

INTERVIEW WITH KIKI SMITH

This transcript is from a conversation between Kiki Smith and Nora Lawrence on May 11, 2020.

NORA LAWRENCE: Can you start by speaking about the two flag pieces at Storm King, *river light* and *hudson river*, and how you came to make them?

KIKI SMITH: Living in the East Village, I used to walk along the East River every morning, four or five days a week, to 23rd Street to the public pool, on the river. In 2005, I made an exhibition in Italy's Querini Stampalia. I started making films of the buildings in Brooklyn on the East River, and whatever was happening on the river. I used these images, maybe from my phone or camera, to make films for that exhibition. I had them for years, and then about five or six years ago, one of my students gave a demonstration to our class on making cyanotypes. I hadn't used cyanotypes in a very long time, and it got me excited thinking about them. I was trying to figure out how to make cyanotypes that related to an etching process. I had my assistants photograph stills from the film, of the glints on water, and print them on Xerox. I traced and scratched them onto plexiglass plates, because I wanted them to relate to etching. Then we made cyanotypes from that. I started layering them to shift the focus, which made a movement in the images. I did that and I called them *Light of the World*.

Then I had my exhibition in Hydra last summer, and I had the ideas to make flags. When I first got there, I wanted to make tons and tons of little flags, like a reflection waving back to the sea. But it's all rock there, so it would have been too hard to do that. So, making larger flags was related to the idea of the shipping flags, like three flags on a mast. So, I made them for Hydra. I liked seeing them, and I wanted to make them larger. When Storm King asked, I thought to make them larger and see what they would look like. I had intended to show them arranged around a sculpture called *Wave*, like in a civic space, an arrangement such as the UN, with the flags in some kind of mathematical form.

The original show was intended to be works related to images of water. I had a lot of works related to water from over the years, so I thought it's nice to gather them together. So I wanted to make different bodies of water, and all different flags. Since we had a series of the East River, I wanted to make a flag of the Hudson River. Everyone who has houses upstate or lives upstate has billions of photos of the Hudson River. I took a picture from the Amtrak going along the Hudson River, usually I take the 4:40pm train when you catch sunset. It might be across from the power plant. I don't know exactly, I was really shocked when I looked at it up close. I thought we should have one that represents the Hudson River. I love the movement of the train, along the moving Hudson River.

NL: It's an interesting connection because with the other flags you're also moving, walking along the river. When you've talked with me about these flags before, you talked about the inherent movement of the flags.

KS: That comes from Vassar College, which has a history of making garlands for graduation, and they had these enormous daisy chains, about five or six inches thick, draped from one girl's shoulder to the next and up to the next, for their graduation; I saw that in a book once. I was really moved by that because it was a way to make sculpture that had qualities but no inherent form. After that I started making a lot of pieces that were disparate objects but in contingency, temporarily together, like in theater or an old version of war where there would be a whole village traveling with soldiers, and everything would eventually be disbanded and dismantled and everything would have to hold its own integrity again. There are these moments when things come together and when they're apart. But they have their integrity together and as individuals. That thing about a live sculpture, something alive.

I live in Catskill, NY and I go to a foundry in Kingston where there is a very large flag off the thruway. It's always unbelievably beautiful because it's very large and moving. The American flag is very successful because of its stripes, as opposed to different kind of patterning, which allows you to see the undulation

of the flag, you're very aware of the movement of the flag. That it's constantly moving and changing and not repeating itself, that's a unique thing to flags. That's the most complicated part of flags, except for what flags mean. Unfortunately, it has to be tethered to something...I would like to float fabric in the middle of the air.

NL: I know you had also made sculptures of kites.

KS: When I was young the first sculptures I made were of kites. Richard Tuttle lived with us when I was a child and teenager, and he was very influential to me. I did a lot of sewing when I was young, things made out of muslin, and my mother gave us kites, Japanese kites, and the fish that you hang vertically [Carp Windsock/ Koinobori]. I like that it can have this constant unforeseen movement.

NL: It seems like you're asked a lot more about nature than about landscape, whereas you seem to deal with nature in a very landscape-oriented way, and I was curious if you had any thoughts about that.

KS: For the most part things just occur to me, or hold my interest, or I find them engaging, and I just want to see what it looks like so that it gives me some orientation or direction for what I should be doing all day long. I like landscapes. I'm very much making icons, it's very monotheistic, my work. In the sense that I can't usually make things with more than one image at a time. Most of my things have one image in the center of something and that's it. Landscapes take up a tremendous amount of information. Since I started making the tapestries, they're more landscape-oriented slightly.

NL: You've also talked about the tapestries as introducing color into your work, and it feels related to the Hudson River work with that beautiful sunset.

KS: It was a way to have background. The nature of tapestries is such that they fill space in a different way, and they require, not absolutely but historically, a whole field being filled with pattern, content and color. Before I would just make a person sitting or standing without any context of space or where they are. It seems limiting to make everything so specific of time, clothing, fashion, economics, and so I wasn't interested in it. With a tapestry it requires a different kind of attention. It gave me the opportunity to make a background, to fill things in. I did it out of collaging things together, and slowly adding in things I felt I needed. The ways I'm making them are kind of strange. Mostly it comes from the actual construction and what I have around that I have access to in terms of patterns to put together.

NL: The flags are connected to the Hudson River and East River, and a lot of your work is connected to the cosmos and celestial bodies. In the viewing experience of these flags, is the idea of the sky in there?

KS: The sun reflecting on the water makes stars. It's the sun that creates the stars, which is a star also. They are pictures of stars. I made these big drawings that were the light on the water. But they were round forms, not fractured like the stars. The stars are about how the sun is hitting from a specific angle, and the waves moving it. The circles are more muted water, like in streams. I have 30 or 40 years of pictures of going out and being in nature, and how the water refracts shadows in swimming pools, creating large webbing. I don't necessarily always use them in my artwork, but I have tons of photographs of trees, water, everything.

NL: In an interview you spoke about water as something that holds memories.

KS: That's from Japanese research, that they see that water holds intention and memory. They can influence the structure of water, which is changing in relationship to us and its environment. Water is the holy sacrament, it's the primordial stuff we come from. It's where we come from. Water is metaphorically and physically enormously rich, it's the source when you speak of a river, but it is the source of life, too. It is one of the things we are going to continue to have a very complex relationship to, as we use all the water and as we pollute all the water. It has been the domain of women historically, where women all over the world are the ones who are carrying water, fetching water, cooking with water, washing with water. It's one of the big sources of death through contamination. It's why Johnny Appleseed and these stories of people planting apples exist, because people were terrified of drinking water. There are places where

people say they have never drank a glass of water because of the contaminants. It has biological stuff that people don't want in it, but also pollution. It is our primary source of life, our bodies are water, and without water we can't sustain ourselves.

NL: You had mentioned in passing that a lot of the work you've been doing recently could fit in a bread box. I was thinking about the public works you've made in the past, including the work in Central Park, and the idea you had of commemorating witches in different European cities. In your work there isn't an idea of "taking over" in making a public work, but working with the setting of the place, and I'd like to hear more about your thinking on making work outside.

KS: I hardly ever make things outdoors because I lived in NYC for thirty-something years. Many people I know make interventions, but to me I'm a homebody and I just want to make things to decorate. I grew up with nothing in our house. I am very attracted to architectural ornamentation, from friezes or figures on buildings, to noses on buildings in the Yucatan. The embellishment of architecture is something that a lot of the last century has tried to get rid of, after WWII, because buildings were compromised.

Ornamentation, narrative, and storytelling are really interesting to me. I don't have any big ideas to take over public places or the world or anything. I'm perfectly happy to just put a chair in a garden. I appreciate small intervention into space, but it's just not how my mind works. I'm also not somebody who makes things very big to begin with. In the last 10 years I have blown up things that I've made through computers, which has enabled me to make things larger. I guess by nature I'm not that energetic or something, and I've always worked at home. If you want to keep being able to walk across the room, if you want to make things large, then you won't be able to live in your house anymore, and I like being able to live in a house. A lot of my work, I put it under the furniture if company comes because I don't have a studio.

When I turned 50, 15 years ago, I had the idea that I should become a citizen, and think about civic space, and what one can do more publicly, rather than making things in private houses. Then I made the woman coming out of the deer, and the woman coming out of the wolf. I love the lions in front of the public library in New York, and I love Elie Nadelman, and also [Paul]anship's sculptures. I love a lot of 1930's decorative mural making, bas-relief like at Rockefeller Center, all over the world, in Germany post-war, there are tons of murals everywhere. I had the idea of making the deer and the wolf outside on plinths. What I think and what happens in reality are two completely different things. I think, oh, somebody might want to put this outside their library, and of course nobody does. I was in competitions for a time, which I didn't get. I thought, well I can't wait around asking for permission to make things, I just have to make them. I've made a lot of sculptures that are for fountains and people don't really use them for fountains, they just plop them someplace.

NL: You've talked about the Bread & Puppet theater and Mexican muralism, and these feel related to me. You've talked about civic life and an interest in engagement, and I was wondering how you relate to either of those?

KS: Bread and Puppet theater is about the scale they worked on, besides the content, and their deep civic activity, they made work that related to pageantry, which is something that is largely absent from society today. You have Mardi Gras, and the West Indian Day parade, but I haven't seen a float since being in Guatemala 30 years ago. I'm very interested in spectacle and pageantry, a kind of mystical experience that comes out of Bread and Puppet theater.

NL: Do you think that connects to the flags?

KS: I would have liked to make the flags much bigger, but that's much more complicated, with enormous flag poles and more expenses than one needs to incur for an art show. I grew up in a kind of mystical experience of life, and continue to live in an animistic world, where everything's about love, aliveness, animating life, mimicking life so that it has some semblance of life, taking something inert and trying to imbue it with life. The reasons why I'm making or doing things are about recognizing that forms have a holiness, like flags or blankets. What it's about to me is that, if it does something it does...if it doesn't, it

doesn't. That's not something one can try to conjure, but whether something does something or not is always questionable and contingent on you as an artist or luck or whatever the universe needs or wants at a given moment. That's not something I feel I have much control over. To me, everything I make is about honoring being here, or honors what is holy. It has a personal or private resonance to things. Everything is talking to you all the time. If you look out the window and see the trees, that's where the life is... outdoors is where the life is. Indoors, you rarely see life emanating, but if you go outside life is emanating everywhere. Sometimes as an artist one tries to catch what is alive or make something that holds some properties of that life, but vibrant life is right outside.