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Lightness of Being: Alain Kirili discusses his new work with Mary Jones

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by **Mary Jones**



Alain Kirili. Photo: Ariane Lopez-Huici, 2018

A search for vitality is central to the work of sculptor Alain Kirili whose long and distinguished career has required exploration of a diverse range of materials: forged iron, zinc, stone, metal, plaster, clay and paper. His honed sensitivity to touch and weight are evident in a new body of work on paper, an installation of 33 painted and collaged pieces. Here, Kirili explores lightness, both literally and metaphorically. Vertical rectangles of vibrant color function as backgrounds for gestural "signs."

Born in France in 1946, Kirili came of age amidst the beginnings of post-war French critical thought. The influence of Roland Barthes is particularly evident in the emphasis he has always placed in semiotics and their manifestation in the body. This had been his impetus to study Chinese calligraphy, Hebrew script and the iconography of global cultures. The embodiment of language as sensation and as a sensual experience is, according to Kirili, communicated through working with the hand. "It's something I refuse to surrender, it's in my DNA."

I met with Kirili in the Tribeca loft he has shared since 1980 with his wife, the artist Ariane Lopez-Huici. We are looking together at his new works on paper, massed on the wall flanking metal sculptures set against colored grounds. The organic lines in the paper pieces are open to multiple readings, as script, brushstroke or some other kind of signifier that references Kirili's own sculptural forms. They exude confident improvisation. They also bring to mind the late cutouts by Matisse in the way color operates as light. Another ongoing new series functions equally on the wall or on the floor. These are elongated, vertical rectangles of several sheets of newspaper taped together and then intersected in the center by a thin, single "zip," sliced, pinned, and draped from the center. Placement,

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displacement, materiality and references to Barnett Newman reframe these ephemeral remnants from The New York Times. They are physically light, seemingly instantaneous and undulating with the slightest breeze.

ALAIN KIRILI

My life as an artist is an antidote to what I should have become. Kirili is a pseudonym. I left the conventional expectations of my family and chose to become an artist. The creative process for me has always been sacrosanct, I've devoted my life to it, and now it is how I stand up to the current negativity of my body. I have bone marrow cancer and am undergoing various treatments. I never know when one will succeed. I confront this negativity with the joy of creation, this is deeply ingrained in my identity. The illness is a new experience for me. Until now, my body has always been a great source of joy and inspiration.

MARY JONES

It's no wonder that you've found a kindred spirit in the late work of Matisse, who having survived his successful surgery for cancer in 1941, felt he had been given a second life and consequently invented the cutouts.

The new work is a good sign that I want to survive. So, I'm an heir of Matisse's second life, because when I came out of the hospital I was starving to create, and to challenge any form of negativity. I've worked intensely to achieve a celebration of life in this new body of work.

We are now quite used to seeing a field or rectangle of painted color behind your large sculptural works. I'm reminded of British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's theory about the "container and contained." There's an interplay between the painted space and the sculptural object. They seem at once to have emerged from that space but also to be extending from it or attached. At times the colored rectangle functions as a base or pedestal. The tension is closer here, as the contrast between materials has narrowed, the color relationships advance. Is this partly due to your renewed admiration for Matisse?

Yes, the fresh, direct perception of color and shape is very new in these works, and there is a specific link to Matisse, to his book "Jazz" and to the "Matisse Chapel," the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France. Ariane and I have attended mass there several times and it has always been very stimulating for me. Of course, I've admired the colors of the stained glass, but also the very rich collection of chasubles that he created. The young priest Father Paul Anel even did a mass in honor of Ariane and me wearing a striking chasuble. With that in mind, I've been studying the symbolism of colors in religious art in the well-known book by René Gilles, "Le symbolisme dans l'art religieux" (1961). It is crucial to understand that color in a church always has a profound symbolic dimension. I'm choosing and mixing beautiful, resonant colors with specific, ascribed spiritual attributes. There's a dialectic between the formality and symbolism of the color and the organic aspect of the line, a powerful tension that I like to explore.

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The "zips" of your newspaper pieces have a similar armature to the paintings of Barnett Newman, who was a formative influence for you. How do you feel the sensual and the spiritual are resolved in his work?

The paintings of Newman are fire. Barnett Newman gave us one of the most beautiful titles for a work of art in the in 20th century art. "Vir Heroicus Sublimis." It means "Man," but also "the phallus." The spiritual world of Newman is really burning with passion. I think of him as a source of white fire. His first sculptures, "Here I" (1950) and "Here II" (1965) were so important for me. I found them extraordinary. They were not anthropomorphic or architectonic. The only thing left was a presence. The quest for presence is something that has been with me from the beginning and I was happy to discover that in Newman. I've also had the opportunity to speak with Tom Hess about him, and to discuss the Talmudic presence in Newman's work. But I also have a great love and respect for de Kooning, in part because he made one of the most beautiful quotes imaginable, "Flesh is the reason oil paint was invented." De Kooning and Newman stand very close to my heart and carry me, and I'd like to add something that I find very impressive, and that I feel is also very lovely. Barnett Newman did a show of "The Stations of the Cross" at the Guggenheim in 1966, and around the same time John Coltrane released "A Love Supreme." I've always loved to look at "The Stations of the Cross" in the Guggenheim catalog, listening to Coltrane's "A Love Supreme."

But there is another Abstract Expressionist artist who has been especially important to me, almost as if he was part of my family: David Smith. I admire his work and character for many reasons and one of them is that he was an artist born in America who confronted and forcefully challenged his Protestant heritage. He denounced it in many of his works, including a great one called "Puritan Landscape," (1946). He stood up to the Puritan traditions of this country and rose above the influences that could have destroyed or suppressed him. He protected himself by working with such dedication, making more than 500 pieces during his lifetime. I find this incredibly inspiring, and like David Smith I also take issue with all things Puritan! This was an ongoing argument I had with Louise Bourgeois. We were friends and were very supportive of one another's work. Although we had verticality and sexuality in common, we had completely opposite views about the Puritan attitudes in America. She loved it, and I hate it. I interviewed her for *Arts Magazine* [March 1989] and she told me, "Alain, you have too much empathy for the world. I love confrontation, I had a great crush on Alfred Barr, because he was a temple of Puritanism, absolutely inviolable, this challenge was part of the attraction." So I said, "OK, Louise, I am not like you!"

You've studied Smith's work extensively, visited and studied his library at Bolton Landing many times. You've also organized exhibitions and written about his work. But how do you see your essential differences?

A huge difference is that he is a master of the scrapyards. He had the ability to find old metal that he that he could transform through welding. There's some blacksmithing and forging in his work, but mostly he could make and envision his work from this found raw material. Whereas in my work, I'm deeply concerned with the trace of the hand and blacksmithing. Let's say, I'm much more of a blacksmith than David Smith. He was a welder. Today, people don't know the beauty of blacksmithing. It is, for instance, crucial in African art and society. The blacksmith is highly respected. He is a central figure in the village, performing necessary tasks in both utilitarian and cultural ways. When I worked in Mali in 2003, I met a blacksmith among the Dogon and worked alongside him. We had a great experience together, built out of mutual respect.

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Even your large metal sculptures have the directness of drawing. Your new pieces are created from drawing subtractively. Is this a new experience?

Actually, the process is almost like blacksmithing. The pleasure of blacksmithing is mysterious and sensual—to create a vibration on the surface of metal and then form a curve. It's a way to introduce gracefulness, an expression of emotion through the marks of the hammer, or the power hammer. In my new work the signs and shapes are slightly trembling, like in blacksmithing, and like in life.

What's trembling in blacksmithing?

The fact that you start with rigid line of metal and as you shape it, a trembling quality is created, one that takes away the rigidity.

Is there sound? Is it percussive?

Oh, yes. You could almost shape it with the sound alone and with your eyes closed. If you beat the metal when it's getting too cold, your ear is also getting too cold, and when it's red hot, it's a different sound. And that's why a lot of music is born in blacksmithing, in the forge. It's very often the secret source of Flamenco.

In this new series, there's certainly a rhythm you've created from piece to piece, and as a whole.

Each work can be by itself, but as an installation they become monumental through multiplicity. Monumentality has always been with me, and I'd like to show them in an environment that activates this potential fully. There's also an "archeology" of my own work here. Recently, I did some corner pieces of an iron rod and a piece of newspaper on the floor that relate to clay pieces I did in the 1970. The recent sculpture utilizing newspaper on the floor and on the wall is revisiting some floor pieces in zinc from 1972. Wire and paper are traditionally used to give thickness to free standing sculpture before it disappears with the addition of clay or plaster.

Today for me, to show the use of paper and wire is a way to break the traditional hierarchy where only bronze is the final version of the sculpture. Now, paper and wire are revealed and are the final versions of my sculptures.

Monumentality can be thought of as imposing, formal and static, yet your work consistently involves movement, especially with the new paper pieces.

I'm concerned with movement, not stasis. My free-standing sculptures are tactile, fully indicative of the human movements that made them. That's the beauty of sculpture, a free-standing work of art and that you can touch, and that has brought you something new, and to experience it fully you are compelled to move around it. Sculpture invites you to circumvolution. You are not just in front of a work of art, you turn around it, you dance around it, you have a spiritual experience enacting this very profound, performed movement that human beings need. In every

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religion in the world, whether church, temple, or a sculpture like a stupa, this movement is practiced. There is a fundamental sense or drive for circumvolution.

And speaking of movements, you and Ariane have recently become US citizens. How's that going for you?

I first arrived in 1965 and traveled back and forth several times. In France, after the second world war, the art community was destroyed. So, it was great for me to meet artists here that were close to my age, like Mel Bochner, Robert Morris, Marcia Hafif, and to go with Robert Ryman to hear jazz. There was nothing better for me than to meet living artists. I admire them, have great empathy for the difficulties they face, and for the determination of contemporary artists. Life is short, it's urgent.

I've been so moved to see women emerge in the artworld, people I originally met in the 80s, like Elizabeth Murray, who was a close friend. To belong to a community is important, and to be part of an open world where women are recognized has been wonderful. The "Me Too" movement of today is something that gives me so much satisfaction, and something I never expected. It's signaling the end of patriarchal power. It's a revolution and it's great. To be married to an accomplished woman artist and see that we both can achieve recognition has been very gratifying. As Simone de Beauvoir said, "In a couple there should be room for two."

I'm not afraid of the feminine or the emotional in art, I welcome it. I'm completely in love with Italian art and I've gone to Italy at least 20 times. It's my first destination. It's absolutely stunning what the church has allowed on its walls regarding ecstasy, it interests me very much. The lightness of being is a crucial aspect of sculpture. We speak about weight. When does a woman experience weightlessness? When she has a climax with God! That's exactly what the St. Teresa of Bernini is saying! There are Hindu temples in India where you see carvings of beautiful bodies undulating, and you begin to understand that when you bring together sexuality and spirituality, you are in masterpiece mode.