

Thoughts on Kiki Smith's *Puppet and Moth*

A particularity of the Kiki Smith exhibition "*Kiki Smith and Paper: The Body, the Muse, and the Spirit*" is how the curator plays with expectations of the audience; more specifically, how she meets or deceives them. What first comes to mind when seeing Kiki Smith's work here is how organic and eventually degradable paper is. The medium evokes the ephemerality of art and creation and deceives expectations: the Nepalese paper that Smith uses is strong - much stronger than normal paper- and not as prone to an organic disappearance as one would imagine. Therefore, through her choice of medium, Kiki Smith defies the belief that paper is ephemeral; even though *Puppet with Moth* (2008) is not made of steel or bronze, it is not fragile. The strength of the Nepalese paper comes as a surprise, especially when this piece conveys fragility and sadness.

Puppet with Moth (2008) is an installation consisting of a child-like, oversized puppet with a glittery moth on his left ribcage. The body of the puppet looks rough- its joints are connected with muslin threads: the shoulders and knees are "interrupted" by emptiness, and the same muslin thread springs from its feet and palms. The head is stylized and smooth, while the body seems to belong to a childlike puppet, the head seems to belong to an alien-like, expressionless adult. The moth, painted with a glittery charcoal paint, is on the left hand side of the torso, while the right hand side has the words "*I Mys*" painted in black. The sadness in the expression of the puppet is undeniable- and not in the sense in which all puppets seems sad because they are expressionless: its resemblance to a child gives it an aura of sadness. The puppet is

hanging from a muslin thread, but is resting on the floor, with its legs in an X, placed in a corner. This piece is always placed in a corner, which exacerbates the feeling of displacement and abandonment : it looks and feels isolated. Similarly to other works from the exhibition, the puppet is constructed from several pieces of off-white Nepalese paper glued together. The facial features of the puppet are present, but at the same time, almost unnoticeable - they seem painted over; the nose and the ears have no orifices, and the eyes are lacking detail. The only empty spaces are found at the joints, with the muslin threads keeping the puppet as one. The position of the puppet is another intriguing aspect; we are used to seeing puppets "in action", and resting puppets do not pose any interest as they are, at that time, not serving their purpose. The fact that it is resting on the floor also has an effect on our viewpoint: we are looking down to it.

The moth and the puppet are recurrent symbols in Smith's work. Generally, the moth is a symbol of femininity and transformation; in her other works, such as *Moth (1996)*, the moth is next to, or in some sort of relation to a character. Similarly to the paper, we can also think of the moth as fragile, but spiritually, it represents a symbol of faith, vulnerability, death, and the afterlife. In this particular work, and in the context of Smith losing her mother, the mother symbolises a loss of female figure which leaves behind a motherless child who feels lost, suspended by threads, like a puppet: the moth symbolises the artists' mother, close to the heart, on the left side of the ribcage. In this context, the artist might be contemplating her own relation with motherhood, in connection with the loss of her mother, and her own choice to not have children. Having been part of the *Sojourn* installation at the Brooklyn Museum in 2010, under the title

Walking puppet (2008) it constitutes, therefore, a recurring character rather than just an individual work: a sculpture with the same facial features and traits is featured in *Annunciation (2008)*. I would consider this character a theme in her work, one that she identifies with and to which she lends different types of emotion - and the fact that this character appears expressionless and has no well-defined facial features establishes it as a perfect canvas for this transfer of feelings and emotions. The position of the puppet- in a corner, below the eyeline, invites the spectator to feel empathy, and to take the time to look- one is more prone to keep gazing at something that is at our below the eyeline, as opposed to somewhere high above.

Puppet with Moth is, visually, very simple - there is not much that perturbs the viewer - the words "I Mys" and the glittery moth painted on the ribcage are the only distractions from an otherwise all-white piece, but more unfolds with every minute spent in front of it. The symbols, especially the moth, are a play on expectations and an invitation to second guess our instincts and to challenge appearances.