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Some artists discover themselves by trying to reject totally the historical past, and by working instead with what they hope will be a pure and innocent eye and hand. Others artists discover themselves by cherishing that same past, and by selecting from the widest range of artistic achievement a personal genealogical table that can provide them with resonant foundations related to their own ideas about what a work of art should be. The sculptor Alain Kirili is one of this latter group, and his frank espousal of a multitude of Western and Eastern traditions, he emerged in the 1970's as an artist who individually and successfully challenged the prevailing attitudes of that decade, especially on the American side of the Atlantic. At a time when most artists wanted to deny the possibility of associative imagery, proposing instead that shapes and materials were what they were, and nothing else, Kirili reinvestigated the endless potential of sculpture to suggest not only metaphors of the human form, but an enormous range of universal experience, from myth, religion, and magic to the eternal vertities of life and death, love and birth. At a time when it was common for younger sculptors to choose materials from the most contemporary, machine-made inventory of plexiglass, mirrors, aluminum, felt, stainless steel, Kirili reverted to such venerable media as terra cotta and forged iron, in which the artist's touch and the changing life of the material itself were indelibly worked into the finished result. As a time when many younger artists worked with structural system that seemed to reject inherited concepts of major and minor, of up and down, of parts adding up to a larger whole, Kirili reasserted, in fresh terms, these more traditional, and more organic patterns of visual order.

To have done this might suggest that Kirili is either a conservative artist, who buries his head in the sand, disliking or ignoring the work of his contemporaries, or that he is carrying out a conscious program of neotraditionalism; but in fact, neither is the case. As a Frenchman who was born in Paris in 1946 and who, in 1966, began to visit New York with ever greater frequency (to the point where he now makes it his primary home), Kirili had a distancing, transatlantic perspective upon developments of the last decades which permitted him to be fully his own master. As an overseas visitor to New York in the late 1960's, he could survey American art of the recent past without feeling the pressures of the generational cycles of his American contemporaries. It was a time when the Abstract Expressionists in particular created so heavy, if so honorable a parental burden upon the younger generation that most artists wanted them to be dead and buried for at least the time it took them to find their own personalities. But for Kirili, exploring the New World from across the ocean, the familiar need of rejecting the viewpoint of the preceding

generation was not a relevant issue. For him, what was important was the personal discovery of masters like Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman, and the use to which he could put their vision, even if they were clearly, for his American contemporary, beside the point in an art world increasingly dominated by styles of willful coolness and objectivity and by attitudes that would find almost embarrassingly Romantic the kind of assertions in words and images which so fascinated Kirili in the domain of Abstract Expressionism. He was later, in fact, to write and talk about both Still and Newman, and it was clear that what excited him, especially by contrast to the art he knew in Europe, was their sublime ambitions, their almost crazy, Romantic individuality which permitted Newman's vertical "zips" to be experienced as almost human forces of will and energy in a universal field, or which allowed Still (as quoted in an essay by Kirili) to say that "paintings must be an extension of the man, of his blood, a confrontation with himself," or that "each painting is an episode in a personal life history, an entry in a journal."

In seeking for a way to make his own art enter this realm of myth, tragedy, and moral force, it was not only the Abstract Expressionists who inspired Kirili, but a veritable encyclopedia of artists and cultures from which he could extract ideas relevant to his work. An avid visitor not only to every available museum and exhibition but to works of art as difficult of access as those found in Romanesque churches of the Auvergne or Buddhist temples in India, Kirili carries with him from direct visual experience a vast repertory of art in both Western and Eastern cultures, drawing upon them for his own ambitions. Yet he does this not in a spirit of eclectic paraphrase, but in a way in which references to other works of art have been so thoroughly absorbed that we sense them in a subliminal way, as if sculptures were both completely contemporary and at the same time echoed with a multitude of comparable images from other times and places, almost in the manner of a Jungian or Freudian archetype that can change its outer shape to meet specific personal needs or tribal functions.

Such generalizations about Kirili's work can be made quickly specific by looking at, for instance, his variations of 1980 upon the motif of *Trinity*. These trios of erect rods of forged iron, standing on single or on double bases, evoke an astonishing richness of association, not only on the level of reverberations of other works of art, but on the level of mythic imagery. The sense of an exalted, perhaps anthropomorphic vertical force that seems to keep extending upward and downward is, for one, familiar in the paintings (as well as the rare sculptures) of Newman which Kirili so admired; but the ancestry goes back as well to the painfully desiccated stick figures on bases that Giacometti made his signature in the Existentialist 1950's. Somehow these two traditions of suggesting a spiritually rather than materially assertive human presence – one figurative, one abstract – are fused here. But a single reading of these erect forms as standing human figures would be inadequate since they also evoke the phallic imagery which Kirili studied in the temples of Nepal, where, as part of their religious rituals, the male and female genitals – lingam and yoni – are recreated as sculpture which, to 20th century eyes,

almost looks purely abstract. (In 1979, in fact, Kirili published a brochure, *Yoni/Linga*, on these sculptures.) Moreover, this surge of energy, whether of male sexual potency or of the human form as whole, alludes to yet another important source of Kirili's mythic imagination, the more veiled sexuality of 19th century sculptures. He astutely recognized this in Rude's apotheosis of Napoleon awakening to immortality, a Romantic monument in Fixin (Burgundy) which makes the Emperor rise from his feet with an energy whose sexual connotations become far more overt, as Kirili noted, in Rodin's robed figure of Balzac, whose over-all configuration has become, in a post-Freudian world, so much more phallic than it was when first unveiled. (Characteristically, Kirili is especially sensitive to the sexuality of Rodin's work, and even complained, in a published article of the *Washington Post* (Jan. 12, 1982) that the great exhibition, *Rodin Rediscovered*, neglected this major aspect of the master's art.)

But such multiple references are even further enriched by the presence of these vertical rods not singly (as is often the case in Kirili's sculpture) but as a trio. The triple group inevitably has deep echoes in Western imagery, recalling of course the archetypal motif of the Crucifixion (enforced by the figures's bases), a Christian theme which has also had many metamorphoses in Kirili's work (he has been especially inspired by anonymous polychrome wooden Crucifixes to be encountered in the forests of Austria), as well as the Holy Trinity evoked by the title itself. But to call this group Christian is again too specific, for the trio of figures of subtly different heights and configurations also brings with it the basic biological associations of a family group, parents and child, an association further underlined in such other sculptures by Kirili as *Birth*, where a human whole seems simultaneously to be composed of parts that shift before our eyes from single to double to triple, a brilliant metaphor of the biological trinity implied in any one human being.

In contradiction to most sculptors of his generation but in accord with older sculptors he admires and reinterprets (from Rude and Rodin to Picasso, Gonzalez, and Smith), Kirili infuses a sense of organic, of emotional and physical pressures, of biological changes in everything he does. His recent variations upon the theme of *Commandment*, (a lofty Biblical title in the tradition of Newman) may at first share the look of, say, Carl Andre's floorpieces in which similar or identical units are distributed on the ground for our overhead viewing, but unlike Andre's work, which evokes an abstract work of precise cerebration, the imagery here is of a biological, even sociological character, of individual presences within a united community. Like a Japanese rock garden, this seems half the work of nature, half the work of man with related forms offering variations on the same theme of burgeoning creatures that may be experienced simultaneously as botanical, anthropomorphic, or even symbolic, as if there were the rude relics of a primitive religion that expands, like the growth of forests or of people, in time.

Kirili's insistence on this organic metaphor extends to his choice and treatment of sculptural matter. Already in the works of 1976-1978, whether in the hand-worked terra cottas, so often pierced, like Christ's head, by iron nails or in the iron pieces which lean so tenuously, like growing stems, against supporting wall surfaces, Kirili's use of materials suggested the qualities of growth, movement, change; but in his amazing mastery of such an archaic technique as forged iron (a tradition he has resurrected in his works under the discipleship of two blacksmiths, one American, Samuel Yellin, and one Austrian, Florian Unterrainer) this experience is further enriched. Thus, in a work like *Birth*, the metaphor of creation is compounded by the actual technique of iron forging, so that the sense of clamps, of pressure, of fission of something molten that has hardened into a form underlines the biological theme. And another, more recent element in his work that contributes strongly to the feeling of organic movement and change is the remarkable use of rectangular statue bases on the ground which, instead of confining the figures upon them to a single fixed site, become multiple stepping stones that permit groups of figures to move from one to the other, bridging spaces, recreating individual and group relationships as in the metaphor of a flexible community. Thus, these single-limbed and forked figures (echoing blacksmith's tools) constantly shift from private to shared experiences, the multiple

Bases offering stable points of departure for their freedom of movement. These creatures, we feel, might almost walk away or be found, the next time we see them, in totally different arrangements.

Perhaps the most complex as well as most recent example of Kirili's dense, multilayered art is a work of 1982 entitled *Cortège*, which immediately takes its place in a long sculptural tradition that the artist knows well. Again, these vertical iron forms are clearly anthropomorphic, evoking a quintet of life-sized figures who seem to participate in a communal situation, while preserving their individuality. Some seem more stable, their motion inward and meditative; others, with forked limbs, evoke physical movement. Their common burden is a flat slab. The art-historical resonances here are tragic, a group of mourners or martyrs who invade the space of the spectator, some momentarily located on their metal bases, others touching the ground that we, too, stand on. Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* may come to mind here, as it often does in other works by Kirili that insist on the proximity to our environment of a gravity-borne group of iron figures of human height. But also, *Cortège*, carries us back to the tradition of tomb sculpture, especially those 15th century Burgundian funerary groups which Kirili had studied in Dijon. These references seem no less important than those to Rodin, especially in the marvelous fusion of static mourning figures and those active ones who bear the deceased. Yet these associations are never specific and self-conscious but instead remain elusive reminders that the universal themes that Kirili would reanimate in his sculpture are themes that Kirili would reanimate in his sculpture are themes of great venerability in the history of art. At a time in contemporary art when so many artists think about traditions of the old masters as either totally irrelevant or as usable only in the form of ironic or witty quotations, it is all the more astounding that Kirili has managed to

perpetuate and revitalize what so many thought was a lost cause. His art tells us that such timeless verities as the individual and the group, as the tragic and the joyous, as the forces of life and death can and should remain challenges to artists who dare to think that these great themes will not expire in contemporary art so long as an artist is courageous enough to resurrect them.