

REGEN PROJECTS

Barden, Lane. "Body Language." *ArtWeek* (January 7, 1993) p. 23 [ill.]

ARTWEEK

Solutions to the problem of how to be a feminist and an artist without becoming a propagandist have become an ongoing project. Even though increased attention to women artists may be directly attributable to the efforts of the feminist movement at large, it is safe to assume that most women who dedicate themselves and their resources to art-making ultimately hope to succeed with their audience somewhere beyond the specific realm of sexual identity and its didactic conflicts. For Kiki Smith and Sue Williams, the key has been the discovery of the right visual language through which they could channel their ideas, and the language they found is the language of the human body (aka *the body*) as a vessel for critical thinking.

The remarkable character of Sue Williams's paintings lies in the way she treats the subject of *her* body, a body which has been beaten, shot, used and psychologically abused in relationships gone very, very bad. The terms she has set for drawing from her own experience are that she must open her own wounds with an honesty that is nearly as brutal as the original atrocities. Pride is absent altogether, and seems to have been casually replaced by a black sense of humor which erupts in manic waves. This is the anger of a woman, but more than that, it is a profound human anger which spares no one, including herself, an anger which truly has been around the block and lived to tell about it. In the

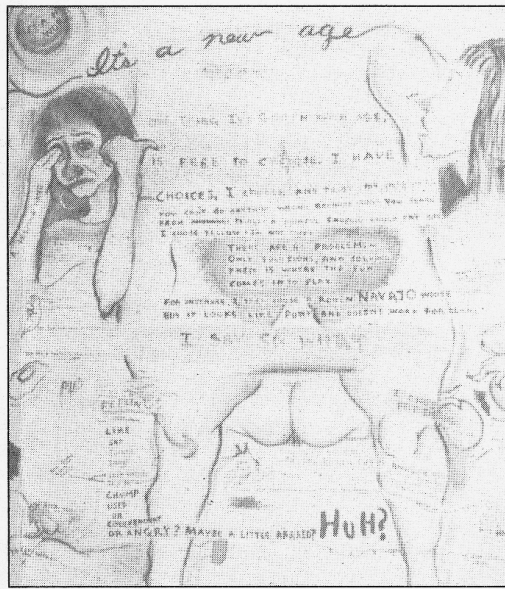
end, however, what is more disturbing than the artist's razor perception is the hopelessness which lies beneath it. Make no mistake, this is a full tilt attack with no possibility for redemption. The sheer depravity of this domestic history transcends the politics of gender and questions the sanity of relationship itself.

The body of Kiki Smith is not her body, but the human body, and Smith focuses attention on body parts. Arms, legs, skulls are presented bluntly as dismembered, dissected objects for observation rather than "studies" for aesthetic exploration. Body parts suggest death more openly than "the figure" can and Smith's accomplishment is to breathe allegory and pathos into them. There is an inconsistency to this work, but in places it is stunningly beautiful. With a

Body Language

Sue Williams at Stuart Regen and Kiki Smith at Shoshana Wayne

BY LANE BARDEN



Sue Williams, *The Yellow Painting*, 1992, acrylic and oil on canvas, 64" x 54", at Stuart Regen Gallery, Los Angeles. (Photo: Angela Cumberbirch.)

studied measure of irony, she gives traditional cast bronze sculptures a life (however grim that life may be) of their own.

Kiki Smith claims an indirect, associative political content for her work. She is interested in how various factions "from religion to law to the medical establishment, vie for control" of the

body. To this short list, Sue Williams undoubtedly would add abusive male partners and rapists, but her attitude is never so academic. Both artists are working with the body as language. The force field which binds the visual arts to discursive developments in critical theory is a strong one; it is helpful, now and then, to send out a tracer.

Foucault thought that a critical language which employs the human body as a model for

critical abstractions has a greater emancipatory potential than the more conventional language of needs and interests or the language of rights. The reasoning for this would be that in a disci-

plinary power structure, needs, interests and rights must be requested, then either refused or allocated by the regime according to what is politically expedient. These linguistic choices ultimately serve to legitimize existing power and therefore must be rejected along with the obsolete, humanist paradigm upon which they are founded. (Nancy Fraser, "Foucault's Body Language," in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, University of Minnesota, 1989, p. 61.)

Foucault, in fact, was interested in control over the body and the way it is victimized by institutional discipline. Kiki Smith seems to share those interests. The problem is that Foucault never suggested that a critical language of the body might refer specifically to the body of a woman. His discussion of the body is limited to institutional abuse, denial of pleasure, and punishment of the individual. Gender is overlooked entirely. The work of Sue Williams (and Smith, though not particularly in the work here) asserts forcefully that gender cannot be ignored in any social critique which places the body at issue. ❧

Sue Williams closed December 19 at Stuart Regen Gallery, Los Angeles. Kiki Smith through January 25 at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, 1454 Fifth St., Santa Monica.

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