

125 NEWBURY

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KIKI SMITH



FREE PRESS

THEN AND NOW

Arne Glimcher

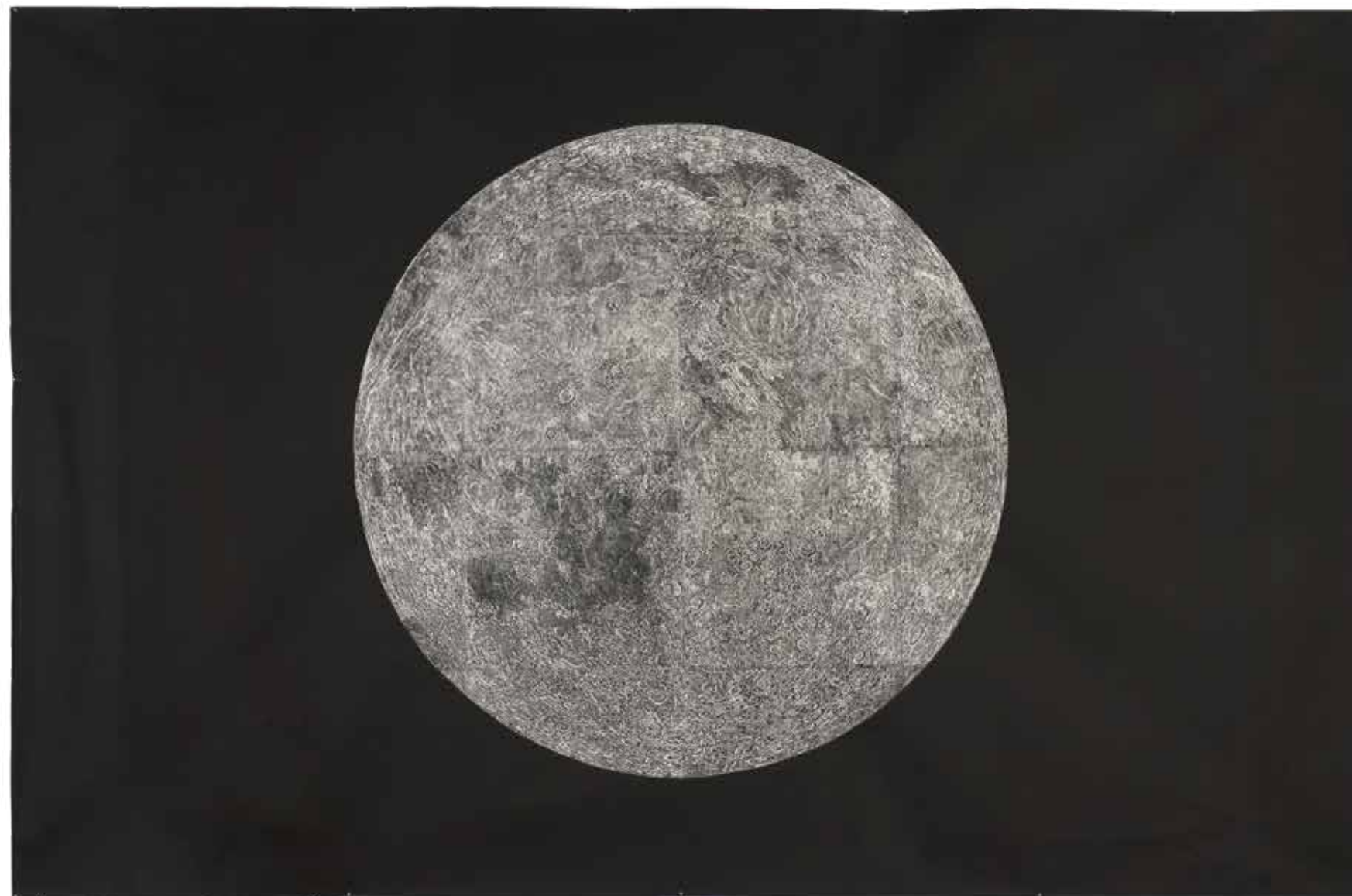
It was 1980 and we were sitting in the waiting room of the New York Presbyterian Hospital. Jane Smith, Kiki Smith, her two sisters Seton and Bebe, my business partner Fred Muller and I, comforting each other and waiting for the inevitable outcome of the day. Tony Smith was dying. Kiki sat quietly working on a piece of paper, churning it between her fingers into a kind of origami, all through the day. The feel of paper, which would become part of the currency of her practice, was a comfort. I didn't pay much attention to the object she was making. I couldn't have imagined she was already an artist.

The Pace Gallery represented Tony Smith, and he was such an overpowering presence that I hardly noticed Kiki in those early years. Kiki's job was making maquettes for Tony from his carefully worked plans. Coincidentally, the maquettes were also made of paper. Paper would permeate her career. Her massive drawings may begin on one sheet of paper, until the lines come to the edge and require an additional sheet, then another, and another. The drawing, and the paper, are in an inseparable race as this patchwork paper quilt reaches for conclusion.

It's rare for a family to produce a group of significant artists. However, in addition to Tony, Jane was an opera singer, an artist on her own, and Kiki, well, became Kiki. Seton is a photographer of hauntingly beautiful images, and Bebe, who would sadly meet an untimely death, was a promising actress.

Tony died, and in a moment of grief Kiki decided to cast his hands and face in plaster, a gesture of keeping him alive. I contacted George Segal for her, and she contacted her friend John Ahearn, asking for directions in making the body casts. These were the first casts that Kiki made in plaster, and it too became a material that she would use again and again throughout her distinguished career.

This exhibition, *The Moon Watches The Earth*, also watches over early paper figures and the most recent bronze bird sculptures that comprise the exhibition. The tragically fragile and the permanently beautiful inspire as optimistic avatars of the persistent value of life. *The Moon Watches The Earth* marks our 12th exhibition together in our 31-year history as friends at Pace, and now at 125 Newbury.



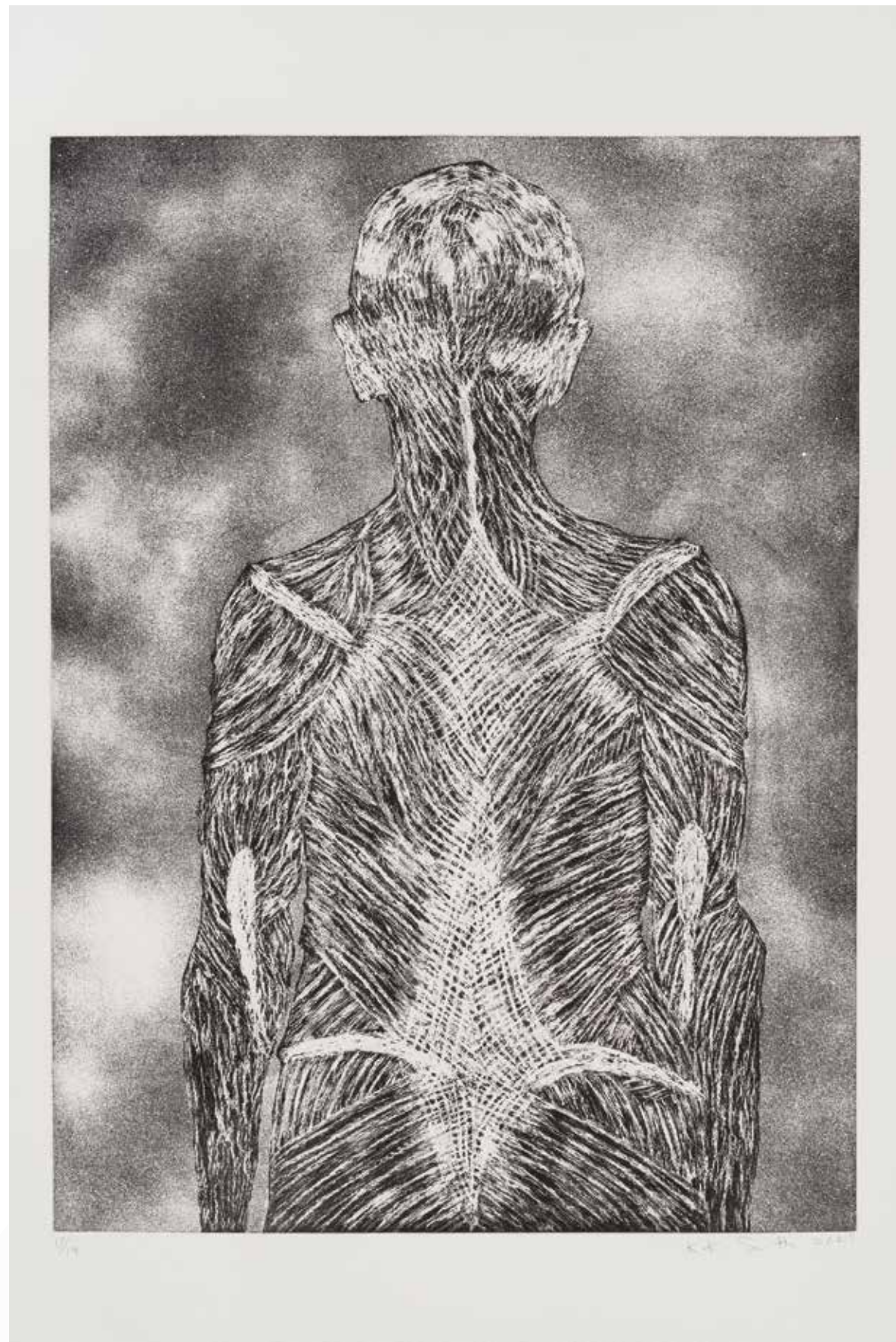
Wooden Moon, 2022. Ink and watercolor on Xuan paper. 8' × 12'



untitled (layered bird drawing), 2024. Crayon and watercolor on gampi silk tissue. 18¼" × 24¾"; *untitled (layered bird drawing)*, 2024. Crayon and watercolor on gampi silk tissue. 18¼" × 24¾"



Not yet titled, 2025. Bronze. 62½" × 58" × 1"; Not yet titled, 2025. Bronze. 54" × 68" × 1"



Dandelion, 2025. Etching and soapground aquatint on Hahnemühle paper. 38½" × 29¼"



Untitled (Meat Arm), 1992. Cast bronze sculpture: 31½" × 16" × 11½"



Untitled, 1990. Six papier-mâché figures and six ink on paper panels paper. 108" x 108" – 120" x 120." Installation view from *Kiki Smith: Hearing You with My Eyes* (2020), Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne (MCBA).



untitled (layered bird drawing), 2024. Crayon and paint on gampi silk tissue. 19⅞" x 25½"



Fall I, 2022. Cliché verre. 16" × 20"



Puppet with Moth, 2008. Papier-mâché with muslin. 80" × 30" × 40"



A BIRD IS TECHNOLOGY:
IN THE FOUNDRY WITH KIKI SMITH

Oliver Shultz

It’s mid-October and the vibrant fall foliage distracts me from my excitement during the long drive up the Palisades from New York City. I am on my way to visit Kiki Smith at the foundry in Kingston in advance of her exhibition at 125 Newbury, which will open in just a few weeks. The two-hour drive passes quickly. Before I know it, I’ve arrived in the parking lot of the foundry, where I find the unmistakable figure of Kiki awaiting me.

She greets me and we enter together, emerging into a small meeting room with tables and benches. Two neat, white paper packages await us. We sit down and unwrap two squash sandwiches and two squash soups. We enjoy a simple lunch together.

The conversation turns quickly to the topic of bronze. We discuss its long history in art over millennia. We discuss Kiki’s own history of working in the medium—her earliest bronze sculptures date to the late 1980s, when she was still in her 20s. She explains that for her, bronze is just one technology among many. Kiki has always been fascinated by technology. She tells me about how birds and bugs build architecture and tools, how they use everything in their environment to flourish. They have their own technologies. She tells me how artists are the same. “Artists are happy to be complicit in discovering the parameters of materials,” Kiki explains.

I’m surprised to hear her bring up digital technology, something that, to me, seems alien to her work. I tell her that the more art becomes digitized and dematerialized, the more I, personally, yearn for physical things, for bronze and stone and paper. Things I can touch. It’s part of what I love about her art—its materiality. “It just depends on your personality,” Kiki muses, “I like technology because you can use it in so many ways to give you a new experience.” We talk about scanning and 3D-printing, which has become a new technique in Kiki’s repertoire. These transformations keep things interesting. It’s a way for form to express itself.

The discussion turns to the word *techné* and what it meant for the Greeks. The knowledge of doing, the knowledge of making. I say that I think of technology as a mode of knowledge embedded in the act of making. Sculpture as knowledge—knowing as making—but even more, I tell her, I think sculpture is about touch. Touching with one’s eyes. “My father always said that he only touched his sculpture when the photographers asked him to put his hand on it,” Kiki says. She thinks perhaps this is common—that photographers ask artists to touch their art when posing for photos. “Some artists are very involved in their tactile experience,” she adds, “Other artists don’t care. It’s about whether it works for the work.”

We talk about the time we’re living in right now. About what a culture, a community, or a moment in history needs or wants from its art—what it allows us to perceive among the various different modes of expression available at any given time. “It’s what you can see,” says Kiki, “what’s available for us to be able to see.”

After lunch, we step inside the foundry, which is abuzz with activity. In every corner of the cavernous space, artisans are performing their special labors. We walk through to a separate workshop that is filled with Kiki’s works. Standing over one of her new sculptures, she begins examining the patina. It’s a bronze relief of a bird with one wing outstretched and the other held against its body—a dove, or perhaps a pigeon—that will hang on the wall of the gallery, one among several new works debuting in the exhibition. Several stars protrude from the body of the dove, which Kiki tells me is Columba. She explains that the bird has become the constellation.

“What I want is an acid yellow green, like motor oil,” Kiki explains, “This looks orange.” Everyone agrees it could be more yellow. “What I want is a green-yellow.” It will take several more weeks

of working with the surface to achieve the subtle shift in tonality that Kiki is searching for.

Kiki crosses the room to look at another of the nearly finished bird reliefs, this one hanging on the wall. This bird has a very different patina—a deep, rich, black patina that has been rubbed back into a brown tone—its surface abraded so the raw edges of the metal catch the light and shimmer. Red iron oxide stars emerge from the body of the bird. After walking around the work and inspecting it, Kiki picks up a long wooden brush with thick, metal bristles, and begins working the surface of the sculpture. She’s modulating the way the little ridges, which make up the feathered contours of the bird’s wing, will respond to the light as it grazes across them, changing as the angle of the viewer shifts in space.

Across the room, prone on the floor, are three more bronze birds. These look very different. Instead of the rich patinas that Kiki has given to the first two—and which adorn most of the sculptures she has made in bronze over the course of her career—she has left the surface of these bronzes entirely raw. Instead of buffing out the remnants of the casting process, she leaves visible the little rectilinear scars where the gating for the molten metal was severed from the object. She exposes the burnt circular marks where the rebar cage that held the sculpture in place was cut away.

Normally, such blemishes would be hidden in a bronze sculpture’s final form. Kiki has chosen to keep these marks visible. Pointing to them, I remark that they remind me of wounds—like shrapnel in the body of the bird, or even gunshots—but in other places they look like sutures. These marks are incredibly beautiful in their own way. Although the birds are riven by fissures and scars, their wings appear outstretched as if in mid-flight.

I can’t help but think about what’s going on in the world right now. These birds—these doves—which are traditionally symbols of peace, have been riddled and pocked. Here in the workshop, they lie prone, tragically, on the floor. In the gallery in New York, Kiki tells me they will be affixed to the walls. Despite their scarred bodies, Kiki will give the birds back their flight.

Kiki tells me the bronzes began as drawings in clay. She draws directly into the soft surface of a clay slab, creating the image as a negative impression. Before the clay hardens, a positive cast is taken in wax. The wax is then transformed into a bronze. This process—from clay, to wax, to bronze—lends the final sculpture a tactile, fleshy feeling, which has its roots in the encounter between the artist’s body and the clay.

I ask Kiki where these doves come from in her work. Do they emerge from her own internal image of a dove, I wonder aloud? Or do they have a specific referent in the world? Are these particular doves? Do they have names?

Kiki has been making sculptures incorporating birds since the 1990s. Around this time, she made a print series called *The Destruction of Birds*. The Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh lent her specimens, which she used as models for a series of etchings. I think about how many bird species exist only in Museums of Natural History, because they are now extinct in the wild. I think about how many more will become extinct in the coming years. One such species is the passenger pigeon, which used to be abundant. The last passenger pigeon, whose name was Martha, died in 1941.

I wonder aloud to Kiki if the birds depicted in her sculptures are doves or pigeons. She doesn’t respond. Instead, she tells me that the birds in these works first surfaced in drawings she made over a decade ago, maybe more. The drawings, in turn, originated from her study of photographs—not photographs of any one specific bird, but rather a variety. “I used to have doves when I was younger,” she adds after a while. She tells me that she had them for maybe ten or twelve years. I imagine the cooing of the doves in the various spaces in which Kiki has lived, the rustle of their wings, this soundscape of birds becoming part of the rhythm of everyday life.

What is at stake in the distinction between “pigeon” and “dove”? In New York, a pigeon is often seen as a nuisance or simply a fact of life—a species that cohabits our civic spaces with us.



Welcome or unwelcome, it forms part of our collective experience of the city and its life. A dove, on the other hand, is a symbol of peace. Kiki has discussed the dove as the Holy Spirit. I think also of Picasso’s doves. I think of Venice, where, not long ago, the city council poisoned the pigeons in Saint Mark’s square in order to thin their numbers, as they make a habit of stealing from the tourists who inhabit the square’s many café tables. In some neighborhoods of New York, people keep domesticated pigeons on the rooftops of their apartment buildings, releasing them in the evenings, where they soar above low-rise apartment houses in great flocks. I wonder how many of these domesticated pigeons defect and become wild, joining the ranks of New York’s millions of renegade birds.

In reference to birds, Kiki has also spoken of the story of Noah. When Noah sets loose a bird from the ark and it returns bearing an olive twig in its beak, this heralds the discovery of dry land, the beginning of recovery. In this way, the bird becomes a technology. In the story of Noah and the flood, the bird is a dove. In a sense, the dove stands in for all birds.

Kiki’s use of doves in her work is not unlike Noah’s—she doesn’t instrumentalize them, she simply allows them to be what they are, to bring back with them the tidings that they are wont to carry. The passage of the dove outward, into an unknown space—the hope of that voyage, the uncertainty of return—is like the journey the image makes in Kiki’s art. The passage of the image between materials is just such a flight. The transformation of the bird from a thing experienced in life, to a drawing in clay, to a three-dimensional wax relief, to the final bronze form, is not merely a technical process. This technique—this technology—is the work. The bird is both the subject of the art and the art itself.

This fact is nowhere more apparent than in the raw surfaces of the unpatinated bronze birds, where Kiki has chosen not to hide the vestiges of the casting process beneath a patina—as she usually does—but rather to embrace them as part of the composition itself. A kind of violent power is revealed here, inherent to the process of casting. In order to make something as solid as bronze, the

forces of the earth must be harnessed. Materials are transmuted from one state to another, from solid to liquid and back again. Energy is released in the form of heat. All of this is intensely primordial, even brutal. Similar processes are at work in the churning magma inside volcanoes.

If the tradition of sculpture has historically lent an imprimatur of finesse to the brutality of bronze as a process of transfer and transformation, Kiki’s doves refuse any such euphemism. Rather than sublimate the violence of their birth, these birds bear their scars—their stigmata—to us, like St Francis in Bellini’s painting in the Frick. Perhaps, I think to myself, these were some of those very birds to whom Francis once preached.

“The birds are first drawings of birds,” Kiki tells me again later on. “I made the drawings so that I could have them laser-cut in wood to use for sculpture. Then I brought them to the foundry and started hammering them into clay.” Kiki explains that she first made rubbings of the wood-cut images, which allowed her to capture a sense of animation in the birds. “I like animating things. I’ve always been very interested in animation. To make art is to animate the world.” The subject of Kiki’s doves, I realize, is animacy and animation. Donatello would have understood this. These scarred doves seem to speak of a fugitive animacy—as if they were empty reliquaries for their own departed saints.

As we leave the foundry, I turn to Kiki and ask her again: are the birds doves or pigeons? I tell her I somehow feel that so much is contained in this question. “Yeah,” she replies, “it’s true. Whether humans or valued or not valued. Whether life is valued or not valued. Who makes that decision?” Which bodies matter and what is the mattering of bodies, I add. She nods. “That’s what this moment in time is a reckoning of,” Kiki says gravely, adding that all these works were made in the last few years. I tell her I can’t help but feel the work is timely. Look at the news. Look at what’s happening. Every chance at peace seems riddled.

And yet, a sense of resistance in the face of tragedy accompanies the flight of Kiki’s birds. Although a thread of melancholia runs through all Smith’s art, tragedy always coexists with hope—hope in the capacity for expression, in the possibilities of *techné*. Doves are a technology of hope. Even as the bodies of these birds are fractured, they remain animate. In their roughhewn beauty, they vouchsafe the indefatigability of hope. “Everything contains everything else,” Kiki tells me, “All the molecules are always moving.” In the art of Kiki Smith, nothing can stop the molecules of the doves from dancing.

Kingston, NY
October 2025





untitled (layered bird drawing), 2024. Crayon and paint on gampi silk tissue. 26" × 18 7/8"



Fall V, 2022. Cliché verre. 16" × 20"



Puppet (detail), 1999. Nepalese paper, muslin, glass and wood. 8' 11" × 49" × 8"



Columba, 2025. Bronze. 62½" × 68" × 1"; Not yet titled, 2025. Bronze. 50" × 71" × 1"



Moon on Crutches Figure 3, 2002. Cast aluminum and bronze. 4' 6" × 9' 1½" × 5' 7"; *Moon on Crutches Figure 1*, 2002. Cast aluminum and bronze. 44½" × 92½" × 84"



30 Seconds, 2011. Bronze. 19½" × 29½" × ¼"



Fall IV, 2022. Cliché verre. 16" × 20"



15 Seconds, 2011. Bronze. 19½" × 29¾" × 2¾"



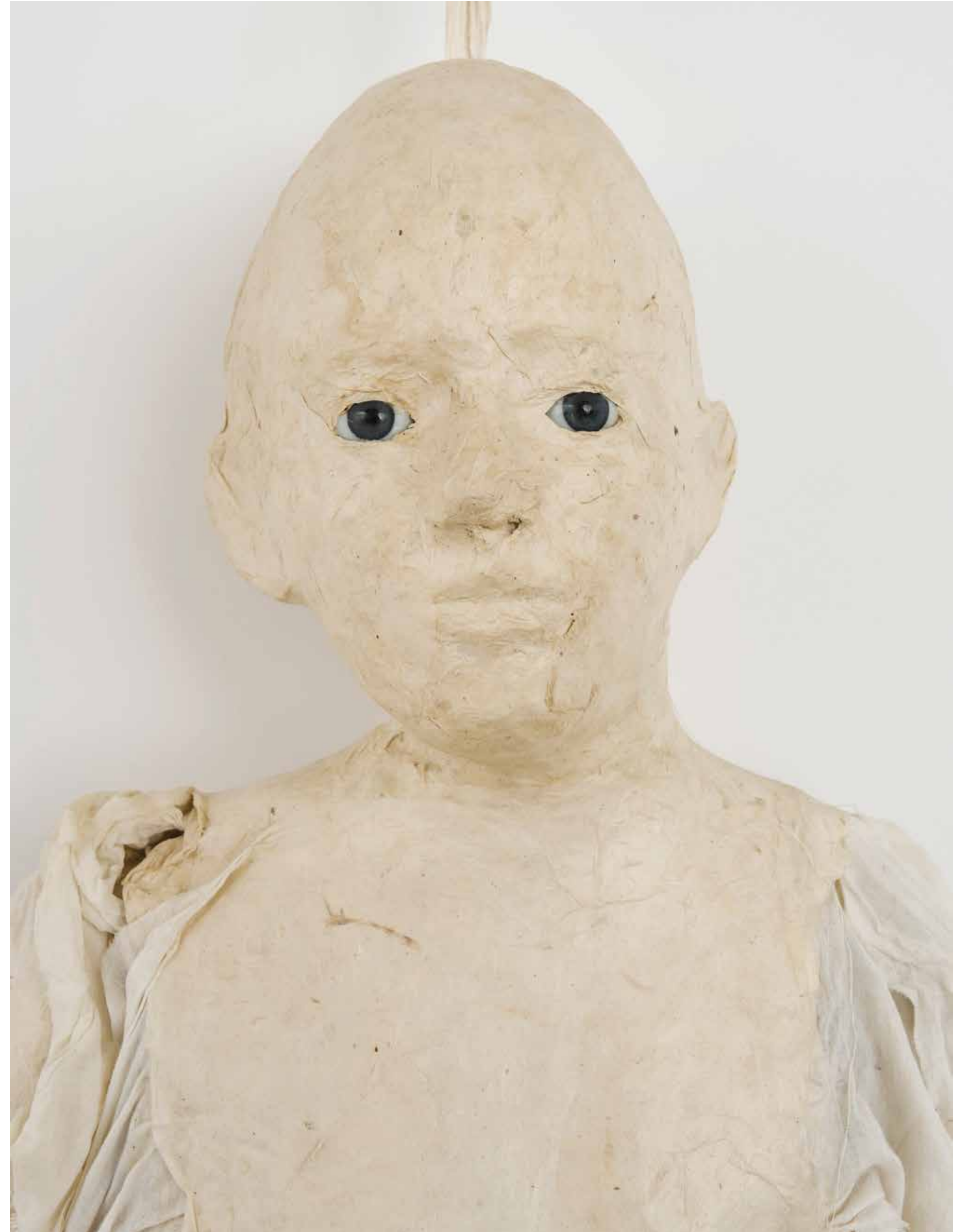
untitled (layered bird drawing), 2024. Crayon and watercolor on gampi silk tissue. 18" x 23¾"



untitled (layered bird drawing), 2025. Crayon and watercolor on gampi silk tissue. 19¼" x 25"



41 Seconds, 2011. Bronze. 19¼" × 29¼" × 2¼"



Puppet (detail), 2000. Nepalese paper, muslin and glass. 54" x 15" x 9 3/4"



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Arne Glimcher

Editor-in-Chief

Oliver Shultz

Contributing Editors

Kathleen McDonnell

Talia Rosen

Assistant Editors

Tumi Nwanma

Dylan Siegel

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Linco Printing

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Aquila, 2025. Bronze. 54" × 68" × 1"

125 NEWBURY

395 Broadway, New York, NY 10013

+1 (212) 371 5242

info@125newbury.com

125newbury.com