

Artforum

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Kiki Smith, *Black Madonna*, 1992, silicon bronze, 71 5/8 x 26 3/8".

PARIS

Kiki Smith

GALERIE LELONG & CO. | 38
AVENUE MATIGNON
38 avenue Matignon
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“From Inside,” the title of Kiki Smith’s first exhibition at Galerie Lelong’s modest Matignonspace, suggests both the inner urges and workings of the body (the show draws heavily from the artist’s powerful anatomical drawings of the mid-90s)—but also an inside job. That is apt, as Smith curated and planned the hanging herself. And it shows.

Hanging on one wall is *Black Madonna*, 1992, a silicon bronze bas-relief that might suggest to some a comical carbonized human, flattened by a cement roller. But in the French context, *Black Madonna* evokes occult magic: It slips into the zone of ambiguity and indeterminacy surrounding the cult of *Vierge noire* devotional sculpture, the origins of which remain a subject of mystical speculation. (Its syncretic traces, some say, are found in the famous Roma pilgrimage to Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, where celebrants carry the dark-skinned statue of their patron saint to the Mediterranean Sea every May.) Ritual object or

feminist fabrication, Smith’s *Black Madonna* is filled with pain, elation, enigma, and a dark, post-punk beauty. Tiny fingertip-shaped protuberances stud an anxious tracery of sinews and vessels that cross the sculpture’s splayed, perforated surface, spinning out from her belly to her upper and lower extremities.

Hands recur as a motif throughout the show—pallid and veiny in the early painting *Untitled*, 1981; metallic and gleaming in three more recent bronze and steel sculptures (*Arc*, *Swoon*, and *Repose*, all 2018). Delicate sketches of the female reproductive system from Smith’s “Avebury drawings” series, 1995, and engravings of internal organs from her first published portfolio, *Possession is nine-tenths of the law*, 1985, exquisitely adumbrate the organic machinery of the body without solving its mysteries. The strange hanging effigy *Ice Man*, 1995, puts all the fragments together, lending a sense of coherence and completion to this accomplished mini-retrospective that reenchants us with Smith’s art.

— Joseph Nechvatal