

Alain KIRILI

**26 juin
16 septembre
1985**

Alain KIRILI at the Musée Rodin 1985

Few artists appreciate the power of tradition more than Alain Kirili, yet none is less intimidated by it. In the setting of the Musée Rodin, Kirili will be surrounded by masterworks of modern sculpture (the *Burghers of Calais*, the *Monument to Balzac*) he holds in high esteem. But he has recognized that he would not pay genuine homage to Rodin by making a cautious selection of his own most well-known works to stand discreetly beside the master's achievements. Instead, Kirili has responded forcefully to that aspect of Rodin which has ultimately been most inspirational to him – the model of courage, of the willingness openly to take risks in one's art.

In 1898, Rodin sent to the Salon only two works : *The Kiss* newly carved in marble, and the just-completed Balzac, still in plaster. On the one hand, the public saw the artist continuing to perfect the style in which he had made his reputation. On the other, they were confronted by something radically new: a monumental sculpture unlike any other, which moved into unknown artistic territory. Beyond the risk of showing the Balzac itself, Rodin had the further courage to make clear his own progress, his own change of spirit, by limiting his entries to these two contrasting statements. In 1985, in a key moment of growth and change in his own career, Kirili has chosen to present himself to the Parisian public with just three sculptures, all stemming from the last year's work: first, a new version of a familiar multipartite piece, *Commandment*; second, a piece whose elements are those of past work but whose form and arrangement are innovative, *Generations*; and finally, a massive new bronze work, *Nudity*, which draws on lesser-known currents within his previous sculpture to produce a form that is challengingly unlike anything he has done before. The statement the artist makes by this three-part selection speaks in some ways as eloquently as does any of the individual works. This is an exhibition that addresses the history of Kirili's development, the variety of possibilities that constitute his future, and the nature of creation and artistic growth as he conceives it.

Commandment

Commandment appeared in its initial, smaller and unpainted form, in 1980. In its basic conception, this piece reflects Kirili's unique position as a man of two creative worlds. The geometric vocabulary and the ground-hugging, base-less dispersal of the work initially suggest the ways in which his work belongs in the context of advanced New York sculpture of the past two decades. Yet in *Commandment* these forms are at the service of a nexus of concerns separate from, or even opposed to, the dominant orthodoxies of vanguard American sculpture in general, and Minimalism especially. *Commandment* is concerned with the symbolic value of basic forms, and particularly with the world of glyphs, signs, and texts, in a way that evokes not only Kirili's fascination with ancient scripture, but also his ties to the Parisian milieu of Roland Barthes and Philippe Sollers. Here as elsewhere Kirili has sought to bring together the two parts of his transatlantic experience, cross-fertilizing the visual and intellectual life of New York and Paris.



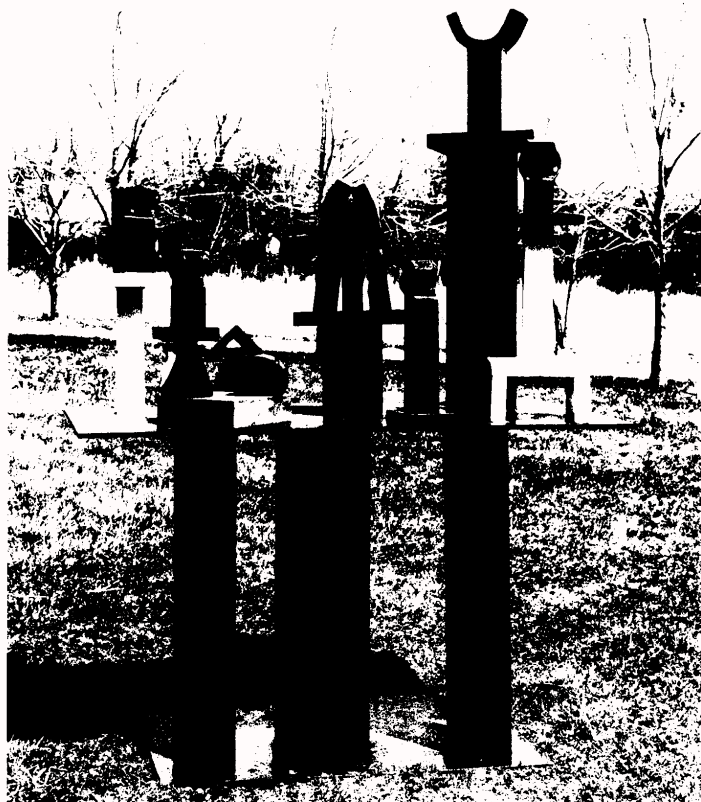
Commandment may relate obliquely to previous “scripted” sculptures, such as David Smith’s *The Letter*. But it is ultimately invested with a strongly personal balance of tradition and ambition, of the established and the experimental. This work has been produced in a series, with variations of elements and arrangements. Yet the concern has not been with the mathematical forms of permutation found in Minimalist art. In *Commandment*, a different kind of variety-within-unity seems to model itself on written language as a rule-bound yet flexible formal system, abstract yet generating and communicating meaning from epoch to epoch and culture to culture. To the flattened checkerboards of Minimal floor-sculptures, *Commandment* offers a chessboard rebuttal, affirmatively lifting itself from the floor plane and evoking the authority of symbolic form in human spiritual history. This “text” sculpture is Old Testament and Post-Minimalist at once, reverent on the one hand and rebel on the other.

Those who saw the initial versions of *Commandment* will remember clearly the grave presence of dense, dark metal elements against lighter wood floors. In choosing now to enlarge the work and to paint the elements white (the Musée Rodin exhibition will be the first public showing of this transformed version) Kirili has changed its impact considerably. Especially when set against the variety of an outdoor setting, the new piece seems more architectural in reference, and has a lightness and clarity previously absent. The element of growth, of springing from the ground, begins to appear more markedly.

Scale is of crucial concern to Kirili, and a general tendency toward greater scale has (like a growing interest in the special conditions of outdoor sculpture) been characteristic of his recent work. But the present version of *Commandment* is not simply an enlargement, in the fashion of the many modern sculptors who regularly produce their works in inflated and reduced versions. It is a reconsideration and transformation of an existing conception, answering to a new set of intentions with regard to light, space, and relation to the viewer. Kirili’s desire to progress in this fashion, by the reconsideration of past work for new purposes, is one of the defining aspects of his production over the past eighteen months. Coming after a relatively long period of steady linear growth along well-defined separate lines, this most recent period has been one of cross-fertilization and expansion, in which elements of past works are being redefined by changes in color, scale, and context; and used to produce work that is open, lively, and formally complex in a way that has no precedent in Kirili’s sculpture to date. These new directions are implicit in the new form of *Commandment*, but even more apparent in *Generations*.

Generations

David Smith once made an autobiographical welded sculpture (*Voltri XIX*, 1962) which resembled a workbench and incorporated several of his metalworking tools. *Generations* is not dissimilar in its table-like form, and in its autobiographical reference; but here it is a symbolic rather than a literal “workbench”, an image of the artist’s conceptual as well as his physical labor. *Generations* brings together a complex array of individual smaller sculptures – pieces from the *Commandment* series, and forged-iron works of various scales – into a composition whose rhythm and mood, as well as its basic approach to formal unity, are markedly unlike any of Kirili’s previous work.



In Kirili's work of two years previous, we would have found all of the individual elements assembled on the upper plane of *Generations*; but formerly they would have been presented as separate conceptions, isolated and possessed of a stern dignity. Here they are stacked, recombined, re-oriented and repainted to form a composition of lively tempo, bright openness, and an altogether looser and more complex kind of authority. The liturgical solemnity of previous grouped works (such as *Cortege*, recently entered into the collection of the Museum of Modern Art) suggested the deep resonance and steady order of Gregorian chants; here some "notes" are the same, but the overall order is closer to the sophisticated play of serious improvisatory jazz. There is a new freedom, and embrace of pictorial richness, implicit in *Generations*. This same spirit appears even more evidently in another series of large assembled and welded sculptures underway in April of 1985; for they will include important planar elements perforated for transparency, extensive use of bright color, and purposely contrasting materials and surfaces.

In these new works we see Kirili acting for the first time as a composer in the full sense. His other multi-partite sculptures, like *Commandment* or *Cortege*, had a governing internal consistency of scale, form, and color among the elements. Now the sculptor begins to explore heterogeneity, gaining new ideas from the stuff of familiar forms, and exploring and enriched dialogue between variety and unity.

The title of *Generations* is aptly chosen. If the organization of *Commandment* suggested the structures of texts and languages, here the order is more like that of a family reunion. The community of parts no longer depends on any simple principle of resemblance or consistent color or scale. Instead, the piece encompasses widely differing individual presences – a spectrum of "physiques" and "personalities" held together by deeper ties. The diversification of elements is based on ideas of "marriage" of disparate parts and cross-combination of basic "genetic" elements. The title also fuses references to creation (things generated, given life) and to continuity (the succession of descendants in a family tree) – two principles always interlocked in Kirili's idea of art. For Kirili, creation has never entailed a rejection of continuity; he has always felt nourished by the great art of past ages, and by the lessons of earlier modern sculpture. *Generations* seems to speak of a parallel notion at work in his personal growth: the new will be arrived at not by escaping from past experience but by incorporating it, and re-imagining its untapped possibilities. A simple reorientation in our view of the familiar – such as Kirili's gesture of inverting a *Commandment* element to serve as a base on the right of *Generations* – can be the point of departure for strikingly unexpected inventions.

Nudity

Whatever the transformations inherent in *Generations* or the new *Commandment*, these pieces would surely be recognized as Kirili's work by anyone at all familiar with the artist's career. The third of the sculptures, the large bronze *Nudity* will doubtless come as a shock even to many who have followed the artist closely. This difficult and challenging modelled sculpture is by far the most audacious in all Kirili's recent work.



Inevitably there will be those who will see the densely modelled surface of *Nudity* as a kind of expressionism; and who will then make the unwarranted assumption that the sculptor is here following the lead of recent developments in painting. This is a short-sighted mistake, a misapprehension which ignores not only a whole side of Kirili's own development over the past decade, but also an entirely different sense of " expressionism " in the modern tradition.

For years, Kirili's best-known work has been his freestanding forged metal sculpture. However, he has been constantly pursuing a simultaneous interest in modelling; and those who have visited his studio over the past decade have been well aware of a whole body of modelled work, less widely exhibited, in terra cotta. The spirit of the dark iron work has tended to be severe and masculine, relieved only by sensuous swelling at the point of the forging impact. The terra-cotta pieces however, compact rather than vertical, have been far more active, even nervous, in their surfaces. Heavily manipulated and often in rich fleshy tones, they have been invested with more feminine form and with an altogether different energy. The forged pieces stem from a world of fire, blackness, and economically decisive violence of metal against metal. The terra cottas radiate instead the warmth of the hand, speak of the pressures of the grasp and the embrace, and pulse with the feel of pliant, labile earth. The austere laconic nature of Kirili's hammer-blow expressions in forged metal gives way here to a more complexly impulsive investment of self – pummeling, gouging, spreading and condensing the malleable and moist material.

In a sense, *Nudity* stems from this ongoing love for modelling, now transferred onto a wholly different scale (the dimensions of the piece are determined by the maximum reach of the artist's body) and merged with a menhir-like verticality. However, even the briefest inspection of the surface of the sculpture will reveal a great variety of gestural marks, including not only the action of the hand but also those of a variety of instruments, such as the mallet hammering and the knife slicing. Far more than in the terra-cotta work, modelling here is balanced by a constant editing, and the diversity of gesture expanded to a great rhythmic complexity.

The incredibly active surface of *Nudity* harks back, not so much to the roiling, eruptive modelling of Rodin, but to the more analytic, anti-naturalist modelling of Matisse. If *Nudity* can be seen as expressionist, it is in the same way one might call Matisse's modelling expressionist – not by the cheap flaunting of emotion, but by more complex ambitions involving deep feeling for life wedded to the felt necessity of analyzing the form and means of one's art.

The expressionism of *Nudity* refers as well to the tradition of gestural abstraction in the artists of the New York School. Kirili has always had profound admiration for the achievements of the American

painters of the Abstract Expressionist generation, such as Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and Willem De Kooning. Only rarely, however – as in the exceptional case of Newman’s *Here One* sculptures – has there been any sculpture that Kirili could see as embodying the force of these painterly achievements. The great production of David Smith, for example, comes out of other traditions in Picasso and Gonzalez, and addresses only obliquely the issues of spontaneous gestural expression that were at the forefront of vanguard art in the decade after World War II. De Kooning himself has in recent years pursued sculpture, but the results have been more literally figurative than the artist’s paintings, and have been compromised by the mechanical transformation of their scale (enlarged by artisans from the painter’s maquettes). Other sculptors, such as Nakian, Di Suvero, and Chamberlain, have also attempted to incorporate the sense of painterly gesture into their three-dimensional work. Yet Kirili feels that in important ways the challenge has not been met, and that the possibilities of a truly abstract, gestural sculpture on a major scale (the sculptural equivalent of the larger-than-easel-size canvas) have yet to be realized.

It would be false, however, to attempt to “explain” *Nudity* only by situating it strategically in any tradition, without allowing for its highly personal nature and its autobiographical motivations. *Nudity*’s intense surface modelling answers a strongly felt, but only partially conscious, desire on the part of the artist to open up the limits of his previous creation. Like the addition of color to the forged metal work, the rise to prominence of modelling signals a new concern for the sensuous and lively, a progress from the deep internalized solemnity of the earlier work to a more open engagement with space and with the viewer.

The impact of *Nudity* is certain to be deeply disturbing in many senses. Insistently abstract, the piece nonetheless has a decided front-back distinction in the variations of the surface, and an inevitable, albeit phantom, figural presence. A powerful affront repels any desire for a simple identification of our body with the form, yet some deeper current, augmented by the dominant scale of the piece, allows the form to inhabit us kinesthetically – more in the primal sense of a dolmen. Kirili has many years accepted the role of a maverick, insisting on symbolic values, and on issues of religion and tradition, when these were far from fashionable. But never in his career has he offered so decisive a departure from the expected vocabulary of contemporary sculpture, and so aggressive an assault on contemporary conventions of beauty. The title is worth examining in this light, for it refers not simply to the traditional sculptural subject of the nude figure, but to the broader idea of a state of complete exposure – *nuda veritas, mon cœur mis à nu* – with total disavowal of concealment or disguise. The theme is consistent with Kirili’s ongoing concern to join the sensuous and the symbolic, to insist upon the necessary linkage in human affairs between a full and

committed physical experience of life and the most serious metaphysical issues – sexuality and the sacred, creation and regeneration.

There have always been tensions inherent in Kirili's confrontations with potentially conflicting demands – the conceptual rigor of the recent avant-garde, faced off against the sensuous heritage of European art and the authority of the great Asian religions; or the immediately felt intimate investment in the physical pleasure of sculpture's materials and processes, brought together with a reverence for the life of ideas. In previous work, this tension has been expressed in the rigorous barriers that tended to divide one mode of expression from another – notably modelling from forging; and in the overall gravity that precluded added color, or any but the most solemn assembly of like forms. In breaking down those barriers, in augmenting the role of color, modelling, and assemblage in his creation, Kirili seems to move toward wedding the ongoing seriousness of his sculpture with that most risky and most fructifying of human commitments, joy. The current exhibition has all the elements, and especially the courage, of such a moment of decision.

I can only add that it gives me great personal pleasure to know that this exhibition, which marks such a signal step in a career already well-honored, will take place in the Hotel Biron gardens where I have often walked and talked with Alain Kirili, about the greatness of Rodin, about the problems of modern sculpture, and about the sensual and intellectual pleasures of art. This summer, Paris at large will be able to share the enjoyment that was formerly only the private privilege of friends, of encountering Kirili chez Rodin.

Kirk Varnedoe.