

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Lucina Ward, Senior Curator of International Art at the National Gallery of Australia, to talk about German-American multidisciplinary artist Kiki Smith. So let's start with what Smith is known for as an artist.

LW: Kiki Smith is known for extraordinary work. Extraordinary work that captures a number of concerns that I specifically find fascinating. There's a commonality to her work, but what makes it, for me at least, and I think for this project, is the range of her practice. She is known as a sculptor and someone who works extensively with paper, someone who draws a lot. She's basically a fantastic maker, and that's why I admire her work so much, is her range of materials, her range of ideas, and the way in which she seems to produce a kind of multi-valenced universe that you really want to kind of enter.

AT: And so because she works across so many different media, we've got film, printmaking, sculpture, tapestries, mosaics, artist books, performance art. I mean, what are the common threads? What are the traits that tell you this is a Kiki Smith work?

LW: There's a wonderful sense of progression and development, and we can see this within the works of art that are held in the National Gallery's collection. So the earliest work, for example, and the most recent acquisition is a sculpture called *Untitled 3* from 1993. That's composed or brings together a rough cast bronze figure with a spill of beads. And then we have wonderful drawings from the early 2000s, from 2007 through 2009, and these drawings show Kiki Smith's practice again in its wealth of materials and approaches. She uses paper throughout her career, but in these particular drawings, there's a wonderful sense of paper as parchment and how paper can be skin-like. And the figures in those drawings are very reminiscent of traditional Christian illuminated manuscripts, but the ideas and the way in which she refers to those figures is completely off her time. And then we have a series of three tapestries from 2012, and they are quite different again. There are many of the same ideas, but you know, there's this wonderful sense of being able to weave through. I mean, I guess in some ways, maybe the earlier works are kind of more in your face, more overtly political. The other, the more recent practice is maybe a little more, ethereal is not quite the word, but maybe spiritual in a earthly bodily sky kind of sense. A sense of the universe and how it's possible for us to move between spaces, and I mean kind of literally and metaphorically. So what's common to Kiki Smith's practice over the period of which I'm mentioning is the use of the figure. And that's one of the things for which she's best known. After period of emphatic minimalism in the Northern American art world and and further afield, artists like Kiki Smith and other key female artists and further afield from the late 1980s and the 1990s emphatically returned to the figure. And they do that for a number of reasons that are really fascinating. I think about the political period of Kiki Smith's early maturity in a really difficult period in American art and culture in the '80s and '90s, a period where things change a lot. And of course, what's probably most dramatic in the case of Kiki Smith's practice, her practice early on is very collaborative and she maintains that element of working with others. But it's much more collective in this early period. For example, she works with key people like David Wojnarowicz and others who are working with ACT UP and really fighting and arguing

about the need for the government not to abandon people living with HIV and AIDS. And in a period of extreme poverty and where people are kind of abandoned by health systems, these artists produce work that needs to be direct. It needs to be right on message. It needs to be able to speak very directly. And that's part of the reason for returning to the use of the body. But Kiki Smith is unapologetically conscious of what the body can do. When I say the body, I mean both, again, literally and metaphorically, what the external body can represent but also ideas about what can go on inside the body. And that's so key to this group of works from the early 1990s with which she makes her name. The figures trailing bodily substances reoccur throughout her practice. And we see figurative works made in paper, later in bronze, they're sometimes suspended. But there's always a sense of them, you know, moving or changing in some ways. Sometimes they unravel. She makes a pair of wax figures in 1990 that hang rather unpleasantly on metal stands. It's almost as if they're kind of propped up on stands. Sometimes her bodies look as if they're flayed. There's often a sense of what bodies that are leaking or somehow exposed. And the idea of the abject is so key to her work. So just to return to a more specific example, *Untitled 3* has a bronze figure, which is rough cast. The figure is bent over, almost completely in half. And she's rather exposed. There's a scar, a fissure across the figure's back that seems to evoke a sense of trauma. And it's a very open-ended work, but you know, there are some clues. But what she's surrounded by is a big spill of glass and sparkly beads. And these beads are joined together in a form that is quite like a, I don't know, like maybe like a spider's web, maybe like an abandoned crochet project. You know, there's always this sense of making and making do with Kiki Smith's work. And she refers to herself as a housewife artist, because she likes to work at home and surrounded by her things.

AT: Now, as we're talking about this emphasis on the body, I'm guessing that a fair amount of that is a focus on the female body specifically. Would that be correct?

LW: Yeah, Kiki Smith uses both. There are more female bodies probably than male throughout her practice. But sometimes those are paired. The sense of the female body in the series from the early '90s, which our new acquisition comes from, or rather the group of works, are probably, you know, read as female. For example, there are two related works, *Peabody* and *Tail*. And another one, which is probably one of the best known called *Train* from 1993. And they incorporate strands of yellow or red glass beads, or in the case of *Train*, papier mache painted brown. And it really is as nasty as it sounds. That figure, *Train*, and the other two, the color, red and yellow, and the brown, evoke, urine or blood or shit. So these figures trail these substances. And so we have the sense of, you know, menstrual blood or someone that's lost control of their bowel, for example. And you know, so these are these are vulnerable bodies and messy and often without boundaries. So we have the sense of a body that expands beyond the form of the physical body.

AT: And I have to say, when you were describing one of them earlier in terms of a body that has clearly suffered physical trauma, it's clearly wounded. I was wondering if that relates to women internalizing pain and making that internalized pain visible, or if that's just me projecting, because we all project our own thoughts and feelings and biases on artwork that we see.

LW: No, I think it's exactly right. I mean, I do the same. Others, I mean, that's the beauty of art, isn't it? It's open-ended. You know, we have certain prompts, but you know, the best art for me asks the best questions. It doesn't necessarily have the best answers. And you know, I think that's what we see in Kiki Smith's work. You know, her tapestries, for example, you know, are very closely related to the drawings in many ways. But you know, they're produced in addition, they're produced on a jacquard loom. And again, we have this sense of bodies that go kind of beyond the ideas of what the human form can do. There's a sense of a deep connection between many of Kiki Smith's figures and the animal or plant world. And that's beautifully captured in the tapestries. They're richly colored. There's a sense of surface. And throughout all three works or throughout the works that we have in the National Gallery Collection, you know, this beautiful attention to detail. The commonality is gorgeous things like a little bit of sparkle here and there that catches your eye. And again, that's kind of a reference to, you know, some of these illuminated manuscripts. But in the case of the tapestries, it's a reference to broader European Christian traditions, too, whereby, you know, an object that is woven and made for a very long period of time, at a loom, with all sorts of layering of history and labor within a tapestry, how that that can represent the story of someone's life, the story of a group of people's life, a sense of continuity throughout history, perhaps, or her story.

AT: It sounds like it could very much be interpreted as everything from, as you were saying, the individual level to the larger progression of societies as a whole.

LW: Yeah, I think so. By weaving these ideas throughout her work, I think this gives us a really terrific sense of the personal and the collective. You know, Kiki Smith is not shy about talking about her life and how it's affected her work. She talks about the loss of her sister to HIV and AIDS. She talks about the experience of, you know, growing up as the daughter of a really well-known minimalist sculptor, Tony Smith. She talks about Jackson Pollock visiting the family home. She talks about the, struggling for a really long time to kind of find her calling. You know, she does all sorts of work. She and another sister spend time working in the health system so that they, and I think this really is very much suggested by her work because, you know, we have a deep sense of, as I say, what goes on within the body. And that, again, you know, there's that emphasis between maybe what she's doing in the 1990s and what she does later. Religious mythology becomes obvious. But we've always got the sense of the idea of ordinary people and maybe saints in medieval art. We've got the figures that are quite androgynous. And we've got the sense that these figures are always reaching or touching or standing or floating. So again, that idea that they could be moving between different parts of the world. And so, you know, if we think about her use of paper, for example, she weaves together handmade Nepalese paper in the three drawings in the collection called *Lounging Legs*, *Mirage* and *What Happened Between the Thought*. So, you know, those three works incorporate lithographs, so printed image or ink and drawing with collage with mica and glitter. And so, you know, the drawings which are really spectacular, there's two that are very large and one slightly smaller. You know, at first you don't necessarily see what's going on. But there's little devices that she uses, like the use of these fabulous little sparkly elements that, you know, might catch your eye and carry you to come a little bit closer and to look at those objects. And so, we have this great sense in all of, well, I

have this great sense in all of Smith's work, of her ability to transform the simplest of material into really evocative works, which are really rich in symbolic meaning, but very approachable because, you know, we're always drawn in. You get the sense of the visceral, but I don't think it ever quite bashes you on the head.

AT: I do wonder also, especially if she's worked in healthcare, how much of her work is, you know, going back to that idea of making front and center the things that are usually hidden. So, particularly when we're talking about something like AIDS that, you know, the general public didn't want to face and really putting that in front of people.

LW: Nicely observed. Yeah, yeah, really. But I think the other thing is that maybe it makes sense to understand Kiki Smith's Catholic upbringing. For example, back to the sculpture, the new sculpture. I love this new sculpture. I've wanted a Kiki Smith sculpture for such a long time for the collection. But the figure is hairless, and there's a suggestion that this might be a reference to Santa Chiara, who's, so the the artist's namesake, who cuts off her hair as a sign of devotion and a vow of poverty. And Smith herself talks about the idea of cutting hair or the ideas of renunciation as both a form of self mutilation, but also as resistance, about creation and making more possibilities. So this idea of life, death, the body as a site of biological contest and collective trauma, which of course is just, you know, really pertinent these days. The balance that I think she makes so beautifully is this sense of a work being about an artist's experience, but not necessarily an individual's. So it's personal, but it's also collective because, you know, she's really engaged. Normally, I shy away a little bit from drawing connections between biography and an artist's work. But as I said, you know, in this case, Kiki Smith points to a lot of those ideas herself. The bronze she uses, the paper that she uses, the tapestry she uses, but probably the materials for which she's best known, early on at least are wax and paper, as I mentioned earlier. And the wax is really intriguing because of course, wax has has a long series of associations both in medicine or, you know, as death masks or, you know, she makes early on one of those really bizarre kind of flayed figures where she cuts into the wax to kind of open out what's what happens within the body. But, you know, her work as an emergency medical technician and her broader knowledge of anatomy may inform her work, but you never have the sense when she uses wax and that's often combined with, you know, paint that's red or colored wax or, but you know, what is the weird thing about wax and its use? It always feels drained of life. You know, I think it's no accident that if one is embalming a body or preparing a body for burial and, you know, you have to have a period where the body is exposed. So people come to pay their last respects. Well, of course, organic material does, you know, not wait for time, does it? And, you know, you often have to rely on wax or some makeup or whatever else to make that body seem presentable to those who've come to mourn their lost, their loved ones. These are all the things I find really fascinating about her work.

And of course, in this project, what we're doing in Deep Inside My Heart and the other projects that link to the National Gallery Initiative of Know My Name, is that we want to suggest the important legacies and series of networks between artists. So for example, Kiki Smith, you know, talks about her connections and her inspirations as people like Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, who's of course work is so beautifully represented in the collection here by her

extraordinary contingent. And, you know, a whole series of other connections that we're drawing between artists and women artists who've gone before, artists who come to prominence in second- and third-wave feminism, artists who look both backwards and forwards, because of course, you know, Kiki Smith has been practicing for an extraordinary long time. And, you know, she's developed a whole series of fan girls who are much younger than, you know, you and I and various other people, you know, so we've got this sense of collective. And of course, that's what's so important to what we're looking at with things like *Deep Inside My Heart* and *Don't leave me this way*. So *Deep Inside My Heart*, for example, is the title that's applied to one of the collaborative works produced by Tracey Emin and Louise Bourgeois.

AT: So *Deep Inside My Heart* is the exhibition that's on through 19 of May 2024 at the National Gallery. What was the focus there?

LW: The point of the exhibition is to bring to the attention of our audiences some of the ideas that we've been talking about. Key artists such as Kiki Smith, in the context of feminist practice, you know, the works of art that have been selected for *Deep Inside My Heart* refer to a period in the '80s and '90s where the body becomes important again. Obviously throughout history, throughout art history, throughout cultural practice, you know, the body is a key site of interrogation, you know, whether it's as an ancestor portrait, as a representation of gods and goddesses on earth, as broader, totemic qualities of objects that combine elements of humans, animals, and objects. Well, things less known further afield. We want our audience to know these artists better. We want our audience to see fantastic works of art and we want our audience to be aware of a project that has been going since 2019 in a period when a great deal of analysis of the collection went on and the recognition of only 25% of the works of art in the Australian collection and it's less in the areas for which I'm the custodian, was kind of shocking. You know, I mean, we knew it wasn't equal, but to actually have a drilling down into the numbers. So, and it made us, "oh, wow, you know, we really need to do something more about this. And so, *Know My Name* is a celebration and a commitment to women artists and, of course, joins global movements to increase visibility. And so, this idea came about through a whole series of wonderful staff and networks, both within the institution and further afield, to put a renewed focus on what our collection does and what our collection can bring to art lovers throughout Australia and further afield. So, you know, I work predominantly in the field of European and American painting and sculpture, and we have parts of the collection where women artists are really well represented. But we don't have, and particularly from this key period from the 1990s, for me at least, a sufficient representation of these extraordinary artists. So, it's partly about all of those things, but it's also about a kind of rebalance. Looking at what our colleagues are doing in Australian art, looking at what our First Nations colleagues are doing, looking at what our colleagues are doing in the broader collection areas in Asia, the Pacific, and further afield. So, you know, the artists in our exhibition are from a wide range of backgrounds. Our oldest artist, or, you know, our senior woman artist, I should say, is Louise Bourgeois. As, you know, we know she's an incredibly extraordinary practice, and of course, she lives to be almost a hundred. And Nancy Spero, who's not quite as long-lived, but, you know, again, is an artist who we think deserves to be better known. The extraordinary

Cuban-American artist, Ana Mendieta. So, that's kind of our first generation. And then, of course, we're teasing that out through a mid-generation - Lynda Benglis, Marlene Dumas, Kiki Smith, and the Australian artist, Bronwyn Oliver, who's represented by a key group of really key early sculptures, and we can come back to that. But then, this idea of generation. So, our third grouping is, in effect, Tracy Emin, Sarah Lucas, and the Indonesian artist, known as Mernie. Emin and Bourgeois worked together, both across mediums, in this extraordinary work from which the exhibition takes its title. And then, all sorts of other things happen. So, if you're somewhat off-put by the idea of bodily fluids, you're going to really laugh, I think, at Lynda Benglis's *Polly's Pie*, which is a work of art that's made of pigmented polyurethane foam, and it's almost like a collapsed painting. It's from 1968. It's the form of the material seems to capture the artist's gesture. And then, also within the exhibition, are elements of broader practice represented. So, performance, video, really intriguing works that are quite surprising in terms of material. There's a lot of humor in these works, and again, it's that idea of kind of pulling you in and making you laugh, or making you cry, or do all those sorts of things that really great works of art can do.

AT: *Deep Inside My Heart* will be on display at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra through 19 May 2024. Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.