

Kiki Smith, What I Saw on the Road, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy

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Kiki Smith

← *Girl*, 2014.

Photo : courtesy of Lorcan O'Neill Gallery, Rome

→ *Fortune*, 2014.

Photo : courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, New York

→ *Earth*, 2012.

Photo : courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, New York

→ *Underground*, 2012.

Photo : courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, New York

Kiki Smith

What I Saw on the Road

What I Saw on the Road is Kiki Smith's first solo exhibition at a public institution in Italy. It is a small show in the Pitti Palace's Andito degli Angiolini, and it is ostensibly an "exhaustive overview" of Smith's "more recent output, the result of an in-depth change in her expression and style" in the last twenty years. The exhibition is framed as a "splendid fairy tale" of nature in which the primary players are animals and where hierarchies have been abolished, but where, simultaneously, a woman's "revolutionary energy" is unleashed. Intriguingly, one of the curators has described the show as an invitation to reflect on the "precious vulnerability" of the human condition in relation to the complexity of life.

As curators Renata Pintus and Eike Schmidt note, in the 1990s Smith became known for her sculptural works depicting bodies, particularly female bodies. Indeed, Smith made her mark with abject feminist sculptural works such as *Blood Pool* (Art Institute of Chicago, 1992), a painted bronze sculpture of a young woman, or girl, curled up in the fetal position. A row of teeth protrudes from her spine, suggesting, perhaps, an oral fixation and a transgression of the boundary between inside and outside of the body that characterized early 1990s abject art.

Although the curators remark that in these more recent works Smith "goes outside the body," there are several human figures, almost always nude, represented in *What I Saw on the Road*. Most are young and female, although there is one nude male subject as well. The exhibition includes approximately forty artworks, encompassing brightly coloured jacquard cotton tapestries, bronze, silver, and wood sculptures, and works on paper. The tapestries are the most compelling works in the show by far, in part because they take up the most space, but also because they recall Smith's earlier engagement with bodies in order to unveil complex human experiences and fears.

Three tapestries hang in a row in the first room, so they inevitably read as a narrative. The first tapestry, *Fortune* (2014), depicts a deer standing peacefully in a snowy landscape. The second, *Earth* (2012), represents a nude woman with wrinkles around her eyes, as well as laugh lines and/or frown lines surrounding her lips. A tree below her feet mutates into a large snake, which slinks along the upper edge of the tapestry. Clearly we are meant to read this woman as Eve. In the next tapestry, *Underground* (2012), a naked man floats near the top of the piece; he is facing downwards, his curved back arching towards the tapestry's upper edge. He is depicted against a threatening red background. The curators would have us read *Underground* as a man's encounter with nature that is "an opportunity for serenity and peace of mind." This interpretation is undermined, however, by the threatening red glow. If anything, these three tapestries can be productively read through a lens of ecological disaster and climate change. But instead, the show is set up as though the law of Nature is one that is, and will continue to be, kind to humans, rather than leading to our inevitable demise because of our own hubris.

It is also surprising to encounter so many naked pubescent girls in the exhibition. For example, in a tapestry entitled *Congregation* (2014) a nude blonde girl is depicted seated on a tree branch, and branches are also growing out of her eyes. In my view, this is not a position of "revolutionary energy," as the didactic panel suggests, but rather one of precarity. She is *literally* out on a limb. There is another naked girl near the end of the show, made out of fine silver (*Girl*, 2014). She has small breasts and a suggestion of pubic hair, and she holds feathers in her hands, but it is unclear whether this sculpture is meant to be read for signs of empowerment or objectification. To be fair, though, this is also the case for Smith's important and ambiguous sculpture *Lilith* (1994),



which depicts a crouching, naked woman and is usually displayed hanging on a wall.

Smith's tapestries produced between 2012 and 2017, although beautifully made, seem strangely dated, not because of their materials—many contemporary feminist artists are working with textiles to create radically new and powerful works—but because of their content. By conflating naked female bodies with nature these tapestries could have been made in the 1970s. Walking through the show, I was reminded of Judy Chicago's exhibition *When Women Rule the World* (Textile Museum of Canada, 2009), which included many of Chicago's textile works from 1971 to the more recent past. Smith's tapestries are not explicitly about women and power, although the curators certainly attempt to lead our interpretations in that direction. For instance, the exhibition's introductory wall panel refers to women's "uniquely female ability to heal the rifts and wounds in what is so often a world of brutality and discord." This is a shockingly old-fashioned image of Woman as particularly suited to healing and the care of others, and it is jarring for a feminist viewer to read this in 2019, in an exhibition of a self-identified feminist artist's work. However, the curators do offer an important insight when they observe that the materials that Smith uses in these works—including thread, a so-called "craft" material—function as effective metaphors for the fragile and vulnerable human body.

The problem with *What I Saw on the Road* is not so much the quality of Smith's work, but rather the curators' attempt to frame the works as a kind of utopian fairy tale or myth. Certainly we can read some of the textiles as a re-telling of the story of Adam and Eve, where Eve stands unashamed in her nakedness. But there are other possible readings that are even more poignant and urgent, namely the destruction that humans have enacted upon nature and the ecological disaster

that we are currently facing. Smith's feminist artworks are strongest when they are ambiguous, inviting multiple readings, both utopian and dystopian. Rather than reducing the meaning of this collection of works to a splendid fairy tale about a world in which there are no hierarchies and humans are not destructive, we could remain open to the various ways the work engages with the urgent issues of our time.

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