Sister artists return to South Orange

Galleries

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A Sense of Place: Kiki and Seton Smith

Where: Washi Gallery, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange Ave, South Orange
When: Through Dec. 9, Open 12-4 p.m. Monday-Friday
How much: Free. For more information call (973) 275-3333 or setnhs.edu/washigallery or professionalarts.org

What else: An opening reception in the Washi Gallery with both artists set for Sunday, Dec. 6, at 4 p.m. They will return for a talk about their work, and their lives in South Orange, with cultural critic and School of Visual Arts teacher Larissa Hilesian on Sunday, Dec. 6, at 7 p.m. in Jubilee Hall on the Seton Hall campus.

Their father kept a tomato vine in the front yard chained with the word “Smith.” Kiki has said they were “the Addams family” of South Orange.

But it was a fine house on a block of similar homes, most of them kept by lawyers, doctors, and professionals. And in that house—thatched with talk, about art, politics, and the beauty of unadorned nature—with its deep Victorian moldings and diamond-patterned windows, the very different styles of Kiki and Seton took shape.

“Sister,” Smith says, “is never a term I would use. It was more like a homecoming for sisters who represent three generations of Smiths from South Orange. Seton Smith was born in the house on Sunday.” Seton’s Irish grandpa built it when his family settled in South Orange, and lived in the house for decades.

“Sister” and Smith are the last surviving members of the family.

Tony Smith studied under Frank Lloyd Wright and became a respected professor, designing exhibitions for the Abstract Expressionists and later helping to create Minimalism, a highly influential art movement in the late 1960s-70s. His home became a meeting place for artists and students and a kind of gallery where works by friends, like Jackson Pollock, Clifford Still, and Barnett Newman, were displayed in largely empty rooms. His own sculptures, usually assembled from smaller geometric shapes like decahedrons, were scattered throughout the house and in the yard outside.

Kiki and Seton’s mother, Jane Smith, was an opera singer and actress who was close to playwright Tennessee Williams, who also lived in the house for a time. Then, Williams was planning to move to South Orange the day he died. Jane and Seton were actually at his hotel to help him move when his death was announced.

South Orange already has a monument to the Smiths in Meadowlands Park, where Tony Smith’s TAU, a black steel abstract sculpture named for the Greek word for the letter T, was erected in 2006. The sculpture, which is about 320 feet tall and 620 feet long, is made up of 500,000 pounds of steel and has been painted in a variety of colors. The sculpture was designed to be a tribute to the Smiths and their contributions to the arts.

“I believe that art should be accessible to everyone,” Smith says. “It should be a part of everyday life, not just something that is kept in museums.”

Sister, Smith says, refers to the Smiths’ close relationship with their hometown.

For much of the 1960s, Smith was a struggling architect, and the family had very little money, and little in the way of furniture for their house. But the Smiths remember a house with no couches and only card tables and folding chairs. They had no TV.

“The house was a place to gather,” Smith says. “It was a place to have fun, to relax, to read, and to talk.”

Sister, Smith says, refers to the Smiths’ close relationship with their hometown.