



Art

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## Society as Cosmos ON ARIANE LOPEZ-HUICI AND ALAIN KIRILI

by Carter Ratcliff

Ariane Lopez-Huici is a photographer. Alain Kirili is a sculptor. Whether he makes them from solid chunks of iron or airy swirls of wire, his works are volumetric. Hers, of course, are flat. His are abstract, hers are figurative. As artists, then, they have nothing in common—nothing but their subject, which is the human body, and that gives them everything in common.

Married in 1977, Kirili and Lopez-Huici got to know one another the previous year in Paris, where he was born and she had been living on and off for more than a decade. After studying at the Arts School of the Musée Nissim de Camondo, in the city's Eighth Arrondissement, Lopez-Huici met Nelson Pereira dos Santos, a pioneer of Brazil's Cinema Novo. Signing on as his assistant, she traveled between Paris and Rio de Janeiro for several years, at the end of which she transformed her mastery of photographic technique into a vocation. She became not merely a photographer but—a crucial distinction—an artist. And so, in addition to making her work, she hung out with other artists.



Ariane Lopez Huici, "Aviva," 1996. Silver gelatin print.  
Courtesy Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, France.

One Saturday afternoon in 1976 Lopez-Huici dropped by the Gallery Ghislain Mollet-Viéville, across from the Museum Georges Pompidou-Beaubourg. There she found colleagues and friends and met, for the first time, Alain Kirili. Meeting again that evening, at the Galerie Jean Chauvelin, in Saint Germain, they have, as she says, "stayed together ever since." To celebrate not only their work but also their shared lives, the Musée des Beaux-Arts, in Caen, is presenting a

joint exhibition that mingles Kirili's sculptures with Lopez-Huici's photographs.

Entitled *Parcours croisés* (*Crossed Paths*) the show begins with one of Kirili's untitled works from 1976. Forged from iron, it is austere geometrical: a response to Minimalism or, it might be better to say, a riposte to that style's ideal of the autonomous object. For Kirili infused the straight lines and flat planes of this sculpture with an architectural quality that rescues it from the realm of pure aesthetics. At this early point in his career, Kirili had already begun to give his abstractions a social dimension. More personally, this forged object also marks an episode in the biography he shares with Lopez-Huici.

When the two artists met in Paris, Kirili had become, at least partially, a New Yorker. Having set up a studio on Greene Street, he was a citizen of Soho, which was still evolving in those days from an abandoned industrial zone to the liveliest artists' neighborhood Manhattan has ever seen. After Lopez-Huici joined him in the summer of 1976, she invited him to accompany her on a trip to Kitzbühel, in the Tyrolean Alps, on a visit to an elderly relative. There Kirili discovered an indigenous tradition of iron forging and, in the course of his visit, made a crucial addition to his technical repertory. For Kirili avoids the monofocus of the specialist. Forging, welding, cutting, and hammering sheets and bars of metal, he also bends wire and molds terra cotta. With each of these processes, he turns inanimate matter into a metaphor for flesh. Weighty or delicate, his objects all have a commandingly bodily presence and that is why his three-dimensional works intersect at innumerable points with Lopez-Huici's photographic images.

Among her most frequent subjects are naked women far too heavy to meet ordinary standards of feminine beauty. Yet she often shows them in poses that have been used, since the time of the Renaissance, to reinforce precisely those standards: the reclining nude, for the most familiar example, though her subjects also assume poses drawn from boudoir paintings of the Rococo and Ingres's overpopulated pictures of imaginary harems. It is as if Lopez-Huici is saying, yes, these traditional poses still have currency but they have no power to enforce the stereotypes that come with them. Aviva, the singer Dalia Khatir, and all the other immensely fleshy women in her photographs have rejected that legacy and yet they too are beautiful. They have the beauty of self-confident, self-accepting nakedness, which is decidedly not that of a 16th-century nude—to call upon a distinction that Kirili draws in the joint interview published in the catalog of the Caen exhibition.

The difference between nudity (an aesthetic convention) and nakedness (a state of being) runs parallel to the difference between an Apollonian and a Dionysian sensibility. Though the former can be sensual, its sensuality is restrained by the demands of propriety. Dionysian impulses are not so much sensual as frankly, ecstatically sexual. In some of Lopez-Huici's photographs we see women who have stepped beyond all familiar poses to enter into states of sheer, passionate

awareness of their own power. Dalia Khatir, in particular, has the presence of a Bacchante—a woman inspired by Dionysus to unleash the full force of her female energy. With his vigorously worked terra cotta pieces, Kirili responds to that energy with a sculptural touch not sensual but sexual, and thus his metaphor of material as flesh takes on life.

Overcoming the difference between abstract and figurative imagery, the metaphor of sculptural material as flesh generates, as I've suggested, a close affinity between Kirili's more volumetric sculptures and certain of Lopez-Huici's photographs. Moreover, the dramatically fragmented quality of his starkest iron pieces—especially those produced with the help of a blowtorch—have a counterpart in Lopez-Huici's photographs of Priscille, a woman who lost a leg and a part of an arm in a grievous accident. In photographs that blur bodily forms, Lopez-Huici pictures her subjects' energies in ways that bring to mind the gestural complexity of Kirili's wire and rubber tubing pieces. Still, her images address vision with an invitation to imagine the impalpable as present and palpable, while his objects simply are palpable and rely on their metaphorical richness to carry them beyond the condition of mere objects. For all the similarities that link their themes and sensibilities, these two artists are as different from one another as are photography and sculpture. Their differences are what make it possible for them to be so closely connected. Without them there would be no connection to be made.

Because the body is their shared subject, Lopez-Huici and Kirili share as well a scale—not merely that of the human form but that of humanity understood as heroic. In Lopez-Huici's photographs of Bill Shannon, a hip-hop dancer on crutches, we see the heroism of the will determined to overcome bodily limitations. Her photographs of wrestlers in Mali evoke ancient, monumental statuary and there is a heroic quality to the willingness of her obese subjects to present themselves naked to the eyes of a world so often reluctant to give up its familiar ideas



L. Ivresse II (988), terre cuite, 23,5 x 20 cm

Alain Kirili, "Ivresse II," 1984. Terra cotta, 23.5 × 20cm. Courtesy Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, France.



Ariane Lopez Huici, "Dalila Khatir," 2011. Silver gelatin print. Alain Kirili, "Aria," 2012. Painted metal wire, 30 × 45 cm. Courtesy Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, France.

of beauty. Similarly, Kirili declines to give his terra cotta pieces a refined finish. They are rough, bulky, and sometimes a touch bizarre in outline—beautiful only if you are willing to set aside traditional assumptions and see the adamantly individual life that pulses in each one of them. It is their human scale that invites this response and yet the art of Kirili and Lopez-Huici has a larger scale as well.

In every ambitious body of work there is an immensity. Joseph Cornell's diminutive boxes, for example, with their tokens of an imaginary Europe and their images of the night sky, raise his delicate sensibility to the scale of a cosmos. For another example, see the scatter pieces of Robert Morris. According to the aesthetic ideology of their time, the 1970s, these tangled heaps of thread and felt and scrap metal were to be understood as asserting the sheer materiality of matter as sufficient in itself. Nothing further was to be mentioned, for, it was said, Morris had liberated art from age-old demands for coherent form and intelligible subject matter. The taste for incoherence and unintelligibility having faded, it makes more sense now seeing those works of Morris's as no less cosmological in their way than Cornell's boxes—or, for that matter, Piet Mondrian's images of universal form. In Morris's case, the image is of primordial chaos: the universe on the verge of giving birth to order and comprehensible meaning. The oeuvres of Kirili and Lopez-Huici are no less grand in their implicit scale. However, their works do not step from the human to the cosmological but from the human to the social. Or their cosmos is society, which means that their art shows no inclination to transcend the human condition that they share so intensely as colleagues and as husband and wife.

In 2002 an exhibition at the Musée des Beaux Arts, in Valenciennes, displayed Kirili's terra cotta sculptures in the company of rough sketches—*esquisses*—in the same material by the 18th-century sculptor Jean-Bapiste Carpeaux. A juxtaposition like this gives art historical sensibilities an occasion to comment on the evolution of certain ideas: abstraction, representation, finish. As helpful as such analyses can be, they inevitably fall short of acknowledging Kirili's larger purpose, which is to remind himself and of course the rest of us that an oeuvre never develops in isolation. It emerges from interchanges between artists, whether in the present or across the centuries.

Intuiting the speed with which the aesthetic would wither and vanish if it were deprived of its social dimension, Kirili has participated in joint exhibitions with Gaston Lachaise as well as Carpeaux. He has collaborated on the publication of a book of erotic drawings by Auguste Rodin and curated an exhibition of drawings by David Smith. For him, these are not figures ensconced in the past but colleagues whose work, at least, is alive in the present. They belong to what might be called his community of kindred spirits, as he belongs to theirs. In an essay written for the catalogue of the Caen exhibition, Barry Schwabsky makes the essential point that "Kirili has never tired of reasserting but also reexamining his fascination with certain great predecessors,

above all David Smith and Auguste Rodin as well as the anonymous creators of ancient Indian yoni-lingam sculptures.”

To extend the social dimensions of his art beyond the visual mediums, Kirili has for years invited Cecil Taylor, Steve Lacy, and other practitioners of free-form jazz to perform in the New York loft he shares with Lopez-Huici, her work, and of course his own. On these occasions, musical improvisation enters into a dialogue with the sculptural kind. And in 2007, when Kirili showed *Commandement, à Claude Monet* at the Orangerie, in Paris, he invited Dalia Khatir to sing at the opening. Thus a monumental figure stepped from Lopez-Huici’s oeuvre into the space of Kirili’s.

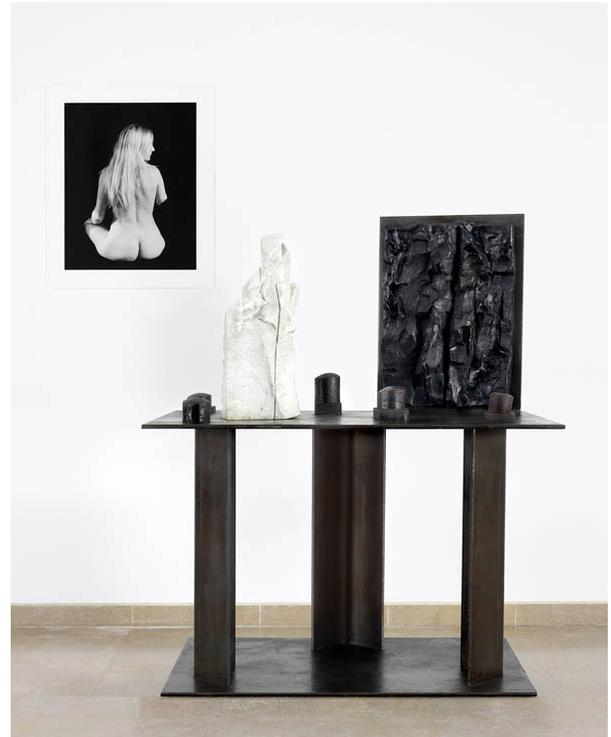
In his rapport with other sculptors—and with those jazz musicians who could be heard as sculptors in sound—there is not merely an acknowledgment but an elaboration of an inescapable truth: art depends for its meaning on its power to recreate community on its own terms. Fittingly, then, the women in Lopez-Huici’s photographs have become her friends, a communal core from which her social being extends its generous reach. Together, she and Kirili have created a large cosmos—and an intimate one, for, as he states in the catalogue 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, shows that we share the same dream.”



Alain Kirili, "Aria," 2014. Metal wire and rubber, 8ft height. Courtesy Arthelix Buswick Gallery.



Ariane Lopez Huici, "Priscille," 2010. Silver gelatin print.  
Courtesy Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, France.



Ariane Lopez Huici "Priscille," 2009. Silver gelatin print.  
Alain Kirili, "Generation," 1992. Marble, iron, and bronze,  
168 x 140 x 94 cm. Courtesy Musée des Beaux-Arts de  
Caen, France.

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