**Kiki Smith or Kiki Frankenstein: the artist as monster maker**

Maria Antónia Lima (University of Évora / ULICES – University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies)

**Abstract**

Very concerned with mortality and interested in the subjects of birth and death, Kiki Smith called herself Kiki Frankenstein. In fact, she seemed to be as seduced by anatomy and natural science as Victor Frankenstein. Following the death of her father in 1980, the themes of mortality and decay were very present in Kiki Smith’s work. Her main artistic purpose is concentrated in mending our fractured existence through the careful assembling of dispersed and lost parts of ourselves. Some of her hauntingly anthropomorphic puppets, in which her role as an artist is to metaphorically heal and reanimate the dead, allude to Smith’s Frankenstein fantasy. We can feel this artistic purpose reflected in her main topics such as anatomy, self-portraiture, nature, and female iconography. Considering the physical self as the primary means of experiencing the world, Smith depicts the fragmented body, exposing organs and body parts in a shockingly and nonhierarchical way. Her intention strives to show how our body is perverted, mutated or corrupted by the dangerous forces of society, science, technology and medicine. In her work, Frankenstein personifies this primal fear of having our body invaded by unknown forces that can totally subvert and violate our identities creating monsters.

**Kiki Smith’s Creation Myth**

In the year of the 200th anniversary of the first publication of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), it seems natural to evoke Kiki Smith’s works as part of a story the artist has created in association with the modern myth of Frankenstein, an artistic narrative where she presents her own creation myth. Kiki Smith has always been inspired by art historical works, from biblical and mythical figures such as Lilith, Lot’s wife or Mary Magdalene, but also by fairy stories and her own dreams. Her interest in mythology associated with her passion for the human body stimulated an admiration in her youth for Mary Shelley’s monster that was as able to shock the public in the 19th century as her sculptures nowadays. She once confessed she was fascinated by those Survival Research Laboratories that take dead animals, like cats, and reanimate them by motorizing their limbs. She compared this to Frankenstein, Jesus, or Osiris.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, unlike Victor Frankenstein, Kiki Smith never concentrated herself on the scientific aspects of the body and its presentation, but in expressing emotional and sensuous connotations related to her own experiences. She clarified her position saying: “The body is our common denominator and the stage for our pleasures and our sorrows. I want to express through it who we are, how we live and die” (Grosenick 502). This same curiosity about the origins of life and death produced the gothic monster myths that arose out of the late Romantic era, such as the Vampire, the Wolfman, or Frankenstein, which are like phobic allegories of the primal fear culture feels as the body is increasingly perverted, corrupted, or mutated by the unknown, intangible forces of society, science, technology, medicine, or in other words, humanity itself. Mary and Kiki always knew the importance of mythology to tell their stories of transgression where artists and monsters oppose and identify each other. They were both very conscious of their power of creating stories like Victor Frankenstein, who tells his story as a way of recovering control over his own life.

Both Mary Shelley’s and Kiki Smith’s curious minds led them to penetrate into the mysteries of life and death and to go deep into the study of mythology, as it was expressed by the subtitle, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. In this sense *Frankenstein* has acquired a double significance as a work of prose fiction and a cultural myth – as a novel of 1818 and a timeless metaphor. It made the great leap from literature to mythology, being a symbol of collective cultural consciousness as Don Quixote, Dracula, Alice in Wonderland, and showing the ethical implications of the metaphor. Similarly, Kiki Smith’s work is also based on mythological subjects and modern archetypes. Her artistic method is synthetic, incorporating elements from ancient Egyptian and classical Indian to modern myths, including references to medicine and anthropology. Departing from some ancient myths, Kiki Smith created some fantastic figures like the *Sirens* (2007)and *Standing Harpies* (2001) which are hybrid creatures having the head of a woman and the body of a bird, based on the temptresses and monsters of Greek mythology. Her artistic curiosity has always led her to explore a wide variety of sources to tell her stories of life and death:

In making work that’s about the body, I’m playing with the indestructibility of life, where life is this ferocious force that keeps propelling us. At the same time, … you can just pierce it and it dies. I’m always playing between these two extremes. (Smith in Wellman 54)

During the early 1990s, Smith gained widespread attention for her life-size figures of wax and bronze depicting naked female bodies in disturbing, visceral poses. She also began making prints whose images are often based on images of her own face and body. More recently, her subjects have expanded to include animals, the cosmos, and nature; in pieces that merge human and animal features. She has created new mythologies that invite us to reexamine ourselves, our history, and our place in the world.

**Kiki Smith or Kiki Frankenstein – A Self-Referential Creative Process**

Very concerned with mortality and interested in the subjects of birth and death, Smith called herself Kiki Frankenstein. In fact, she seemed to be as seduced by anatomy and natural science as Victor Frankenstein. Several of her drawings and sculptures depict inwards and parts of the body, such as *Ribcage* (1987), *Shield* (1988), a pregnant belly used as a shield, or *Second Choice* (1987), organs presented like fruits in a ceramic fruit bowl, as a reaction to the trade of organs.

Following the death of her father in 1980, the themes of mortality and decay were very present in Kiki Smith’s work. She offered clinical treatments of human organs in her sculptures of the period, including *Glass Stomach* (1985), *Untitled* (*Heart*) (1986), and *Second Choice* (1987), a bowl of lungs, liver, spleen and heart. *Hand in Jar* (1983) – a latex hand, covered in algae and submerged in a mason jar filled with water – resulted in a morbid and poetic sculpture. “First I made anatomical drawings, drawings of particles and cells,” Smith recounted, “then works about systems in the body, like the lymph and the digestive system, then works about skin, then whole figures and sculptures based on different cosmologies. And then, through the cosmologies, animals.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In all cases, art is clearly an animated creation for Smith — it has its own aura or soul, beyond just expressing what is in hers. The writer Marina Warner observed that Smith’s works look “unblinkingly at the life in dead things.”[[3]](#footnote-3) When she was a child, Smith had little shrines and mummies for dead animals and put necklaces on them. Her mother described her making a shrine to Mother Mary.

When her sister died of AIDS in 1988, her sculptures turned into symbols of inner injury and vulnerability, such as *Virgin Mary*, *Tale* and *Blood Pool*. In many of her works, created after these two family losses, the mad scientist’s laboratory is evoked by the disembodied part, showing a preserved decadence and an inevitable sense of isolation due to the long periods of disconnection with the outside world. Therefore, it is natural that Smith’s main artistic purpose is concentrated in mending our fractured existence through the careful assembling of dispersed and lost parts of ourselves. Some of her hauntingly anthropomorphic puppets, in which her role as an artist is to metaphorically heal and reanimate the dead, allude to Smith’s Frankenstein fantasy.

We can feel this artistic purpose reflected in her main topics such as anatomy, self-portraiture, nature, and female iconography. Considering the physical self as the primary means of experiencing the world, Smith depicts the fragmented body, exposing organs and body parts in a shockingly and uncanny way. Her intention strives to show how our body is perverted, mutated or corrupted by the dangerous forces of society, science, technology and medicine. Frankenstein personifies this primal fear of having our body invaded by unknown forces that can totally subvert and violate our identities.

Smith’s commitment to the representation of the body is rooted in her fundamentally humanist perspective. For her, the body is our existential condition, creating many limits and possibilities for our lives in a particular time and place. In an interview to Robin Winters she stated: “I think I chose the body as a subject, not consciously, but because it is the one form that we all share; it’s something that everybody has their own authentic experience with.” (132). This existential demand for answers to the mystery of life, so common to tragic figures as Oedipus and Hamlet, is also very central in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, where some very well-known expressive questions are asked by the monster: “My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?” (134). And all these questions seem to lead to a final fatal answer or conclusion: “My form is a filthy type of yours” (136). Just as the creator and the creature tend to merge their identities in the novel, also in Mary Shelley’s and in Kiki Smith’s own roles as artists the categories of creator and creature mirror and overlap one another. If the monster identifies itself with his creator, Victor Frankenstein can’t help seeing his own image projected on the hideous body of his monster. As an artist, Kiki Smith was also able to find her own identity reflected in her works that, like Mary Shelley’s creature, can be considered her “hideous progenies”. In an essay called “Frankenstein’ Fallen Angel”, Joyce Carol Oates saw “the monster as an outsized mirror-image of his creator” (251), which shows the self-referential power of Shelley’s novel, where the ugliest creature can represent the demon id of his creator’s deepest self. Identifying herself with some of her most terrible creations, Kiki Smith also found that making “horrific things” can serve as type of “exorcism … making the scariest things you can make and placing them outside you, to protect one’s internal psychic being.” (Posner 22). Due to this protective and cathartic method, Smith succeeded in maintaining a certain balance in her life, which led her to confess that she was only a middle aged woman that was not yet in the mood to disappear, because it took her a long time to get here: “I’m just trying to have a good life; that is my ambition: to be better at being here.” (*Ibid.* 42). It seems that, like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,the creative process of Kiki Smith’s works also told her a cautionary tale: “Seek happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries.” (236). This can be, perhaps, the common advice created by the true story of all those who seek to explore “the unknown powers” and to “unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” (40).

This similarity between the creative processes of a 19th century writer and a contemporary sculptor can happen very naturally, because in the past this association between several kinds of creators was always very present in the first stories written about obsessed artists or scientists. The kind of creator-figure we find in these stories is a peculiar mixture of artist, philosopher, craftsman, and chemical experimenter. What is repeatedly shown in these tales of transgression is how the secret skill, which makes the protagonist independent and severs his social ties, becomes an obsessional end in itself and masters the master. These narratives were often also explorations of the Romantic crisis of artistic identity, self-reflexive fictions of creative aspiration and its uncertainties. As Chris Baldick concluded *In Frankenstein’s Shadow*:“In many of the best tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann and Nathaniel Hawthorne, artists of various kinds discover the destructive and damning qualities of their own creations, which typically develop autonomous powers and overwhelm their creators.” (64).

Presenting a vision of catastrophic creation, arising artificially from fragments, *Frankenstein* reflects the drama of the creative process showing that its author was not very trusting of creativity, the imagination, intellectual ambition and writing itself, a fact that originated a self-referential work, where literary creation, as every other art form, can be seen as a process of assembling and combining pre-existing elements. An example of the sculptor as monster maker, Kiki Smith can also be compared to a perverse creator who is able to associate a perversely modern creation tale with the ancient biblical story, never stopping producing artistic acts of reanimation through her capacity of taking damaged bodies and making them whole. In her introduction to the 3rd edition of *Frankenstein* (1831), Mary Shelley concluded: “Invention… does not consist in creating out of the void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances but cannot bring into being the substance itself” (1996: 171).

**Artist v/s Monster – Opposition and Identification**

Both Mary Shelley and Kiki Smith succeeded in transgressing and subverting the category of the monster. One of the most disturbing aspects of Frankenstein’s monster is that he has fully human feelings. He has no mechanical characteristics and his need for companionship makes him more human than his creator. Similarly, Kiki Smith’s highly visceral works, that range from beautiful to the grotesque, are archetypes of human despair and they retain a sense of their own fragile humanity. As Whitney Chadwick well observed, they are “stripped of personal and social context and re-presented as disturbing symbols of social breakdown and /or psychological fixation.” (20). The truth is that her sculptures do not represent the fixed, self-contained, or harmonious body of classical art. On the contrary, they are more interested in the uncontrollable body that leaks, stains, defecates, and exposes his interior. Her most transgressive work is *Virgin Mary* (1992), a sculpture where the woman’s nude body is flayed, the skin removed to reveal bare muscle tissue, reminding us of the body horror that ripples through the Gothic canon from *Frankenstein*, whose manmade monster’s “yellow skin barely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath” (51). Considering the body as the physical form of spiritual life, Kiki Smith presents her Virgin naked and in raw meat, with her muscles and veins exposed as if she was ready for a special lesson of anatomy where the students could learn more about the experience of pain rather than some objective scientific knowledge. This work seems to be in direct association with other representations of female bodies by an artist who represents it as a form of resistance and transgression. They may be abject bodies that refuse to behave like *Pee Body* (1997) and *Train* (1993) releasing their fluids and staining the world, but their pain is absolutely human and evokes a spiritual dimension that opens the way for a certain redemption. Some of her women bodies denounce the loss of women rights and their humiliating conditions while victims of physical abuse or domestic violence showing them as survivors of many injustices and victims of psychological tortures. In *Blood Pool* (1992), Kiki Smith created a realistic and strangely surreal figure associated with the beginning and the end of life. It seems still barely formed, with a spinal column ripped from her body, but without having a particular face and her limbs merge into an amorphous mass. In such a position this woman shows her extreme vulnerability and a proof that a tender being, as initially Frankenstein’s monster also was, can have a damaged life with a body and spirit violated. Another figure, revealing an extreme condition of human life, is a white wax woman prostrated before us in a humiliating situation. Her posture of extreme supplication is intensified by her very long arms stretched out before her which turn her more vulnerable and ready for any kind of punishment. One of the most abject of this group of figures is a work entitled *Tale* (1992), made of wax, pigment and papier-mâché. This shows a woman moving like an animal and unable to contain her feces, which can be a signal of her psychological derangement, showing everything that she would wish to keep under control without being totally exposed. She can be ashamed of her condition, but this is exactly what makes her more human. When pursuing his desires for knowledge, Victor Frankenstein knew if we wanted “to examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death” (44) and, like Kiki Smith in all these works, he also believed that “I must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body” (45).

If Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* reacted against the negative effects of Industrial Revolution, denouncing the new tyranny which reduced nature to a machine, Kiki Smith’s sculptures also give us a frightful warning of the advances of technology. Referring to Smith’s *Tale* (1992), Jeffrey Deitich noticed, in *Post-Human* (1992), an irrational reservoir of negative emotions that may overwhelm these scientific advances, observing: “Kiki Smith’s flayed bodies, dripping with excretion, bear witness to the emotional wreckage that festers below the plastic surface” (43). In *Getting the Bird Out* (1992), we can see a bird hanging on a thread rising from the mouth of a human head, which expresses the direct connection between man and animal that Kiki Smith has always apprehended in her art. Once she looked at some Assyrian reliefs and noticed the figures in them “morphed between humans and animals, birds and humans.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In *Women Artists in the 20th  and 21st Century*, it is underlined the capacity Kiki’s art works have to present the world as a whole in the reality of its dichotomies and their power to make the excesses of the present more comprehensible, concluding that “she creates a new feeling for nature and the human body, re-animates its significance in a technologically and scientifically oriented world, and provokes reflection with shocking but also poetic images.” (505) Also very concerned with the precarious state of our ecosystem, Kiki Smith is worried with the disregard for the relationship that once existed among humans, birds and animals, and the natural world, believing that nature has become a “ruptured space”. Very often in her work she represents birds and animals as corpses, with the intention of domesticating death, finding beauty in its most disturbing aspects. She has the same Frankensteinian and romantic ideal about the importance of the creative process of the artist as symbol for all human engagement with the world. For her, the artist has to assume the role of healer and creator while symbolically reanimates lifeless creatures through art, reminding us of our mortality, but also suggesting that there is a possibility of rebirth and regeneration. While being a kind of Prometheus Plasticator, like Victor Frankenstein, because she was extremely inventive in her use of materials throughout her career, modeling wax to create the human form, Kiki Smith was always very interested in this ethical role of the artist. In an interview to Christopher Lyon, she felt the necessity to make clear that, in spite of being a monster maker, she was no mad scientist. She said: “we are not doing research our lives are at stake.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Kiki reminds us here of the responsibility of art and its creators, like Mary Shelley did in *Frankenstein*, expressing her distrust of science whose experiences lead to isolation and loneliness creating alienated individuals who live detached from the object of their analysis and from all relationships. In *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* Mary Kilgour wrote a chapter entitled “The Artist as Goth” where she observed that romantic works were used to represent the artist as subject to higher laws and someone who reject all normal ties (203).

**Our Monsters, Ourselves – A New Concept of Self**

In the future, it will certainly be possible to create art that is also biology. If that happens, a new moral structure will be needed to help people to deal with the radical changes caused by artistic and scientific innovations that will determine their choices and thoughts. It will not be easy to decide what is good or bad about restructuring the mind and body. Technology will remodel bodies in a way that the boundaries between aesthetics and genetic engineering will possibly be surpassed and some monsters can probably be created.

In *Post-Human,* Jeffrey Deitich observed that “our new technological and sociological environment is gradually shaping a new concept of self, a new construction of what it means to be a human being.” (22). Together with science, art will have the important role of not only discovering and representing new forms of life but also of recreating and redefining life itself, even when the “dream of reason produces monsters” as Goya’s famous work of art reminds us. However, these monsters are each time more like ourselves and become part of our complex and uncertain lives. According to Joyce Carol Oates in “Frankenstein’s Fallen Angel”: “The monsters we create by way of an advanced technological civilization ‘are’ ourselves as we cannot hope to see ourselves – incomplete, blind, blighted, and, most of all, self-destructive.” (249).

In an interview to the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Kiki Smith stated that technology is changing the body in many ways, observing that we now have transplants, artificial organs, and skin being grown from the circumcised foreskins of penises, and all the new ideas of reproduction it has created, including surrogate mothers, artificial inseminations, test-tube babies, hysterectomies, and abortions, have enormous ramifications in the way people view their lives. According to her opinion, everything is very different now, and it is difficult for people to change their sense of boundaries, or their definitions of who and what they are. Through a very disquieting art, Smith has always been trying to clarify these effects of our contemporary existence without forgetting the influence that Mary Shelley’s monster exerted in her work due to its enormous impact on our present lives:

Frankenstein is an allegory of what our body is now — a composite body where you’ve got your brother’s kidney, somebody else’s eyes, and a slew of surgical implants. People generally think of their body as their fortress, their landscape for being here, but this is rapidly becoming less and less so.[[6]](#footnote-6)

As Fred Botting concludes in his introduction to *Frankenstein – Contemporary Critical Essays* (1995), monsters function as “indices of deformity” fulfilling a socially regulative function. Consequently, revealing monstrosity or deformity can regulate social attitudes and behaviour (6). Kiki Smith’s monstrous figures only reproduce our anxieties and fears towards the monstrous and uncontrollable tendencies of the modern world. They are projections of our most vulnerable conditions and like all monsters, they mirror all our most disturbing secrets, but at the same time they are deeply ourselves. Their forms are only a filthy type of ours.

**Bibliography**

Baldick, Chris. *In Frankenstein’s Shadow – Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing*. Oxford University Press, 1987.

Botting, Fred, ed. *Frankenstein – Contemporary Critical Essays*. Palgrave, 1995.

Chadwick, Whitney. “An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors.” *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation.*  MIT Press, 1998.

Deitich, Jeffrey. *Post-Human*.Uwe Kraus GmbH, 1992.

Kilgour, Mary. *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. Routledge, 1995.

Kimmelman, Michael. “The Intuitionist.” *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 5, 2006.

Grosenick, Uta; Ilka Becker, ed. *Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century.* Taschen, 2001.

Oates, Joyce Carol. “Frankenstein’s Fallen Angel.” In Barry Moser, ed. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. University of California Press, pp. 241-254.

Posner, Helaine. *Kiki Smith*.The Monacelli Press, 2005.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Wordsworth Editions, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ . *Frankenstein – A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. J. Paul Hunter. Norton, 1996.

Smith, Kiki. Interview by Carlo Mccormick. *Journal of Contemporary Art*. <http://www.jca-online.com/ksmith.html>. Accessed 12 September 2018.

Wellman, Wendy (org.) *Kiki Smith – Prints, Books and Things*. The Museum of Modern Art, 2009.

Winters, Robin “An Interview with Kiki Smith.” *Kiki Smith*. Institute of Contemporary Art, 1990.

1. Kimmelman, Michael. “The Intuitionist”, *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 5, 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/05/magazine/05kiki.html> Accessed September 20, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Kimmelman, “The Intuitionist”, *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 5, 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/05/magazine/05kiki.html>. Accessed September 20, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Smith, Kiki. Interview by Christopher Lyon, April 4, 2005, in Posner, Helaine. *Kiki Smith*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2005, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Smith, Kiki. Interview by Carlo Mccormick. *Journal of Contemporary Art.* <http://www.jca-online.com/ksmith.html>. Accessed 12 September 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)