"It Represents the Artifice of Sex": Kiki Smith on Times Square and Her Site-Specific Installation

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In an unassuming dirt lot on the corner of 46th Street and Eighth Avenue — a mere stone’s throw from Times Square — a stained-glass cutout of Josephine Baker sits among a constellation of multicolored star sculptures in hand-blown, translucent, iridized, and modeled glass. “Chorus,” a site-specific installation by Kiki Smith — an artist best known for creating unnerving sculptures of extremities, entrails, and cadaverous figures that epitomized the body-conscious “Abjekt Art” of the early ’90s — reveals her deft handling of much sunnier fare. “As the sun shines through and glitters upon the translucent and opaque glass, the stars will contrast with the raw urban lot,” Smith said of the installation in a press release. Created in conjunction with the Art Production Fund, it is up through September 4th in the Last Lot Project Space. Smith spoke to ARTINFO about her memories of Times Square, her penchant for nostalgia, and the anonymous joys of public art.

What initially drew you to Josephine Baker as a subject?

Josephine Baker really exemplifies the glamour of Times Square. She exemplifies the imagination of raw sexuality, but in a way that’s very cleverly constructed. She didn’t really work or perform that much in Times Square because of racism in America. That said, almost 100 years later, she really exemplifies a lot of what Times Square represents. Also, she was very active in the civil rights and all different kinds of movements in her life. You know, people want to turn [celebrities] in to these flat things that just existed in one period of their life. But she had a long life. Her interests spanned over a great deal of time. Also, there are not very many African American women who are represented in pop culture all the time. There are not that many women. Period.

A chorus girl, music hall diva, movie star, civil rights activist, she was an icon of civil rights and feminism. She was also a sex symbol.

I think that she was someone constructing, and playing in those languages. Sexuality and the construction of sexuality are not static. They are changing all the time. I don’t think that she is fixed any more than sex is fixed or race is fixed. She was extremely bright, innovative, and clever. She was addressing and playing with these things, playing with racial identity, playing with sexual identity. She was also one of the most famous women in Europe, perhaps in the world in a certain way. She had a tremendous impact in Europe, in Europe’s interest in African American culture, and in how American culture was perceived abroad.

You’ve been working with stained glass for 25 years. What draws you to this medium?

I started painting on glass in the mid ’80s in really rude, crude conditions. It’s something that I really love: painting on glass. In more recent years, I’ve made things on a much larger scale. But I’ve never had an installation. Glass enables one to have a clear light. It’s a kind of transparent color. It retains its clarity, but at the same time has this luminosity about it. In a certain way it mimics organic life, in that it has a vibrancy.

Time Square used to be synonymous with seediness, danger, and sex. For better or worse, Robert Moses and then Rudolph Giuliani imposed a conservative social agenda onto the space. The spectacle of sex has been replaced by the spectacle of advertising, With Josephine Baker, are you attempting to bring sexuality back into Times Square?”
I don’t want it to be forgotten. There’s very little representation of sexuality — in both its glamorous and messy aspects — in our culture. It’s not like I want to know about other people’s sexuality. But in terms of cultural representation, in other cultures [sex] is not hidden. It’s not separate. In my work, I’ve always been interested in how sexuality is separated from spirituality in our culture. I think that separation often gives us convoluted understandings of our lives and vilifies sex. There are a lot of things about sexuality that can be scary and negative. The scariness, the awkwardness, of it. But it’s also a celebration of our vitality, of exuberance. I don’t want that to be negated. Times Square sort of represents all of that. It doesn’t necessarily represent all aspects of sex. It represents the artifice of sex. It doesn’t represent intimacy. But it represents the image, the spectacle of sexuality, which is something that humans rarely share collectively. At least in our society, we rarely collectively share the image of sex, or what is tantalizing, what is provocative.

How do you think your project interacts with the site of Times Square, as opposed to Josephine Mekseper’s “Manhattan Oil Project?”

I can’t speak to the other people’s work, but in a way maybe their work is more of a juxtaposition to the space. What I made is more speaking to what happened there, to historical images of Times Square, to Broadway as a theatrical space — as an exuberant environment.

Midtown, and particularly Times Square, is considered by many to be the armpit of New York City. It’s synonymous with blockbuster theater, tourist traps, schlocky attractions, basically capitalism run amok. If you were appointed mayor or city planner, what would Times Square look like?

People would be in trouble.

Do you think Times Square deserves its bad rep?

I think that, in America, there really is a loss of place. Because of the scale that business exists on now, there’s more of a generic aspect to our lives as you go from one city from the next. I think a lot of places have lost the uniqueness that was once fundamental to them. I think Times Square is a victim of that. But Times Square has many facets to it. It’s really this place where many different constituents in society are all on top of one another temporarily. You used to be able to go to the movies, very cheap movies, all night long. When I was young we could go up there and just watch one movie after the other, you could go to the movies at midnight. It’s really the place of entertainment and spectacle. If you think about all the lights in Times Square, it’s just mind-boggling. You could be on LSD or something. People could make analogies to certain places in Asia, but, in America, there’s really nowhere else besides maybe Las Vegas that offers visual stimulation on such an enormous scale. All because of light. Maybe that’s related to the stained glass too. It’s a quiet remembrance of the natural way that happens, that the daylight or the nightlight passes through it, rather than generating light the way electrical light does. I think for the whole country and for a great deal of the world, Times Square still represents some intersection of magical realism. I always think the best places in New York are the subways. That’s where you get the largest insight into the vibrancy of living in a place with people from all over the world. We’re all just sort of on top of one another co-existing.

What was it like to create work for Times Square, as opposed to a gallery or museum? You’re forced to compete with the surroundings.

“Chorus” isn’t minimalistic by any means, but anything I made would have been dwarfed. I’ve rarely had the opportunity or been invited to make things outdoors... When I was younger I don’t think I was really that interested. I was more interested in just making things on a domestic scale. At this stage in the game, it’s really exciting to make something in public, something that has an anonymity to it. I put my work in small gardens in my neighborhood. I didn’t want to be asked, because I might be dead by the time somebody asks me to do something. There’s enormous activity of people making things for the streets in New York and not being asked. I think there’s a lot of exciting work being made like that. The graffiti art of the ’70s and ’80s very much revitalized the public space and what public space means. It’s really fun. I’m just interested in having an experience — and so for me, this is wonderful.

Tons of passersby who have no idea who you are see the work.
That’s the thing I think is nice: it’s not about you. You just put something out and it just does its own thing. That passivity is really attractive. Maybe somebody sees something. Maybe they don’t see it. Maybe they see it after it’s been there five years. You know, I just saw two enormous buildings in Midtown that I’d never seen before. They must have been there at least in the last 10 years. Then there’s the opposite. Things disappear and you don’t notice. Like Times Square: it disappeared. My version of it from the late ’50s. I remember when people used to walk around with sandwich boards in Times Square saying “The End is Near,” seeing kids putting bubble gum on string down the subway gratings to try to catch coins. You would never see that now. Then there were the “ban the bomb” people. That was later. It’s a space where all different groups of people use it as a platform to proselytize and stand up on soap boxes and entice people into shows. I used to work there, so I hung out there a lot.

**Did you have a studio there?**

No. I worked in a bar there called Tin Pan Alley on 49th street. So I spent all my New Years Eves in Times Square. There were lots of artists living or renting studios there.

**Are you a Broadway fan?**

I hardly ever go to Broadway, but I actually went to a play called “Cock” at the Duke theater the other night, and quite enjoyed it. But “Chorus” isn’t really about plays. When I worked in Times Square, at night you’d go out into the street, and people would hang out in these rattan chairs. I think there are famous photos of the Black Panthers sitting in them. People would take polaroids of [passersby] for a dollar. It has a street spectacle aspect to it. For me, that’s what I’m interested in: this idea of spectacle.

In a recent interview you said, "I am interested in the 1920s... in the visualization of spectacle pageantry and how that relates to medieval art... the exuberant festiveness of public experience." Can you elaborate on the affinities between the twenties and the middle ages?

It exists in my own convoluted imagination. It’s completely my fantasy life. It’s not based in any research or anything whatsoever. It’s just my impression of things. But both periods have a larger-than-life iconography attached to them. I mean, film is much older, but the 1920s were really when Hollywood got going — when those enormous, theatrical stagings began. Where you have thousands of people involved in [creating] an image. You know, if you go into small towns in Italy or all over Europe, there are still these vestiges of medieval life, which have a great deal of pageantry in them. Carnivals. Processions. I just think about the magnificence and scale of churches: the rich, vivid layering of images that you see in the cathedral. Something about that in my mind has this enormous, fanciful theatricality to it.

**You’ve said that one of your worst personal problems is nostalgia.**

One does have emotional attachments to different time periods, but often that negates lots of reality. We negate lots of reality in our lives everyday period, just to get through the day. I don’t know why. Sometimes I think it can be a romantic, revisionist, or slightly blind version of what was going on, but also that’s something that is very useful to me. It’s emotionally useful. It’s sort of like how denial helps people stay alive. Maybe it has to do with the feeling of a time rather than the actual — whatever it means — time. I don’t know. I don’t know the answers. For me, I just go to what I’m attracted to and I feel like, in different aspects, I learn something from it.