

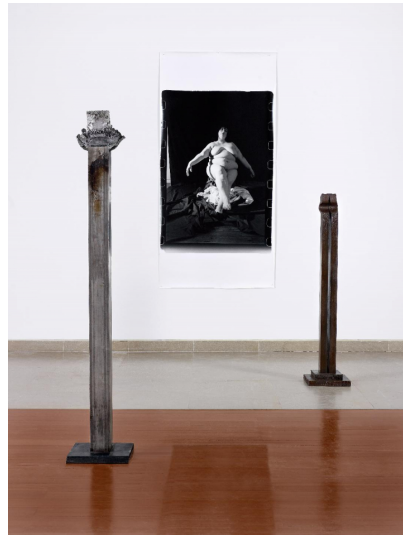
Ratcliff, Carter. "Alain Kirili's Embodied Abstract Art," *Hyperallergic*, 22 June 2019.

HYPERALLERGIC

Alain Kirili's Embodied Abstract Art

Throughout his career Kirili has evoked the body in his abstract sculptures, in an era when sculpture has often sidestepped the human form.

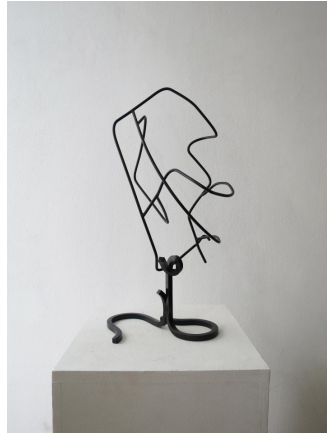
By Carter Ratcliff



Alain Kirili sculptures and Ariane Lopez-Huici photographs at The Musee de Caen, France, 2014 (all images courtesy of Alain Kirili)

“Urgency,” “improvisation,” “spontaneity” — talk to the sculptor [Alain Kirili](#) about his art and these are the words you hear. They sound like good things — far better than their opposites — but what do they have to do with such physically rigid, laboriously produced things as sculptures? The question becomes more insistent when Kirili mentions his admiration for the art of the American sculptor David Smith, especially the towering pieces of Smith’s *Cubi* series. These works are usually praised for their formal resolutions, at once intricate and grand. Without denying the grandeur of the *Cubi* sculptures, Kirili sees through their finished state to the intuitions that produced them. He senses, in other words, the urgency, improvisation, and spontaneity in Smith’s process. And Kirili’s generous appreciation of Smith helps us see those qualities in Kirili’s work, as well — in his forged pieces, for example.

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"Trembling II" (2016), forged iron, 7 x 9 in.

Kirili is nearly alone among contemporary sculptors in adopting the techniques of the blacksmith. In the *Iron Calligraphy* series from 2015, thin bars of the dense metal curve over the walls where they are mounted, their lengths punctuated by the impact of his hammer. Working while the iron is hot and malleable, Kirili has no choice but to be spontaneous. When the iron cools, the hammer marks become permanent, yet their rhythm is that of a human gesture, urgently repeated, and this gives the iron a muscular verve. Kirili's *Iron Calligraphy* has the fluidity of drawing on paper, while the imagery in his large drawings has the weight and solidity one would expect from a sculptor so closely attuned to the physicality of his materials.

Born in Paris, in 1946, Kirili was 19 years old when he traveled to the United States for the first time. At New York's Marlborough Gallery he encountered David Smith's work and was so impressed that he set off across America, visiting museums and galleries in search of more. This was a journey of discovery, doubly so, for it revealed to the young artist not only the full range of Smith's artistic production but also the tenor and the energy of the nation that fostered it. In 1972, Kirili's sculpture was included in an exhibition at the Sonnabend Gallery in Soho, then the city's newest — and rawest — art neighborhood. In the following decades, his work has been steadily on view in Manhattan, yet he has remained very much a participant in French culture, exhibiting often in Paris, Grenoble, and other French cities.

In 2007, the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris invited Kirili to show drawings and sculptures in the company of paintings from Claude Monet's *Les Nymphéas* (*Waterlilies*) sequence. As Kirili has noted, these late *Waterlily* compositions are "open, without beginning or end." In sympathy with this implication of the infinite, he built a variation on his *Commandment* series. First launched in the 1970s, a cluster of totemic forms occupies the gallery floor in each

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previous iteration; low-lying, their proportions and hieratic configurations nonetheless give them a monumental aura. Subtitled *Homage to Claude Monet*, this multi-part sculpture was installed on the banks of a pond near the Orangerie. Made of tinted concrete, its play of colors alludes to the color that flickers over the surface of the pond — and through the art of Monet.

In 1980, Kirili moved with his wife, the photographer Ariane Lopez-Huici, from Greene Street in Soho to a loft in Tribeca and his devotion to improvisation and spontaneity took a new turn — rather, it took a fresh impetus from a long-felt passion. Kirili remembers being awakened as a child by unexpected music. It was the sound of Sidney Bechet, a founding father of jazz, playing in the kitchen of his family's apartment in Paris. This was the beginning of a lifetime of listening to jazz. During the early 1970s, Kirili attended concerts by proponents of free jazz at the Fondation Maeght, a center for the arts in the hills above Nice, in southern France. In the following decade, he launched a program of free jazz concerts in his and Lopez-Huici's loft. Since then, there have been seven or eight music events every year, featuring such musicians as Cecil Taylor, Billy Bang, and Roscoe Mitchell.



William Parker and Maria Mitchel with *Commandement XV*, 1998

Often, they have performed in the company of Kirili's sculptures, and dancers — among them Leena Conquest and the dancer-vocalist Thomas Buckner — have interacted with these objects. As Kirili cautions, however, one medium is never used to illustrate another. When art, music, and dance converge it is, he says, to reveal "the affinity of creative processes." Roulette Intermedium, a performing arts and new music venue in Brooklyn, sponsors an annual Vision Festival in June. This year, the Festival acknowledged Kirili's encouragement of jazz with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Earlier in 2019, he received an Art Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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In real time, Kirili works with musicians and dancers, while his two-person exhibitions with such artists as the 18th-century sculptor Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux and Juan Gonzalez, the avant-garde builder of iron hieroglyphs, allow him to collaborate across historical time. However, his most sustained — and sustaining — collaboration has been with Lopez-Huici. They met one afternoon, quite casually, while gallery-hopping in Paris. They met for a second time that evening, again by chance. That was in 1976 and they have been together ever since. In 2014, the Museum of Fine Arts in Caen presented an exhibition entitled *Parcours Croisés* — roughly *Crossed Paths* — that juxtaposed sculptures by Kirili with photographs by Lopez-Huici. The result was an endlessly nuanced synergy, despite the formal differences between his three-dimensional, non-figurative work and her exuberantly figurative two-dimensional photographs.

Four years ago, the sinuous gestures of the *Iron Calligraphy* series evolved into figures — or, more accurately, freestanding configurations of lines, curved and sometimes angled to evoke the human presence. The means are identical in each of these works, yet the results are thoroughly individual. With these sculptures Kirili does, in his distinctive way, what sculptors have done for millennia: he confronts us with presences analogous to our own. Throughout his career he has evoked the body, male and female, in an era when sculpture has often sidestepped the human form to focus on geometric shapes or objects found readymade in everyday life.

Forging, welding, cutting, hammering sheets and bars of metal, bending wire, and molding terra cotta — with each of these processes, Kirili finds in inanimate matter a metaphor for flesh. Weighty or delicate, his objects have a commanding bodily presence and that is why his three-dimensional works interact so tellingly with Lopez-Huici's photographs, for among her most frequent subjects are heavy, at times obese, nude women unabashedly assuming the poses that have long been used to reinforce conventional standards of feminine beauty. Rejecting stereotypes that align physical beauty with slimness, Lopez-Huici's models powerfully assert their beauty.

Together, Lopez-Huici and Kirili have created a realm of shared sensibility where sharp differences of medium, image, and scale reveal, with time, a strong underlying accord. As Kirili states in the catalog of the Caen exhibition, "Each of us provides the other with an open field of possibility, and the fact that our oeuvres correspond, despite the differences between sculpture and photography, show that we share the same dream."