

ARTFORUM



Alain Kirili. Photo: Ariane Lopez-Huici.

French American sculptor Alain Kirili died May 19 in New York, where he lived and worked, at the age of seventy-four. The news was confirmed by Susan Inglett Gallery, which represents the artist. Known for his minimalist abstract sculptures and large-scale public works emphasizing verticality and movement, Kirili over the course of fifty years explored tactility and gesture through materials ranging from the forged iron that characterized his early work to the copper, terra cotta, aluminum, pigmented concrete, Styrofoam, and wire of later pieces. His monumental outdoor sculptures in limestone, which he began making in the early 1990s, embodied the warmth and free spirit that characterized his smaller sculptures.

Born in Paris in 1945, Kirili was nineteen when he encountered American sculptor David Smith's work at the Musée Rodin. Deeply impressed, Kirili traveled to the US that same year, visiting a number of museums across the country and becoming enamored of Abstract Expressionism. A few years later in Paris, he met French Korean painter and printmaker Ungno Lee, who brought him into the orbit of philosopher Roland Barthes and other figures associated with the avant-garde literary review *Tel Quel*. Kirili began sculpting using sheets of zinc and gained his first solo show at Paris's Sonnabend Gallery in 1972. He soon turned to forged iron, creating floorbound works that spired ceilingward, and exhibiting in Paris, Geneva, and New York, receiving his first US solo show there in 1976. In 1977, Kirili married the photographer Ariane Lopez-Huici, who survives him. A year later, he visited India for the first time and became fascinated with the Hindu Yoni-Lingam, a sculptural representation combining the feminine and the masculine; he would later credit the sexual and repetitive nature of this religious object as influential on his work.

Kirili moved to New York in 1979, where he continued experimenting with forged iron, in works that variously reached out from walls or were scattered about the floor, as in his "*Commandement*" series: unique, abstract, glyph-like forms inspired by Chinese calligraphy and Hebrew script, ranging in height from roughly one to three feet each and placed in groupings of up to ninety. A longtime and devoted advocate of freestyle jazz, Kirili in 1992 got saxophonist Steve Lacy to perform among a group of these sculptures installed at New York's Thread Waxing Space. The event launched a series of similar collaborations between Kirili and various jazz musicians, including Roy Haynes, Joe McPhee, and Cecil Taylor, among others. During this same span of time, Kirili began working in wire, which he formed into organic shapes, and bronze, which he cast in unrecognizably abstract human forms. He created his first large-scale public work, *Grand commandement blanc*, for the Tuileries in Paris in 1986, and in 1992 inaugurated the ongoing "*Résistance*" series: massive, multipart limestone sculptures, which art historian Thierry Dufrêne described as "giant drippings" owing to the rapid and unpremeditated placement of their components.

Kirili's work is held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Museum Ludwig, Cologne; and the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, in Valencia, Spain, among numerous other institutions. In December of 2020, he was made a French Commandeur de l'Ordre de Arts et Lettres, receiving France's highest cultural honor for his contribution to the arts.