Kiki & Seton Smith
A Sense of Place

A Hometown Tribute Exhibition

Presented by
The Pierro Foundation and
The Walsh Gallery at Seton Hall University
October 30 - December 9, 2016

The three Smith sisters: Beatrice, Kiki and Seton
Our Sense of Place
Judy Wukitsch, President, The Pierro Foundation

The Pierro Foundation was founded to honor my late husband, Lennie Pierro, a passionate, community-spirited artist and professor. Together we co-founded the Pierro Gallery of South Orange in our Village community center in 1994. Our original goals for the gallery continue today as the mission for the grass-roots, non-profit Pierro Foundation — make exposure to good art easily accessible to the wide community, offer opportunities for regional artists, and inspire artists and viewers by example. The Foundation’s first initiative was a dream for Lennie: the installation of Tau, a sculpture by our third generation South Orange resident, Tony Smith.

The initial sense of “familial” pride and belief in a powerful bond between art and community is the same commitment that now compels the Foundation to pay tribute to Kiki and Seton Smith with this exhibition, honoring two eminent artists who once called a small town in New Jersey their home.

A Sense of Place delves into literal and symbolic influences our external world has on who we are. The tangible reference to locality aside, allusions to the mind, body, and spirit are inherent in the works of both Kiki and Seton. Although as individuals their bodies of work are vastly different, as a collaborative force, their sensibilities merge to expose narratives that embrace vulnerabilities and emotions.

In her black-and-white photographs, Seton captures the essence, the soul really, of a built space. In earlier work, details from the interiors of old homes present us with a white, railed landing on an empty staircase or corners of mirrors with vague reflections, tempting us to imagine the full scenario. Now, she turns to building exteriors in spare, white, indefinable locations, nestled within trees or bushes, with vacant windows. People are absent. Always. Once again, we are prompted to complete the narrative, wondering who and what figures in the story. The “place” is seen as structure, but it is only an introduction to what is untold.

Kiki puts to work a wide variety of materials, whatever she deems necessary, to tell her story. Liberated from any single medium, she explores the notion of “place” within her and within all of us, trusting her hands to tell the truth. Often, a singular subject placed on a page or floor or wall is surrounded by space, with no details to encumber, omitting embellishments which might cloud the focus. Line, form, and shape narrate her stories, whether they derive from a favorite fairy tale, a historical reference, or deep personal experience. Her framework is the natural world; her “place” is within, where all her art originates.

The Pierro Foundation is pleased to present works of Kiki and Seton Smith in collaboration with The Walsh Gallery at Seton Hall University. Together, we share glimpses of these two distinguished artists’ backgrounds, ideas, and significant works, revealing an expansive world of possibilities to our residents and visitors. We hope to inspire all who view this exhibition to form their own stories, and experience their own sense of place.

Self as a Product of Environment
Jeanne Brasile, Director, Walsh Gallery at Seton Hall University

The Walsh Gallery is committed to presenting exhibitions of international import within its humble confines on the campus of Seton Hall University and is pleased to collaborate with The Pierro Foundation. The gallery and Foundation both seek to enrich the lives of South Orange residents and other communities with art programs while supporting local artists. A Sense of Place concomitantly fulfills these seemingly divergent warrants as we honor two of South Orange’s most distinguished artists, Kiki and Seton Smith. The exhibition queries the essence of identity by exploring how our sense of self is inextricably defined by the spaces we inhabit. In the case of Kiki and Seton, growing up in the community of South Orange with their artist/architect father, Tony Smith, and their mother Jane Lawrence, an opera singer and actress — influenced the sisters to pursue the arts.

Both Seton and Kiki spent much of their formative years in their father’s studio, assisting with making models and geometric forms. Seton’s large format photographs appropriate the dimensions of Tony Smith’s scaled-up sculptures and his concerns related to navigation through particular spaces. Seton’s stark and ambiguous imagery of houses in various states of isolation and decay are as much about what is depicted as they are concerned with the psychological impact on the viewer. There is a haunting sense of both absence and presence within the imagery that speaks to the physical sense of moving through space. Biographically, Seton’s photographs relate to her childhood home, which she notes was “extremely sparse.” That sense of emptiness permeates her photographic prints, which are devoid of any human subjects. The imagery interrogates space, architecture, landscape, and the possibilities presented through the medium of photography.

Kiki’s path to a career in the arts was not direct. She was initially drawn to crafts and decorative arts before turning to fine art. This interest in various disciplines echoes her father’s diverse pursuits in fine art, architecture,
design and fabrication processes. Working in media such as sculpture, drawing and prints, Kiki’s work overtly confronts the human condition. Like Seton’s photographs, Kiki’s work contains heavy psychological underpinnings, but it functions more within allegorical conventions. Kiki acknowledges the highly-charged, emotional content of her work, which implicates the human body as a central and ongoing motif in her practice, while also addressing the natural world. Taken together, these interests, like those of Seton, ultimately address the human condition collectively, as well as on a highly personal level.

Viewed within this context, both Kiki and Seton Smith negotiate the complex psychological and emotional terrain in understanding the self and the manner in which place becomes a defining characteristic of identity. This exhibition honors these two distinguished artists by sharing their artistic achievements and formative influences in order to explore the complex relationship among art, life, and community. Ultimately, A Sense of Place considers Kiki and Seton Smith’s seminal influences in the Village of South Orange, while positioning their practices in the present, to query the very nature of identity and how it is irrevocably connected to the notion of place.

A Sense of Place
Dan Bischoff, Art Critic, The Star-Ledger

Kiki Smith remembers growing up in the double lot behind her father’s family house on Stanley Road in South Orange, right on the border with Newark, lying in the grass and looking up through the branches of the trees. “There are such big old trees in that neighborhood,” she says. “What I remember best about it was doing nothing.”

It was the 1960s. There were “like, 48 girls in six or seven houses” on the block, and Kiki Smith (born 1954) and her younger twin sisters, Seton and Beatrice (born one year later), used to roam around the neighborhood of rambling Victorians and American Renaissance mansions to find dead animals. Mostly they were dead birds. In that deep lot behind the Smith house, the kids would wrap the little corpses up like mummies, tuck talismans into the bindings, build tombs in the earth, and bury them, with great ceremony.

“I remember it as a very secure place to grow up,” says Seton Smith, now best known for her enigmatic architectural photography. One year, their father, the sculptor, architect, and theorist of minimalism Tony Smith, built a playhouse for them in the big backyard entirely out of screen doors. It was a sort of minimalist concept of a playhouse, a see-through rectangle with uncompromising lines, just as astringent as Philip Johnson’s Glass House in Connecticut — only made out of generations of battered screens.

At first glance, there would seem to be little resemblance between Seton’s austere photographs of tautly aligned interiors planted with modernist furniture and Kiki’s phantasmagorical output of figural, processional, and fairy tale-like themes. But as much as their artwork is intertwined, it makes its tightest knot in that old house, which still stands not far from this gallery. There the sisters spent their childhood listening to talk about art in an artist’s home while outside, beyond South Orange, the country went through a decade of social upheaval.

Teasing out the similarities is one function of A Sense of Place, a joint exhibition of the work of Kiki and Seton Smith organized by The Pierro Foundation and Seton Hall’s Walsh Gallery. In many ways, the sisters are still together. While Seton lives almost half the year in Paris now, she keeps an apartment on the Lower East Side in Manhattan not far from Kiki. And they share a summer house, built in 1690, in Catskill, New York.

But what they share most is that big late nineteenth-century house, where Hamilton and Stanley Road meet. The one that had sky-scratching trees, big abstract sculptures in the back yard, and a tombstone with “Smith” chiseled into it sitting in the front yard. The Smiths, Kiki has said, were like “The Addams Family” of South Orange.

“That house...was all about art,” Seton says. Before the sisters were born, Tony Smith was designing the art exhibitions of the Abstract Expressionists. Their mother, Jane Lawrence Smith, was an opera singer and actress, and a great friend of Tennessee Williams, who acted as Tony’s best man at their wedding. Kiki was born in Frankfurt, where Jane was on tour. When they moved back to Tony’s grandmother’s summer house in South Orange in 1955, Tony and Jane shared a Bohemian life with their three daughters and a revolving menagerie of artists, friends, and students, who made mealtimes on Stanley Road into moveable feasts.

“I liked listening to them talk,” Kiki says. “I always liked it a lot. And they were, many of them, pretty advanced artists. Like (minimalist painter) Robert Swain, (color field painter) Pat Lipsky, and someone who’s still very important...
to my work today. (minimalist sculptor) Richard Tuttle. There were many others.”

It was in her father’s house that Kiki got the idea of making art in her living room. She doesn’t really have a studio today; she works where she lives, on the Lower East Side or upstate.

There’s a famous photograph of all three Smith sisters (Beatrice, by then an “underground actor,” died from AIDS in 1988) sitting at a card table in the Stanley Road home, making decahedrons out of cardboard for their father, who would use their handiwork to assemble maquettes for his low-lying white or black sculptures. (Kiki laughs when she says she “hated” doing it — and also says her father’s way of making art out of many smaller components is part of her common practice today.)

The Stanley Road house has many of the elaborate, off-the-shelf features shared by the remaining Victorians all around it — deep moldings, porcelain door knobs, hand-thrown plaster walls, and so on. But inside, when the sisters were growing up, it was largely empty. Much of the old furniture had been carried off by one of Tony’s aunts, or slowly sold, piece by piece, to make ends meet.

“We didn’t have any money, and not much furniture, either,” Kiki recalls. “Mostly a few folding tables and chairs....We didn’t even have a television. My mother disapproved. We had to watch the Beatles on Ed Sullivan at a friend’s house.”

“I remember making my mother buy us couches once,” Seton says. “You know, to have something to sit on.”

“There were days in South Orange when people would put their old furniture out front for pick up,” Kiki says, “and we’d run through the neighborhood, choosing nineteenth-century pieces to bring home....I remember places like the Town Hall Deli, which was so beautiful then, perfect, and everyone was so proper. They’d call me ‘Miss Smith’ when I went in. And there was a very nice Italian grocer who’d give my mother credit, which was a big help when we needed it.”

What they did have were minimalist sculptures by their father, arranged in empty rooms as if at a gallery, and paintings by the then-avant-garde artists whose exhibitions he designed and hung. Tony Smith liked to show the art of family friends — folks like Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and many other now-familiar names.

At the same time, parts of the house were like “death wings,” Kiki says, filled with leftover stuff from Tony’s youth and his parents’, even his grandparents’, days. The house was never entirely their own — the complicated deed left by Tony’s mother entailed aunts and uncles as owners too, and at different times the Smiths were joined in living at the house by relatives. The place was layered in family history like sedimentary rock.

Tony Smith was born in 1912. He was named after his grandfather, Anthony P. Smith, founder of a waterworks manufacturing firm that did business with public utilities like the East Orange Water Co. The Smiths were Irish Catholic.

“My father never wanted to be, you know, ‘the son,’” Kiki says. “His father was on the South Orange Board of Trustees. My dad used to go around town almost furtively, scrunched down behind of the wheel of his car, in order not to be recognized.”

But the big house on Stanley Road and especially its double lot backyard, was a whole world. Tony Smith suffered from tuberculosis when he was young, and his parents built a pre-fab house in the back to protect his delicate immune system. He lay there making models — models of the cliff dwellings of the Southwest, where he’d traveled for his lungs. Later he worked for architect Frank Lloyd Wright, a fellow fan of the desert, who taught aesthetics as a kind of religion.

There was something about twinned opposites in the Smith home — Victorian decoration laid against an O’Keeffeian desert simplicity — that was not unlike Kiki’s dead animals and trailing bodily fluids contrasted with Seton’s architectural photography blurred down to simple geometries.

“I don’t think we had a hi-fi,” Seton recalls. “I don’t remember music — well, except when my mother would sing part of an aria, which she did now and
then. My parents listened to WBAI or some public station.

“It was such a given in that house, the sparseness,” she continues. “Only when I went to Donald Judd’s house museum have I felt a similarly sharp emptiness. I remember much later, in New York City, when my mother took out all her mother’s things, which were like china and glassware, just delicate things, how very different that was from how I’d known her growing up.”

The contrast between sleek modernity and fusty turn-of-the-twentieth-century decoration is a commonplace today, but nobody lived like that in the 1960s. It was an aesthetic education just getting up to brush your teeth, but it didn’t necessarily mesh with conventional social norms.

“I was terrible at school,” Kiki says, “and it made me feel horrible. I spent 90 percent of my time in school staring out the window…. We were all dyslexic. If it hadn’t been for a couple of teachers that I loved I’d have given up.

“I remember a first grade teacher at Marshall School. She’d just moved to South Orange, and it was her first year as a teacher, and she brought all her childhood toys, dolls, and stuffed animals for us to play with,” Kiki continues. “I asked her to come to my house for Christmas dinner, and she came! I look back on it and think, What kind of kid does that? I gave her my most prized possession, my First Communion beads, as a Christmas present. And I think it was Seton who asked, `How do you know she’s even Catholic?’ ”

The sisters were always on slightly different wavelengths.

“Seton knew she wanted to be an artist when she was 12, but I had no idea,” Kiki says. “I went to Columbia High School and just hated it. My parents sent me to Changes, Inc., which was run by the Ethical Culture Society and was more progressive….This was the Vietnam era. I went to Washington for civil rights demonstrations; it was a lot of fun, actually. Mom and Dad didn’t approve of drugs or anything like that, but in a general way they approved of what we were doing. They were very progressive in that way.”

Judy Targan, an artist and collector whose family had three generations live in South Orange, remembers the Smiths from those days because her daughter, Amy, was classmates with Kiki.

“There were a whole bunch of young women, they were all friends, who felt their education had to be more meaningful, and they acted as a group. They all went on to be doctors and lawyers and very successful people, you know. But that was the times — that sort of self-determination was encouraged.”

The girls grew up and went off on their own, Kiki for a year or so to San Francisco, Seton to study art in Boston and New York. Tony Smith’s sculpture started to be noticed — stark, uncompromising, segmented forms, like Tau, installed near the duck pond in South Orange’s Meadowland Park in 2008 as a memorial. Tony and Jane gave up the Stanley Road house and bought a stately, red-brick Georgian house on Berkeley Avenue, a few blocks up the hill and just across the border in Orange.

“I remember (Jane Smith) turned the rooms on the third floor into dedicated homages to painters — you know, a Bonnard room, a Matisse room,” Seton says. “She had them painted with colors from their palettes and furnished straight out of the paintings. It was early installation art, in a way.” Kiki remembers a death mask of her grandfather in the Stanley Road house when she was a girl. It seemed completely natural to Kiki and Seton that, when their father was dying in 1980, he asked them to make a death mask of him, as his mother had for his father. And it was equally natural for Kiki to call sculptor George Segal in New Brunswick, who knew her family, to find out how to make a plaster death mask.

“I thought it was sort of an old-fashioned thing to do, not creepy or anything,” Kiki says. “I mean, the first thing you saw when you entered my grandmother’s house was a death mask of her husband. Gosh, say it like that and it sounds weird, but it really wasn’t. That was just the sort of thing people used to do.

“A house is your childhood” she says.

It’s memory. And improbable history. I know this myself — when I took a job as an art critic for The Star-Ledger in 1996, I bought a house on Hamilton Road in South Orange. A year or so later, I learned that it was just four doors from the house where minimalism happened, and where Kiki and Seton Smith grew up. Literally the first contemporary art exhibition I attended after moving to New York City in 1979 was the do-it-yourself Times Square Show in 1980, in which Kiki Smith made her startling debut.

What you will see in A Sense of Place are prints that display the precision of modernist interiors, every stick of furniture in some way a chastened person, balanced by prints that show the fairy tale monsters these tight little geometries were meant to contain. It’s nice to see them together again.
Kiki Smith has said that her “relationship to the figure isn’t as close to sculptural history as it is to dolls and puppets.” The distinction she makes between “sculptural history” and “dolls and puppets”¹ might be reframed as the conventional bifurcation of high and low art (a dichotomy that her generation of artists, including David Wojnarowicz, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Robert Gober, among others, have done their level best to demolish), but it may be more useful to think of it as the difference between the remote and the intimate.

Ever since her first solo exhibition, Life Wants to Live, presented at The Kitchen in 1983, Smith has dedicated her practice to the close (for some, uncomfortably close) inspection of the body: human and animal, present and absent, in whole or in parts. Turning her back on the high modernist precepts that gave rise to the reductive, autonomous object — the work of art solely concerned with the material from which it is made — she looked instead to the pliable, organic installations of Eva Hesse as well as the rawly sexual sculpture of Louise Bourgeois and the socially committed work of Nancy Spero.

Her instincts led toward a restless, anxious art form, endlessly morphing in its appearance and materials. From the beginning of her career, she has wrapped her vision around a narrative, either overt or implied — an act of heresy to the prevailing formalist aesthetic that initially relegated her work to the margins of institutional culture. Making her way through alternate venues like The Kitchen, White Columns, and Colab, and such generation-marking events as The Times Square Show (1980), she insistently spoke in the language of pictures, something everyone could understand.

There are no boundaries to the kinds of materials she uses — wax, bronze, plaster, glass, polyester resin, fiberglass, paper, pewter, neon light, photography, collage — nor are there limits to the range of emotions she is willing to explore. Her imagery confronts the viewer with the dislocating, psychic shock espoused by the Surrealists, summed up in the famous phrase from
the poet Comte de Lautréamont: “As beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”

Rose branches sprout from a woman’s spine; a blue-winged moth kisses the tongue of a disembodied head; a black bird made of muslin and feathers carries off a gold coin in its beak. Anonymous figures give birth, sleep, excrete, merge with animals, disintegrate, and die, while on a parallel plane, a pantheon of saints, goddesses, and heroines — the Virgin Mary, St. Geneviève, Red Riding Hood, Alice Through the Looking Glass — offer role models and cautionary tales.

The common experiences and shared stories illuminated by these piercingly strange images refute the idea of art as self-enclosed and self-referential; Smith’s work instead takes on the attributes of a collective drama (reflecting the theatrical realm of her mother, the soprano and actress Jane Lawrence Smith) — an ongoing morality play dissecting our spiritual and corporeal fragility, connecting to the viewer in clear, silent speech.


*1994, phosphorous bronze, 13.5 x 9 x 7” edition of 3, Pace No. 25907

The Falls I • 2013
(Clockwise from top left) Earth, Sea, Sky • 2015

Shooting Star • 2015
SETON SMITH: Vernacular Space

Thomas Micchelli, artist, writer and co-editor of Hyperallergic Weekend

Seton Smith lived in Paris for twenty years, returning to New York in 2004, a life change that brought about an aesthetic turnaround. During her time in Europe, as she told the painter Eve Aschheim in an interview for The Brooklyn Rail (February 2008), she was “photographing in public spaces, which are either in museums or chateaux, house museums, and decorative arts museums. Now that I am back in the U.S., I feel like going back to photographing the vernacular American architecture and landscape.”¹

Smith’s transition to a new mode of working is rooted in a keen awareness of the limits and demands of culture. In Paris, she was inescapably an American, and as an American she recognized that the experience of a foreign culture, no matter how familiar, is ultimately mediated through the organs of that culture, which distill centuries of complexity and conflict — as manifested in its art, design, history, customs, and cuisine — into a comprehensible narrative.

The move back to the U.S. was a return to an entirely different cultural framework, one less mediated and more experiential, but similarly engaged with history — of photography, of the country, of herself. The houses Smith photographs in black and white may be from far flung areas (North Dakota, Maine, Upstate New York, Georgia, South Carolina), yet all include glimpses of leafy deciduous trees, the kind she would have seen growing up in her hometown of South Orange, N.J.

The road trips she took to gather her select images evoke the Depression-era wanderings of Edward Weston and Dorothea Lange, and it is easy to imagine many of the vistas as the subjects of those foundational artists. But Smith’s departures from their classically oriented worldview is telling. No matter how rough-hewn or hardscrabble, there would always be a certain ideal, if not idealization, at work in the photos of Weston or Lange, and the same can be said of street photographers such as Helen Levitt and Lee Friedlander. The act of photographing a subject innately ennobles it.
While Smith’s latest works are intricately tied to that history, the reality she presents is unadorned and enigmatic, with ordinary structures often disfigured by time. She presents space — both architecture and the landscape it occupies — not as an artistic sublimation but as it is lived in, functional and neglected (and the diametric opposite of the clean, planar enclosures associated with her father, the architect-turned-sculptor Tony Smith).

In this regard, she approaches the built environment with the same unforgiving eye that photographers like Nan Goldin, Larry Clark, and Peter Hujar turned on their own lives and those of their friends. There is beauty, but it’s ephemeral, slipping out from behind the scars.

That some of the buildings Smith depicts in Savannah and Charleston were once slave quarters amplifies the imagery’s historical echoes and deepens its shadows, calling into question the ordinariness of other structures in other photographs, with their white clapboards, satellite TV antennas, and shuttered windows, challenging us to ponder what benevolence or obscenity their façades might be hiding.

Girl, 2012
Edition of 13, lithograph (four-color) on Zerkall Book smooth white, 21" x 28" Paper: 21" x 28", KS-1332.11-P Publisher: Southeastern Center for Print at SCAD, Atlanta

Goat Moth, 2015

Good Day, 2015

Eggs, 2015, 2005
monoprint/open edition varié watercolor, gold leaf and graphite on Losin Prague paper, edition varié 8" x 11.5" KS-1754-P Publisher: Kiki Smith

Esperanza, 2015


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December 6, 2016

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