

Kiki Smith : natural etchings

[text by Judith B. Hecker]

Author

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Kiki Smith

Natural Etchings

In the second half of the 1990s the focus of Kiki Smith's printmaking shifted from the human body to the bodies of birds and animals, and to exploring humanity's relationship with other earthly creatures. She often sketched directly from dead and stuffed specimens (some deliberately sought out in natural history museums, some encountered in ordinary life), depicting them isolated on blank backgrounds that directed attention to their form and symbolic resonance rather than to their environment. Her regard for the life of animals was matched by an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of their forms—their shapes, and the colors and textures of their coats. During this period, Smith began a prolific collaboration with the New York etching workshop of Harlan & Weaver. She found the delicate line attainable with etching ideal for the depiction of feathers and fur.



Fawn, 2001. Etching and aquatint on mold-made Hahnemühle paper, plate: 18 × 24" (45.7 × 61 cm), sheet: 22 1/2 × 31" (57.2 × 78.7 cm). Publisher and printer: Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York. Edition: 30. Courtesy Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York

Smith's first etchings of animals were based on museum specimens and are characterized by simple linearity and powerful morbidity, as in the multipart etchings *Destruction of Birds* (1997, dated 1998) and *White Mammals* (1998), where the bodies seem to dangle in the space of each sheet. She then moved on to more richly described representations. To achieve the detail and realism of *Fawn* (2001), Smith built up the image slowly on the metal etching plate, gradually developing the varying textures of the animal's fur, the tufts on its chest, and the position of its limbs. The white spots in its coat were produced by burnishing, or erasing, areas of the plate. This densely layered portrait resonates with warmth, belying its source in Smith's photographs of a stuffed fawn that she borrowed from a friend. The animal is posed as though at rest, and the mood is still and peaceful. Even so, the floating of the image against a white background gives it a subtly unnatural quality that subverts the sentiments conventionally associated with this creature and underscores the limitations of taxidermy, which showcases specimens in death rather than in life.

Fawn was preceded by another compelling etching, *Ginzer* (2000), which initially seems to show a cat in a relaxed, curled-up position. On looking closer, though, one notices that the body is unnaturally limp and contorted at the same time. In fact Smith made the etching from the body of her cat, Ginzer, shortly after the pet's death. In an extension of her physical, uninhibited approach to printmaking, she brought the body to the workshop, laid it directly on the metal etching plate, and traced its outline. She next built up the fur with layers of etching, drypoint, and spit-bite aquatint, a process that



Ginzer. 2000. Etching, aquatint, and drypoint on mold-made Hahnemühle paper, plate: 18 × 24" (45.7 × 61 cm), sheet: 22 1/8 × 31" (57.2 × 78.7 cm). Publisher and printer: Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York. Edition: 24. Courtesy Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York

produces washy tones. A more personal work than *Fawn*, *Ginzer* captures the appearance of death as a way of memorializing the loss.

The pleasure Smith takes in etching feathers and fur reappears in depictions of human hair. For *Two* (2002), the largest etching she has made at Harlan & Weaver, Smith took photographs of an artist friend lying in her backyard. His bearded face and chest hair offered another opportunity to match fine strands with the delicate line of etching. The closed eyes of the upper portrait suggest a state of sleep or even death, while the eyes in the lower image are open and wakeful. Other subtle differences between the portraits reflect the process of their making: the upper one was based fairly precisely on a photograph, while the second image was drawn more interpretively. As in her animal studies, Smith provides no clear sign to show the subject's state: perhaps he is a figure at rest, perhaps he is a corpse. In our efforts to interpret these images, and the complex, fragile condition of life that Smith so often presents, this powerful ambiguity leaves us wondering.

Judith B. Hecker
Assistant Curator



Two. 2002. Etching and sanding on mold-made Hahnemühle paper, plate: 38 × 30" (96.5 × 76.2 cm), sheet: 45 × 35" (114.3 × 88.9 cm). Publisher and printer: Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York. Edition: 18. Courtesy Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York. Photo: D. James Dee

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