



Kiki Smith (American, b. Germany 1954). *Born*, 2002. Lithograph, edition 4 of 28. Brooklyn Museum, Emily Winthrop Miles Fund, 2003.17

Educator packet for the special exhibition

Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection

on view at the Brooklyn Museum, October 31, 2008–April 5, 2009

About the Artist

Born in Germany in 1954, Kiki Smith moved to New York in the 1970s. Trained as a paramedic in Brooklyn, Smith explores in her artwork the vulnerabilities and possibilities of the body, its internal and external processes. Although best known for her sculptural works, Smith has been integrating printmaking into her image-making repertoire throughout her career. Predominantly self-taught as a printmaker, Smith has worked collaboratively at commercial and university print workshops. She has said, "I could just make prints and be satisfied."¹ Smith's imagery can be interpreted as literal or metaphorical, personal or political, scientific or spiritual. As a feminist artist, Smith uses her artwork to reclaim the female body from patriarchy, modern medicine, religion, and other forms of institutionalized oppression.

About the Artwork

Kiki Smith turns the Brothers Grimm's version of "Little Red Riding Hood" upside down, almost literally, by suggesting that the character and her grandmother were born of a wolf rather than being eaten by one. The lithograph print features themes repeated throughout Smith's art, such as birth and regeneration, relationships between humans and animals, and the Madonna and Child. Smith gives the characters her own facial features, portraying herself both as a young girl and an older woman, and showing her identification with the cycle of life and rites of passage.

Description of the Artwork

Two human figures wearing red cloaks stand within the belly of a large brown animal lying on its back and curled in the shape of a crescent moon. The animal's profile shows its open eye, erect ears, and parted lips, which expose its tongue and sharp teeth. The animal's tail and its four limbs with visible nails extend upward, surrounding the two figures. The taller of the two human figures is dressed in white and the shorter one is in yellow and blue. The two figures embrace, gazing at each other. Where the wolf and figures meet there are thick red marks. The background is white with hints of black ink at the edges.

¹Fay Hirsh, "Mortal Coils," *Art in America* (May 2004): 124.

Questions for Viewing *Born*

Describe the two human figures. What do you notice about their facial expressions and body language? How are they dressed? What might their relationship be?

Describe the animal. How is it posed? What is its expression? Do you think it is alive or dead? What visual clues support your answer?

Consider the relationship between the two human figures and the animal. Describe how they are visually connected. What ideas does this connection suggest?

This painting was inspired by the story "Little Red Riding Hood." What elements does Kiki Smith borrow from the story? What might the red hood symbolize? What or who might the wolf symbolize or personify?

In one version of the Brothers Grimm's story "Little Red Riding Hood," a hunter cuts open a wolf's stomach and pulls out a grandmother and child. Smith's version of the story is illustrated from a feminist perspective. What components of the fairytale has she altered to express this perspective? Support your answer with visual details in the artwork.

The artist has used her own self-portrait for each of the figure's faces. What might the artist be suggesting about her own life by including these self-portraits? Does this change your understanding of the artwork? How?

Why do you think Smith titled this artwork *Born*? Read the following quote from Smith. Does this information about the artist's point of view change your opinion?

I'm not making art about being a woman able to reproduce. I haven't reproduced and know very little of it in that way. To me, making stuff about birth is about the fact that one is born oneself rather than that one is a capable breeder. That's an entirely different thing. Everyone is born. That's how you get here, and it's also something that you have to keep on repeating over and over again to keep your life vital— to be a phoenix, to make new, or renew, your life existence.²

²See www.jca-online.com/ksmith.html

Activities

Art Activity

Kiki Smith uses the printmaking technique known as **lithography**. She makes lines on a printing plate that is later covered in ink and pressed onto paper. The repetition of small lines is referred to as mark-making. This technique allows Smith to create texture and detail, as in the wolf's coat or on the faces of the figures.

A preliminary activity to practice mark-making and clustering marks is to create a value scale with ten 1x1-inch boxes using a medium-point marker. Now, apply this knowledge about value and mark-making to another medium. For example, scratchboard is a practical material that can be used for mark-making with immediate results; printmaking materials that can create printed images include Styrofoam, linoleum, and easy-cut rubber.

Writing Activity

Archetypal characters in childhood stories and folktales may have an impact on the way we view ourselves and the world around us. Discuss the possible archetypal references in the artwork and the characters in the story that inspired the artwork. Focus on the possible origins of gender stereotypes that Smith may be addressing in her work. Write a folktale or rewrite an old one. Illustrate the story to show any archetypal characters in a new way that is meaningful.

Science Activity

Kiki Smith is an artist and a scientist. As a medical technician, she learned firsthand how the systems of the body operate. When her cat Ginzer died, Smith traced its outline onto a printing plate and continued over the next two years to create a series of prints of dead animals. Smith's observations from real life are reminiscent of those of artists and scientists of the Renaissance period. Use real-life specimens or reproductions to carefully practice detailed line drawings of human and animal body parts.

Resources

The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales. Written by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith. Illustrated by Lane Smith. New York: Penguin, 2002

This book is a collection of parodies of famous children's stories and fairy tales, which highlights storytelling conventions in humorous ways.

From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers. Written by Marina Warner. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995; Noonday paperback edition, 1996

This book explains real-life themes found in wives' tales, including those written by the Brothers Grimm, and how they are used to skillfully convey messages to adults and children.

www.pbs.org/art21/artists/smith

Art:21 provides access to biographies, interviews, clips, images of art, and links to Web resources for Kiki Smith, who was featured in Season 3 of the Art:21 video series.

www.bartleby.com/107

This is an online edition of *Gray's Anatomy of the Human Body* from Bartleby.com. It features reproductions of 1,247 vibrant engravings from the classic 1918 publication. *Gray's Anatomy* was heavily studied by Smith.

www.brooklynkids.org/index.php/schoolprograms/portablemuseum

A link to the Brooklyn Children's Museum's portable museum kits. Scientific specimens, including animal and human skeletons, preserved birds, and insect collections can be rented to observe and draw from.

Concepts for Visual Literacy

Archetype: The original pattern from which all things of the same type are representations or copies

Feminism: A social and political movement based on the premise that women are equal to men and should have equal rights and opportunities

Intertextuality: Referring to, remaking, re-creating, or borrowing of visual ideas and elements from the past to pay homage to or modernize an idea

Personification: The use of animals or characters to express abstract ideas

Symbolism: The applied use of signs or objects that have acquired a fixed meaning

Burning Down the House was organized by Maura Reilly, founding curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, and Nicole J. Caruth, independent curator and former Manager of Interpretive Materials at the Brooklyn Museum.

Brooklyn Museum

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