine white ruffle with a single fastened button located just below the white fabric. The monochrome blue pigmentation works to dilute or normalize the dark hair decorating the girl's face. In the scope of gender, one key message of this work is to facilitate the patriarchal idea that, "men can do X, but

women cannot.” In this instance, men can have hair on their face, but women cannot. Here, and throughout this exhibit, Kiki Smith pushes the boundaries of gender roles and expressions. If hair is acceptable on the face of a man, why does hair on the face of a girl cause an overall feeling of uneasiness? Because of strict, limiting gender roles/norms within a heteronormative, predominantly cisgender society which creates a dichotomous gender hierarchy.

Kiki Smith herself gave me a bit of insight to the motivating drive behind *Wolfgirl*. As stated in the exhibition catalogue, Smith is fascinated by folktales such as Little Red Riding Hood and sometimes creates alternate endings of these commonly known stories. She told me that she has also been fascinated by the disease known as Hypertrichosis, she actually began this work of art by simply drawing hair (she especially enjoys creating strands of hair). Once the process had begun, she conjured up a brand new ending of the tale in which, “She changes the relationship between the two characters from that of predator and prey to one of equals” (Weitman 16). Instead of the big bad wolf easily swindling the seemingly silly and stupid little girl to her near-death; through *Wolfgirl*, Smith provides a different relationship between the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood. The original folktale ends with both Little Red and her grandmother being eaten whole by the male wolf character, displaying quite literally, the patriarchal idea of men’s dominance and control over women and their anatomy. Like any other damsel in distress tale, the two women are later rescued by a Frenchman’s axe cutting into the belly of the beast, releasing the women unharmed. The tale displays an overt power struggle between men and women, primarily pertaining to the male desire of control of women and the even greater desire to devalue women by monopolizing their representation within the media in a sexist manner. For example, the male wolf is able to outsmart *two* capable human women and later feast on their flesh with minimal effort. The defenseless, powerless women’s only chance at survival is to sit

around and be rescued by a random male character, never before mentioned in the tale, who suddenly barges into the grandmother's home and frees them.

Male characters within the original tale have complete agency and play active roles within the text, while the women are powerless passive beings created in order to be toyed with by men which displays the oppressive cultural notion of men's control and universal superiority to women. The wolf takes advantage of the women's genuine kind nature by luring them physically closer to him with a cunning cleverness and then abducts or keeps the women, another literal translation of men's entitlement and control of women's anatomy, until he's ready to do what he pleases with their bodies; in this case, devouring them. This paradigm correlates with the concept of gender-based violence which could be intimate partner violence, sexual assault, rape, or even murder. The ways in which the wolf obtains his desires is similar to how abusive partners may sweet talk their victims into believing they have good intentions and mean them no harm; or how rapists may lure an intoxicated woman into their car, home, or the nearest dark alley. When the axe man comes into the scene, he's portrayed as a hyper-masculine figure, heroically saving Little Red and her grandma from the evil male character. The big, strong man has saved the day and is now idolized, perhaps even charming in the eyes of the victims and readers alike. The specific relationship between the axe man and the wolf enforce one particular rape myth: if a man saves a woman from any potential form of danger propagated by another man, he may feel as if he *deserves* something from the woman, usually in a sexual manner. This is a myth because a woman does not owe a man anything simply because he saw a her in harm's way and intervened, he reacted how any decent human being would. By the original author insinuating these admirable and noble qualities, it is implied that Little Red live beyond the story

somehow involves the axe man. In a few versions, at the very end of the tale, the axe man in fact rapes Little Red.

Smith revises this ending through *Wolfgirl* that suggests a *mutual* romantic partnership between the wolf and Little Red. Smith told me at the exhibition that, in addition to enjoying the simple task of creating strokes as hair like structures, she had envisioned the incomplete figure to be the lovechild of the big bad wolf and Little Red. As boldly declared throughout the exhibition, in which most if not all women depicted are sexually liberated, *Wolfgirl* gives a voice to Little Red as a character with just as much power as the “frightening” wolf. Through the story of *Wolfgirl*, Little Red is not intimidated by the animal, but instead may have challenged or displayed (sexual) dominance or mutual partnership with the powerful wolf; thus elevating her role in the story and giving a feminist backdrop to the piece itself. Little Red is being portrayed as something more than just a vulnerable and defenseless little girl within the original tale. There is no need to be rescued by any man, Smith gives the female characters a sense of agency the original tale’s authors robbed women of. The women in Smith’s spin on a classic story are able to defend themselves from the wolf’s evil intentions, and even resolves in Little Red and the wolf conceiving in a consensual way. This instates the notion of egalitarian, which eliminates the gender binary power struggle of man versus woman.

While elements revolving around the concept of gender are clearly prominent; Kiki Smith may have had an entirely different inspiration than controversial contextual, social, and political stances. After all, she began this piece through the sheer intrinsic motivation of creating strokes that resemble hair strands. The beauty of Smith’s work lies within the versatility of symbolism and meaning. Her art lets the audience envision their own explanation, while prompting their brains to get a thorough exercise attempting to dissect and analyze each piece of the puzzle.

## Bibliography

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