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GALLERIES

Sister artists return to South Orange



Dan Bischoff
For The Star-Ledger

Artist Kiki Smith remembers growing up in South Orange in the 1960s as a long summer day under huge trees, where she played Hatshepsut. She says the kids on her block used to find dead animals — birds, mostly — and wrap their corpses like mummies, place talismans in the folds, and then dig them tombs in the backyard, where they were buried with pomp.

Her sister Seton remembers their father, the sculptor and architect Tony Smith, building a “playhouse” out of old screen doors in their double-deep lot on Stanley Road — a see-through, Philip Johnson sort of playhouse — just what you would expect from a theorist of minimalism.

Both artists are returning to South Orange on Sunday for “A Sense of Place,” a self-curated exhibition co-sponsored by the Walsh Gallery at Seton Hall and the Lennie Pierro Memorial Arts Foundation.

Both women have become internationally recognized artists. Kiki, 63, is known for her sculpture and prints, which often have fairy tale or feminist themes. Seton, 62, for her tense photographs of tautly aligned interiors planted with Modernist furniture and architectural views devoid of any human presence.

“A Sense of Place” is a homecoming for sisters who represent three generations of Smiths from South Orange. Tony Smith was born in the house on Stanley Road; the Irish grandfather he was named after established a foundry in Newark that made equipment for the East Orange Water Co. and other waterworks, and Tony’s father sat on the village council for many years.

“I think they feel very attached to South Orange,” says Judy Wukitsch, director of the Pierro Foundation, which was named for her late husband Lennie Pierro, an artist and professor at Kean University who also lived in the village. “That house is their childhood, and it’s also the place where, under Tony’s eyes, they became artists.”

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISTS

Tony Smith studied under Frank Lloyd Wright and became a respected professor, designing exhibitions for the Abstract Expressionists and later helping to create Minimalism, a highly influential art movement in the late 1960s-70s. His home became a meeting place for artists and students and a kind of gallery where works by friends, like Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman, were displayed in largely empty rooms. His own sculptures, usually assembled from smaller geometric shapes like decahedrons, were scattered throughout the house and in the yard outside.

Kiki and Seton’s mother, Jane Smith, was an opera singer and actress who was close to playwright Tennessee Williams, who also visited the house from time to time; Williams was planning to move to South Orange the day he died. Jane and Seton were actually at his hotel to help him move when his death was announced.

South Orange already has a monument to the Smiths in Meadowlands Park, where



Seton Smith and her sister, Kiki Smith, below, return to the township they grew up in Sun-



“In A Bower” by Kiki Smith



“Savannah-SlaveHouse,” by Seton Smith.

Tony Smith’s TAU, a black steel abstract sculpture named for the Greek word for the letter T, was erected in 2008 (not without some controversy over public installation costs, about \$170,000, though the sculpture fabrication was paid for entirely by private fundraising). Like other artistic favorite sons, Tony sometimes had a complicated relation-

ship with his hometown.

For much of the 1960s, Smith was a struggling architect, and the family had very little money; he sold the finest pieces of his parents’ furniture to make ends meet, and the sisters remember a house with no couches and only card tables and folding chairs. They had no TV.

A Sense of Place: Kiki and Seton Smith

Where: Walsh Gallery, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange Ave. South Orange

When: Through Dec. 9. Open 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday

How much: Free. For more information call (973) 275-2033 or see shu.edu/walshgallery or pierrofoundation.org.

What else: An opening reception in the Walsh Gallery with both artists is set for Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. They will return for a talk about their work, and their lives in South Orange, with cultural critic and School of Visual Arts teacher Lynne Tillman on Tuesday, Dec. 6, at 7 p.m. in Jubilee Hall on the Seton Hall campus.

Their father kept a tombstone in the front yard chiseled with the word “Smith.” Kiki has said they were “the Addams family” of South Orange.

But it was a fine house on a block of similar homes, most of them kept by lawyers, doctors, and professionals. And in that house — that reverberated with talk, about art, politics, and the beauty of unadorned nature — with its deep Victorian moldings and diamond-paned windows, the very different styles of Seton and Kiki took shape.

“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. ... 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.”

Kiki is showing a profusion of recent work, much of it, like her earlier fairy tale installations, about animals. These particular animals seem more purely about animal life than storytelling. Her prints of the goat moth, a heavy-winged European moth with an antediluvian look, are accompanied by a mimetic bronze sculpture of a tree branch on which goat moths perch. There is an intensity to her observation that has been growing in her work ever since the first fairy tale images, and the interest in animals rhymes with her memories of growing up in South Orange.

Seton seems more like her father in a way, contemplating pure form in space like an architect detached. She shows seven large format (most 36x44 inches, one 71x102) photographs, all black and white, and all taken of white houses. After three rooms of Kiki’s voluble animals, Seton’s seven photographs are still and mute. Minimal, one might reasonably think.

“It was such a given in that house, the sparseness,” Seton recalls about the Smith home on Stanley Road. “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.”

That “house ... was all about art,” Seton says.