

NATURE & SYMBOL

Exhibition Facts

Press conference	6 August 2020 10 am
Duration	6 August – 13 September 2020
Venue	Colonade Hall
Curator	Dr Antonia Hoerschelmann
Works	20
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Opening Hours	Daily 10 am – 6 pm From 27 August Wednesdays & Fridays 10 am – 9pm
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The special exhibition *Nature & Symbol* focuses on issues of human identity and existence – namely the struggle of coming to terms with our transient life's trajectory as flowing through space and time. Four positions from the Collections of the ALBERTINA Museum serve to illustrate the impact that considerations around gender, generation, and cultural background have on artistic creation. Offering a wide variety of viewpoints, the show examines interactions between the digital and the analog, as well as correlations between reality and imitation.

Franz Gertsch, for example, not only rivals, but transcends the natural by creating woodcuts from photographs. In his work, the female image is thematized, raising questions around the relationship between woman as supposed 'first nature' and her projected nature, her likeness. How are we to view a female nude? How are both male and female perspectives ingrained within the work? What is it like to define oneself, rather than be defined by someone else? The works of Ofer Lellouche and Kiki Smith then also engage in this discourse on identity, further contemplating religious, geographical, political and gender-specific aspects.

Several generations enter into an artistic dialogue in the exhibition *Nature & Symbol*, which features both more prominent and lesser-known works originating from various backgrounds. For a young Christiane Baumgartner, for instance, Franz Gertsch's achievements were a central catalyst. The exhibition juxtaposes works by Franz Gertsch, Christiane Baumgartner, Ofer Lellouche and Kiki Smith – all acquisitions or donations from the last two decades.

CHRISTIANE BAUMGARTNER

The German artist Christiane Baumgartner has revived the traditional medium of the woodcut by reflecting upon such new media as video and digital photography in her large-format works on paper, lending the traditional technique a contemporary dimension. Together with Neo Rauch and Tilo Baumgärtl, the artist can be counted among the best-known practitioners of the New Leipzig School. Her monumental woodcuts derive their effect from the tension between speed and standstill.

Christiane Baumgartner's works address such themes as surveillance and the indiscriminating anonymity of CCTV cameras. While none of her images derive directly from a source of this kind, they do evoke the character of accidental stills as produced by security cameras.

Transall

Transall is based on a photograph published in the magazine *Der Spiegel* that appears to have been taken with a powerful telephoto lens from behind a fence. The photograph has a curious quality to it, as if it were the product of an espionage mission. It looks unedited, as if coming directly from the camera, and is devoid of any expression. *Transall* shows military cargo planes lined up on a runway. In Baumgartner's works, the appearance of such planes always introduces a sense of discomfort and unease. Germany and France developed the Transall C 160 in the late 1970s and early 1980s in order to transport troops and weapons by night at a low altitude and be able to touch down in otherwise inaccessible terrain. The planes' threatening appearance is amplified through the large format of the work, as well as the stark frontal view.

FRANZ GERTSCH

In the late 1960s, the Swiss artist Franz Gertsch found acclaim for his large and brightly colored Photorealist portraits of notable personalities in the art scene of Bern – pictures based on unpretentious snapshots.

In the mid-1980s, Gertsch temporarily gave up painting, devoting himself to his monumental woodcuts instead. When the medium of the woodcut had seen its last artistic acme in German Expressionism, its powerful expressiveness relied on the deliberate integration of the wood grain and the anti-illusionistic two-dimensionality of the prints. Gertsch's epochal significance lies in the fact that he has revived woodcutting by endowing it with a radically new form.

In these unique and greater than life-sized prints – where of each color variant only a single impression is made – Gertsch works with photographic models as well. However, the vulgar “snapshot aestheticism” derived from real-life situations has now been replaced by reduced narrative detail and an icon-like monumentalization of the subject matter: initially, gigantic individual portraits of anonymous girls from his rural neighbourhood; later on, blow-ups of inconspicuous natural details from the meadows and waters near his solitary Swiss studio, to which Gertsch and his family had retired in the early 1980s.

Gertsch contrasts the powerful presence of his hyperrealistic works with the almost dematerialized phantasm of the monochromic woodcuts and their abstract colors: in the second half of Gertsch's career, the accidental immediacy of a shrill moment has given way to the permanent and general validity of quiet, meditative works.

Silvia

Gertsch creates his monumental woodcut portraits from slides which he projects on the wood board. The figures of the girls look calmly and straight into the eyes of the viewer. They appear open and unconstrained, but reveal little of their inner life as the artists avoids emphasizing any specific trait or characteristic. Resolving the picture into countless dots of light shimmers, the girls' faces look as if behind a tender veil, turning them into fairy-like beings despite the otherwise realistic representation. The color also changes the complexion: a dark tone gives the face a sculptural presence. A light tone etherealizes the person portrayed like a visionary apparition and underlines her iconic austere charisma.

Triptychon (Schwarzwasser)

Between 1990 and 1995, Franz Gertsch created a woodcut series of water pictures showing a river running by near his house. In the monumental *Triptych (Blackwater)*, the soft movement of the waves forms concentric circles spreading out sideways.

At the same time, the artist also works on the *Silvia* Portraits which have the same shades of tainted blue and green. While the grasses are represented with portrayal accuracy, the details in the portraits are reminiscent of plant or landscape shapes. Motifs from nature and portraits are inseparably interrelated. The monumental, wall-filling size of these pictures consciously correlated by the artist.

OFER LELLOUCHE

Living and working between Tel Aviv and Paris, Tunisian-born artist Ofer Lellouche's practice is crucially informed by a negotiation of the universal human condition as rooted in his specific multicultural background. Starting to experiment with video art and painting in the 1970s, he has taken on various media over the course of his career, including drawing, sculpture, etching, and woodcut printing. Self-portraiture and the confrontation of the human body can be seen to act as *leitmotifs* throughout his oeuvre. Here, the unity of content and form is of essential importance to the process: Rather than forcing an abstract idea onto any given medium, the specific characteristics of a woodblock, metal plate, or bronze cast are recognized as inevitably determining the work's final outcome. This aspect of engaging with naturally-given organic shapes and materials considerably heightens the effect of Lellouche's portrayals of the body, which are imbued with a transient quality as they become subjected to the deteriorating effects of time.

In their self-reflexive engagement with materiality, Ofer Lellouche's works thus negotiate the transience of human life, the psychological complexities of the self-image, and the supposed ideal of perfect wholeness.

Heads

The violent impulse in the figures' gaping black eyes, as well as the harsh network of lines, then also become discernible in his series of heads, whose rough surfaces and mouthless faces almost evoke physical trauma. The fragmented human body here again stands in direct correlation to the process of creating sculpture, which inherently requires the molding, cutting, and joining together of separate parts. Lellouche ultimately does not aspire to complete wholeness or perfection, as according to Judaism the creation of the human image is a form of idolatry.

Interior Atelier

Interior Atelier, a woodcut from 2011, epitomizes the artist's visual reflections upon the self-portrait and its longstanding tradition in art history. As Lellouche maintains that self-portraiture can serve as an outlet to "see yourself in a kind of reckoning with yourself," the featuring of both frontal and profile views of abstracted human heads creates a tension within the work between direct address and passive anonymity.

KIKI SMITH

The American artist Kiki Smith is known for her interdisciplinary work across various media, exploring the foundations of the human condition. Subjects such as the body, the transience of life, birth and death, as well as the link between spirituality and nature, are examined from a postmodern viewpoint. Her preferred media range from sculpture, photography, prints and drawings to painting and textile art. In all of these, however, the human body is continuously placed at the center. To her, it is “our common denominator and the stage for our joy and pain”; through its exploration she seeks to express “who we are, how we live and die”.

The art of drawing occupies a key position within Kiki Smith’s oeuvre. In her life-size female figures, symbols from mythology, fairy tales and legends, as well as Christian iconography negotiate Smith’s role as both a woman and an artist. Here, the Nepalese paper she uses is of particular significance. Fragile and permeable, its organic, almost skin-like, structure conveys a sense of vulnerability, as felt by the female protagonists, whose inner depths seemingly become exposed on the outside. Thus, muscle cords, tendons, and bones are visible in the two nude figures featured in *Blue Stars on Blue Tree* and *Tree with Yellow Roses*. Networks of lines, broken up and interrupted repeatedly, further embody flows of energy and emotion.

Kiki Smith’s representations of the female body confront the viewer with issues of gender and identity. Through them unfolds a fragile, female and often autobiographically connoted universe, asserting itself in defiance of the male-dominated domain of art and art history.

Banshee Pearls

The title of Kiki Smith’s twelve-part series *Banshee Pearls* refers to ancient female spirits, the *banshees* of Gaelic folklore, whose wailing heralds the death of a family member. With the choice of this title, the artist recalls her father who called his teenage daughter a *banshee*, thus turning her into a figure of death in her portrayals of herself. Several partly distorted and frightening self-portraits of different scale are combined with masks and grimacing faces. The production process was manifold: Photographs and photocopies of the artist’s face provided the material for both negative- and positive-working lithographic plates. Kiki Smith used childhood photos, prints of her own hair, and images of her teeth, which she carefully photocopied. The beauty of the flowers and heraldic symbols drawn on the plate in ink act as a counterbalance to the otherwise grotesque pictorial language.

Sueño (Dream)

Employing the most diverse techniques, Kiki Smith has dedicated a large portion of her production to printmaking: from early screen printing on fabric to linocuts, from intricate artist books to monumental multimedia prints, from photocopy transfers to reworked photographic self-portraits. In the context of the 1980s AIDS epidemic, the forces of life and death and the human body became crucial subjects in Smith's artistic practice. The artist found printmaking to be an especially suitable medium for her focus: "Prints emulate what we are as humans: we are all the same and yet everyone is different."

The intimate relationship with the printing process Smith developed eventually resulted in a direct interface between the surface of prints and the artist's body. *Sueño* (Dream), a prominent example of this approach from a significant group of prints to be found in the collections of the ALBERTINA Museum shows a figure curled up in fetal position—a recurring motif in Smith's oeuvre. Against an empty white background, the life-sized flayed body appears both imposing and terribly fragile. Smith achieved this by lying on the etching plate and having the printer outline the contours of her body, which she then filled with the sinuous texture of exposed muscles. The paper becomes a kind of surrogate for the skin's vulnerability.

Since the mid-1990s, Kiki Smith's continuous intense dedication to both prints as well as sculptural objects has increasingly looked beyond the self and the human body toward things and creatures of the natural world.

Tapestries

Cathedral and *Congregation* belong to a series of tapestries rendering dreamlike nature scenes. They refer to the famous tapestry of Angers, the "Cycle of the Apocalypse," which dates from the fourteenth century and shows the visions from the Revelation of John. Kiki Smith's tapestries form a counter-design to these depictions of horror. They unfold a cosmos in which living beings exist in intimacy and familiarity, with humans fitting in symbiotically. The works are based on collages in which a variety of materials such as crayon, ink and watercolor, glitter, printed material or cut Nepalese paper are combined to create a heterogeneous landscape of textures. Kiki Smith often added smaller etchings and drawings. These drafts were scanned, digitally combined and altered, then printed out in large format and once more reworked by the artist in her studio by hand. By finally weaving them to a single textile object, Kiki Smith emphasizes the spiritual connection between flora and fauna.