

## Alain Kirili/Gaston Lachaise: Flesh in Ecstasy

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THIS EXHIBITION pairs the groundbreaking, French-born sculptor Alain Kirili (b. 1946) with his predecessor, American Modernist Gaston Lachaise (1882–1935). Featured are forged iron pieces from 2006 by Kirili, including the series *Nataraja* inspired by the Hindu God of Dance, and, by Lachaise, boldly erotic bronze works from the early twentieth century by Lachaise. Created at very different times in New York, both bodies of work strive to capture the unchanging essence of human spirituality and sexuality. Two important developments come between Lachaise and Kirili: the changing parameters of the definition of sculpture under Duchamp and David Smith, and the Sexual Revolution. One wonders how their different environments might have affected the reception of their work, especially the erotic works. Can one compare their enjoyment in sculpting human flesh? To what extent do external sources influence either artist's creative process? Why their shared interest in elevating bodies and resisting gravity?

The concept of a dialogue exhibition is not new for Kirili, who thrives on juxtaposing his own works with those of other artists. Kirili looks to his predecessors in a spirit not of eclectic paraphrase, but of affirmation of the imperatives expressed in their work, namely sensuality, eroticism, ritual and celebration. He has conceived dialogue exhibitions with Rodin, Carpeaux, and Julio Gonzales. Last year, in an artistic *ménage-à-cinq* at the Musée d'Orsay Kirili showed his work, titled in a nod to Mallarmé, beside photographs by Steichen of a sculpture by Rodin of the writer Balzac.<sup>1</sup>

Kirili and Lachaise share a fascination for the exotic. Their art espouses a variety of cultures, Eastern and Western, whose motifs they recognize, re-use and co-opt to make their own. "I avow," wrote Lachaise, "that I am a portion of the creative forces which are constantly reincarnated throughout the march of time."<sup>2</sup> In addition to the body of Isabel, a married American woman of French-Canadian descent who became Lachaise's lifelong muse, Lachaise found inspiration in the art of Egypt, Greece, India and South-East Asia. He often left the École des Beaux-Arts to admire the *Nike of Samothrace* and the *Venus de Milo* he



Fig. 1 Isabel Dutaud Nagle, photograph by Jean Agérou, Paris, c. 1901-1905. Courtesy Lachaise Foundation, Boston.

could find at the Louvre, the Primitive and Aztec art at the Musée de L'Homme, or the Asian art at the Musée Guimet.

Like Lachaise, Kirili was struck by the Louvre's *Nike*, and has found inspiration in a wide range of sources, from ancient art to American, from African art to Indian and Nepalese. In 1965 Kirili first discovered the work of David Smith at an exhibition of American art at the Musée Rodin. Look carefully at the works of Kirili and Lachaise, for they are the product of much observation and study. You might see in them the shadow of Burgundian tomb statuary or the attributes of Shiva.

For Lachaise the greatest influence of all was 'Woman'.<sup>3</sup> As Louise Bourgeois wrote, "Gaston Lachaise had one God and it was a woman, his wife, and he put her on a pedestal both literally and figuratively."<sup>4</sup> Lachaise met and fell in love with Isabel Dutaud Nagle (fig. 1) in Paris circa 1903, and proceeded to sacrifice his Paris career to follow her in America. "I worked from you all afternoon," Lachaise writes to Isabel, "expressing your body—expressing your thoughts—your body is your thought. It has been burning hot in the studio . . . I am all aflame—a flame that burns of You . . ."<sup>5</sup> In his art, Lachaise conveys not just his love for Isabel, but the experience of loving her. His later, more experimental works offer up isolated breasts, buttocks, pelvises, vulvas, or an abstract combination thereof, each recalling the power of one woman, of 'Woman.'

Kirili sees one of Lachaise's earliest tributes to Woman, *Nude with a Coat*, 1912 (plate 5), as the female equivalent of the tremendous, male, creative power captured by Rodin in his iconic statue of Balzac. "What Lachaise is telling us," Kirili explains of the small statuette exhibited in the 1913 Armory show, "is that verticality can incorporate the pride of woman. *Nude with a Coat* is an amazing representation of the power of woman."<sup>6</sup> In his own abstract statuary, Kirili celebrates verticality, defies gravity and attempts to capture the same powerful forces of nature expressed by Lachaise and Rodin.

Kirili relishes the dialectic of masculine/feminine in his work—the complexity of symbolizing "what does really represent life."<sup>7</sup> To do so, Kirili employs one of the oldest form of this representation, the Hindu yoni and lingam, seen in his sculptures from the late seventies as well as his current work. The long vertical shaft, or lingam, might stand for the masculine, while the molded oval, or

rounded form, the feminine, or yoni. Kirili's group of *Plastiras*, in which suggestive female forms alternate with simpler shafts of metal surging upward to the next female form, display this use of the yoni-lingam to advantage (fig. 2).

Donald Kuspit's apt characterization of Kirili's work as "a balance between the sacred and the profane"<sup>8</sup> also applies to the work of Lachaise. Reverential in aim and yet extremely physical in nature, the works of both Lachaise and Kirili bear traces of their maker's hand or tool, gestures and signs of their existence. While his own work is more abstract than that of Lachaise, Kirili is drawn to the older master's evident pleasure in rendering human flesh as seen in his most expressive works. Lachaise's *Burlesque Figure*, 1930 (plate 3) for example, emanates euphoric pleasure, conveyed by the sumptuous bump and grind of her fleshy hip, suspended at the height of gyration. Just as in his drawings, Lachaise would go over and over some bodily contour he sought to make more voluptuous (fig. 3), in *Burlesque Figure* he applies more and more plasticene, enlarging the hip to achieve the desired effect of intensity and mass, the desired portion of flesh, which he serves up to the viewer with lightness, upward movement, and disregard for gravity. Rough-hewn compared with the rest of her, the hand-worked lump that is her right hip is highly expressive of passion, of both body and soul, dancer and sculptor. Kirili observes, "Flesh is in ecstasy in Lachaise."<sup>9</sup> Kirili's own pleasure in rendering human flesh is somewhat veiled by his abstract language, but nonetheless marked by great physicality. Calligraphic strokes are part of Kirili's metal-smithing expressiveness, in which his treatment of the sculpture's surface shifts from convex to concave, from roughly hammered to slippery smooth. The paint varies, from glossy to impenetrable, the brushwork from vigorous to smooth. The result can be anthropomorphic, as in the painted red, white, pink and grey sculpture from *Un Coup de Dés*, whose colors recall ruddy flesh, blood, intermingled with strands of hair. Kirili's rapid, improvisational working process imbues the sculpture with rhythm, speed and lightness.

The pleasure experienced in sculpting flesh, says Kirili, is an antidote to the puritanical denial of the body. Lachaise perceived this denial in 1909. "This good, modest city Boston," he writes to his Paris friend, "plans to prohibit [Isadora Duncan] when she returns because she dances a bit too nude: as for myself, I feel that completely nude would be a beautiful thing, too. It's phenomenal how these



Fig. 2 Alain Kirili, *Plastiras*, from *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira la sculpture*, 2005, painted, forged iron, 9 x 13 x 10 feet (274 x 400 x 310 cm) installed at the Musée d'Orsay with photographs of Rodin's *Balzac* by Edward Steichen, 1908. Courtesy Alain Kirili/Laurent Lecat.

Fig. 3 Gaston Lachaise, *Strutting Woman*, undated, graphite and ink on paper, 24 x 19 inches. Photo: Wit McKay.



virtuous and chaste people see nothing but sexes.”<sup>10</sup> Indicative of this intolerant atmosphere, it was *Playboy* magazine that in 1919 brought photographs of Lachaise’s *Elevation* to the public. Even twenty years later, Marsden Hartley described his friend Lachaise as “an indomitable pagan who saw the entire universe in the form of a woman.”<sup>11</sup> Today, one can see Lachaise’s expressive sculptures as devotional, not shocking or pagan.

With the advent of Duchamp’s *ready-made*, the act of modeling and working with tools in sculpture became for Kirili all the more critical. Robert Rosenblum has observed that while some artists hold that “shapes and materials



PLATE 3 Gaston Lachaise,  
*Burlesque Figure*, 1930, bronze, 24 x 8½  
x 6 inches (62.2 x 21.6 x 15.2 cm).  
Photo: Paul Waldman

[a]re what they [a]re and nothing else,” Kirili’s investigations yield “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 verities of life and death, love and birth.”<sup>12</sup> Lachaise, focusing on the female body with its procreative capabilities, makes palpable several of these “verities”. His striking sculpture *In Extremis*, c. 1934 (plate 2), whose Latin etymology gives us “at the point of death” or “in grave or extreme circumstances”<sup>13</sup> represents an undeniably powerful, real-life experience. Be this a literal or metaphorical representation of a woman’s death (“la petite mort”), it is fertile ground for the overlap of Kirili and Lachaise, and has prompted Kirili to make his own vertical work, *In Extremis*, 2006 (plate 1), in painted forged iron.

Kirili’s *In Extremis* is abstract, and yet, as a reply to Lachaise’s work its twisting forms make anthropomorphic claims. Surely the central shaft, out of which grow a multitude of rounded hollows of metal, is the “spine” rising up through the architecture of a human body. The resulting cage of so many twisting arms and legs writhes with a rhythm provided by the undulating metal, hammered with a pattern of spacing that is regular at points, irregular at others. No longer is the curved iron “foot” at the base an innocent echo of the round forms above, but an extremity of this abstract personage, arched in involuntary ecstasy, or agony. Curling as might human fingers or toes on a bedsheet, the curled metal, erect as compared to its two mates, suggests a momentary spasm—a potent symbol of a living being in the throes of passion. There is something stark and bony about these limbs of white metal. And yet their hardness is mitigated by a preponderance of curves—of knees, hips, breasts and skin, and a curving movement which recalls that of joints and sockets.

The series of forged iron works called *Nataraja* (plates 7–10) was given its name for Nataraja, the Hindu God of Dance. Kirili finds Nataraja, one of the manifestations of Shiva, to be a marvelous expression of the jubilatory nature of Hinduism. In December and January Kirili spent a month in the South of India, where he has been before to admire the lavish decorations of temples from the Chola Dynasty (8th–13th century). Kirili’s particular fondness for the temple of Tanjore is made apparent in this series of graceful dancing sculptures. These delicate drawings of black metal have a rhythm that is at once abstract and figura-



PLATE 4 Alain Kirili, *Nataraja I*, 2006, forged iron, 101 x 47 x 23 inches (255 x 120 x 89 cm)

tive. Swirling upward, they are little hurricanes, whirling dervishes of pleasure celebrating life. The alternate-side-of-the-metal hammering makes the metal pulse with excitement, energy coursing up and down, in and out. Each curve could be a shoulder or an arm turning and reaching upward, with the occasional ends of otherwise endless metal representing hands, bent wristless. Jumping reflections of silver on the sweetly uneven surface imbue the weightless mass of spidery limbs with double-jointed, boneless movement. These forms have their origin in the organic shapes of the female body. On the floor or lifted in the air are feet that are bare, flexed, pointed, bent backwards, or turned in opposing directions. These feet echo the forms above, resist gravity and propel the upward movement of each piece.

Do references to Hindu mythology exist in the work of Lachaise

According to Lincoln Kirstein, Lachaise felt close to the Hindu sculptors of India. . . to their scenes of loving and destructive gods.”<sup>14</sup> Though perhaps not as overtly sought as his own references, the multiple arms in the protruding limbs of *Dynamo Mother* (fig. 10) of 1933 remind Kirili of the many arms of Shiva. This idea is further supported by the fact that in early 1933 Lachaise, thanks to Kirstein, attended a performance of Hindu dancer Uday Shan-Kar at the New Yorker Theatre.

While the work of Kirili is very different from that of Lachaise, the two oeuvres share some essential characteristics. Both have the challenge of depicting sexuality in sculpture. Neither artist looks to a model, but allows himself to be guided by his inward eye and the memory of forms, inviting his unconscious to help steer the creative process. Body emerging (Kirili) or body immediate (Lachaise), their works possess an aspect of levitation or weightlessness. Each artist is a sensual genius, unabashedly exalting the erotic forces of life, while simultaneously pushing the limits of sculpture. Kirili’s provocative forged iron works from 2006 acknowledge and honor Lachaise in the twenty-first century.

Alain Kirili’s works can be seen around the city of Paris, from the Tuileries Gardens to the Musee de l’Orangerie, which will host “Kirili et les Nymphes” this year (May 15–September 17), to the Espace Massena, where his *Hommage to Charlie Parker* will be inaugurated also this year. The legacy of Gaston Lachaise can be seen in public institutions around the world.

- 1 *Correspondances—Alain Kirili/Edward Steichen*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, January 31–April 30, 2006.
- 2 Gaston Lachaise, "A Comment on My Sculpture," *Creative Art*, vol. 3, no. 2, August 1928.
- 3 Lachaise wrote that Isabel was "the primary inspiration which awakened my vision and the leading influence that has directed my forces. Throughout my career as an artist, I refer to this person by the word 'Woman.'" Lachaise, "A Comment on My Sculpture."
- 4 Louise Bourgeois, "Obsession," *Artforum*, vol. 30, no. 8, April 1992, pp. 85–87.
- 5 Undated letter from Lachaise to Isabel, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- 6 May 18, 2006 author's interview with the artist.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Steven A. Nash, *Alain Kirili: A Dialogue with Rodin*, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1999, quoting Donald Kuspit. "Signs of Will: Le Sculpture d'Alain Kirili," *Alain Kirili*, exh. cat. Galerie Adrien Maeght, 1984.
- 9 May 18, 2006 author's interview with the artist.
- 10 Letter from Gaston Lachaise to Pierre Christophe dated May 17, 1909, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- 11 Marsden Hartley, "Gaston Lachaise," *Twice a Year*, Fall/Winter 1939.
- 12 Robert Rosenblum, published on the occasion of the exhibition *Alain Kirili*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1982.
- 13 The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition, 2000
- 14 Lincoln Kirstein, *Gaston Lachaise, Retrospective Exhibition*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1935.