

The Fairy Tale of “Little Red Riding Hood”: Ecofeminist Artistic Practices of Kiki Smith

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Abstract: This text examines contemporary feminist artist Kiki Smith's rebellious reinterpretation of Western traditional fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood”, focusing on several artworks that center on two archetypal characters “Little Red Riding Hood” and wolf as central protagonists. Through meticulous analysis of these works, this study argues that Smith constructs an alternative narrative framework that unfolds along two intertwined conceptual trajectories: dissolution of boundaries and emergence of relational symbiosis, thereby destabilizing deeply rooted binary oppositions, especially those separating humans from animals, women from nature, and articulating a vision of cross-species ecological integration that resonates with contemporary feminist theory, particularly epistemological turn in ecofeminism. Therefore, symbolic reconciliation between “Little Red Riding Hood” and wolf is not merely narrative revision, but it represents convergence point between contemporary feminist artistic practice and broader transformation of feminist epistemology, while simultaneously projecting an ideal vision of harmonious, pluralistic and non-hierarchical ecological coexistence.

1. Introduction

From approximately early 2000s to present, contemporary feminist artist Kiki Smith has created many artworks inspired by main characters of fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood”, namely young girl herself and wolf, and Smith works across multiple mediums—including painting, sculpture, printmaking and craft-based art forms—reexamining this widely circulated Western narrative and subjecting it to imaginative reinterpretation process. Through these artistic explorations, she not only reconfigures familiar storyline but also opens up broader discursive space in which traditional meanings can be questioningly reimagined.

In these works, Smith's artistic practice resonates profoundly with epistemological shifts emerging in contemporary feminist thought, particularly those related to ecofeminism, while her visual language echoes this intellectual transformation while translating theoretical insights into symbolic and material forms. Smith does not reiterate rigid oppositions that have historically constructed Western cultural narratives—human versus animal, culture versus nature, innocence versus savagery—but rather points toward relational mode of existence characterized by reciprocity, interdependence and cohabitation. Through doing so, she indicates possibility of dissolving deeply entrenched binary boundaries, thereby imagining new pathways through which marginalized beings—whether human or non-human—can achieve mutual redemption and coexistence.

2. Rewriting the Fairy Tale

The story of “Little Red Riding Hood” is one of the most enduring narratives in Western folklore, and it has been passed down through numerous variants over centuries. In these versions, the fate of the young protagonist differs significantly, as in some tellings, the story ends with “Little Red Riding Hood” being devoured by the wolf, with her innocence being swallowed by predatory violence, however, in other versions, the narrative grants her a certain degree of agency: she cuts open the wolf's belly, thereby saving herself and her grandmother. The most widely circulated version, which was popularized by the Brothers Grimm, concludes with the dramatic intervention of a hunter, who kills the wolf and rescues the girl and her grandmother from the beast's stomach.

However in Kiki Smith's artistic reimagining, narrative positions traditionally assigned to “Little Red Riding Hood” and wolf are not merely adjusted—they are fundamentally reconfigured, and sometimes even deliberately subverted. In traditional fairy tale, these two characters occupy starkly opposing symbolic roles: on one side stands innocent human girl, fragile yet morally pure, while on other side lurks wolf, violent, cunning and irredeemably evil. Smith dissolves this antagonistic polarization, thereby blurring boundaries separating these two figures through imagery related to gestation, transformation and rebirth, which allows entities that cultural tradition has long framed as irreconcilable to merge within shared symbolic continuum.

In this newly imagined narrative realm, 'new “Little Red Riding Hood”' is not merely a revised literary figure, but rather points toward a broader mythological poetic vision, suggesting that humans and animals might transcend rigid boundaries historically imposed upon them, thereby entering into relationships of mutual transformation and ontological coexistence. Thus, in Smith's hands, this fairy tale evolves from a didactic narrative about danger and innocence into a speculative allegory about interconnected life.

Smith's artworks center on images of “Little Red Riding Hood” and wolf, highlighting her feminist stance, while also integrating with epistemological turn advanced by ecofeminism. First, artist demonstrates keen awareness of contradictions inherent in traditional binary thinking, where when boundaries of gender are strictly divided, struggle against oppression often becomes self-contradictory, with liberation of one group seeming achievable only through continued subjugation of another group. Early ecofeminist discourse itself occasionally falls into this binary impasse, for example, elevating Gaia, Earth Mother to supreme spiritual authority, or advocating female leadership as corrective domination over males^[1].

Secondly, Smith's resistance to binary thinking did not arise from conceptual vacuum, as it is closely related to her historical and cultural environment, and during her life and work in America, she was deeply influenced by ideological energy of two major feminist movement waves, while at same time she was also influenced by theoretical contributions of generations of feminist artists, historians and scholars, with these ideological and political currents providing fertile soil for development of her artistic vision^[2].

Finally, Smith's reinterpretation of “Little Red Riding Hood” originates from personal reflection, intersecting with broader shifts in feminist epistemology, and as a universally recognized fairy tale, this narrative inevitably provokes critical reexamination. For example, in Grimm's version, the young female protagonist ultimately relies on the intervention of a brave male hunter to be rescued, and moreover, in Western cultural discourse, the term ““Little Red Riding Hood”” is often used humorously—or contemptuously—to describe someone naive, lacking experience and easily deceived. Meanwhile, in countless versions of the story, the wolf almost without exception appears as the embodiment of brutality: savage, predatory and morally corrupt.

In this sense, binary opposition between “Little Red Riding Hood” and wolf reflects a deeper symbolic structure, which implicitly positions women and animals as opposing categories in

cultural imagination. However, Smith's work raises an important question: must this opposition remain unquestioned, or can it be critically re-examined?

As response, Smith through her artworks proposed two conceptual paths to rethink this deeply rooted binary opposition: first, dissolution of boundaries, and second, symbiotic formation of relational coexistence.

3. The Dissolution of Boundaries

In 1999, Kiki Smith created two works that directly involved intertwined imagery of wolf and girl: “Daughter” (Figure 1) and “Wolf-Girl”, with the conceptual inspiration of these two works both coming from characters in Western fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood”, however Smith did not repeat traditional narrative of confrontation between human innocence and animal savagery, but presented a visual encounter in which human girl's body overlapped and merged with wolf's body. Through this physical interpenetration, artist highlighted gradual dissolution of boundary that historically separated humans from animals.



Figure 1. Kiki Smith, “Daughter”, sculpture, paper and fabric, 1999.

Image source: WikiArt

In “Daughter”, Smith constructs an image of a figure wearing red hooded cloak, which is clear reference to iconic protagonist in fairy tale, a girl called “Little Red Riding Hood”. In fact, some art critics even directly call “Daughter” as “Little Red Riding Hood”, however Smith does not adopt any classic narrative ending related to this story. Instead, through highly personalized treatment of materials and context, she reimagines ending of story, and proposes completely different symbolic trajectory.

This sculpture uses paper and fabric as main materials, which is distinctly different from marble, bronze and carved wood traditionally associated with figurative sculpture, while the human face and body are mainly composed of paper, with its surface appearing rough, wrinkled and granular, thereby producing a strange swollen yet fragile texture, as if the form itself might disintegrate under the slightest pressure. Smith mentioned in interviews that paper has an interesting duality: although it looks delicate and fragile, it still maintains certain toughness, and in her view, this paradox reflects qualities she associates with women themselves—seemingly fragile on the surface, yet enduring in essence^[3].

However, beyond its materiality, the most striking feature of this sculpture lies in the blending of human and animal facial features. Apart from the basic arrangement of facial features, the girl's face

presents many characteristics associated with wolves (Fig. 2), with dense brown-black hair growing irregularly along the hairline, cheeks, and on the jaw and chin—long and messy hair even appears in the center of the cheeks below the eyes, and these tufts of hair clearly evoke the rough fur of wolves, thereby carrying an untamed primitive quality. The girl's hands placed at the waist also deviate from recognizable human anatomy: the fingers extend forward in a claw-like shape, while the nails are long and sharp, and her legs are unusually thick and muscular, with the contours of the calves and ankles not resembling the slender proportions of a human girl, but rather resembling the powerful hind limbs of a quadruped animal.

Therefore it is obvious that Smith's sculptural presentation of “Little Red Riding Hood”, although rooted in the archetype of a human girl in a fairy tale, ultimately refuses to replicate that familiar red-cheeked child image, instead presenting as a hybrid entity—a physical fusion of girl and wolf, thereby locating itself at a liminal place where boundaries of species dissolve.



Figure 2. Facial detail of “Daughter”

A more explicit, visually more dramatic rewriting of fairy tale ending appears in Smith's 2002 lithograph “Born” (Fig. 3), where reversal of narrative becomes undeniable, as young girl “Little Red Riding Hood” and her elderly grandmother both emerge from inside of wolf's body, as if being “Born”, with the wolf lying on ground in a posture that evokes childbirth, and blood flows outward from its opened abdomen, thereby visually linking act of birth with red cloaks worn by girl and her grandmother.



Figure 3. Kiki Smith, “Born”, lithograph, 173 × 142.5 cm, 2002.

Image source: WikiArt

In this composition, blood functions as powerful symbolic medium, which not only signifies harm or violence but also signifies connection and transformation, with the red flow visually linking female body with wolf's body, thereby establishing blood as channel through which boundary between female body and animal body becomes permeable, and what once might be interpreted as devouring narrative thus transforms into generative emergent image.

Although “Born” and “Daughter” evoke similar conceptual scenes, the former elucidates the relationship between birth and fusion with stronger narrative continuity, and in this lithograph, these two processes—generation and mutual penetration—are simultaneously presented on the plane of the same picture, where it is noteworthy that the part of the female body below the knees is not depicted with clear anatomical features of the human body, but instead, they merge into flowing blood and the interior of the wolf's body, thereby forming a visual continuum that dissolves the distinction between organism and environment.

Such imagery reflects Smith's broader natural philosophy, in which humans and non-human animals are not fundamentally separated entities but exist in a state of profound interdependence—a relationship of 'you are within me and I am within you', thereby making the connection between human life and animal life intimate and inseparable, with both being intertwined in a way that cannot be defined by rigid classifications^[4].

This viewpoint resonates strongly with the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, and on the basis of criticizing deeply rooted dualistic thinking, ecofeminism attempts to dismantle those conceptual structures that have historically provided legitimacy for the domination of women, nature and animals, where in this discourse, the concept of 'social isomorphism' is proposed to describe common social conditions experienced by these marginalized groups under long-term operation of patriarchal, male-centered power structures, with women and nature, subject to the same system of domination, thus constituting a community of shared destiny.

Importantly, this community is not understood as an essential or predetermined unity rooted in biological determinism; instead, it is historically and socially constructed through the recognition of shared experiences of oppression^[5]. Furthermore, the concept of social isomorphism serves not merely as a diagnostic framework for analyzing current inequalities, but as a call to future action, thereby inviting oppressed groups to consciously cultivate solidarity and coalition.

Smith's works appeared at a time that coincides with key developments in ecofeminist thought. Around 2000, ecofeminist theorist Karen J. Warren argued that women's perceived closeness to nature could serve as a crucial political strategy for resisting and surviving within patriarchal society, and during this period, ecofeminist discourse began to articulate new understandings of relationships between humans and nature, women and animals, and women and men^[6]. These evolving theoretical insights align remarkably with conceptual orientations embodied in Smith's artworks inspired by “Little Red Riding Hood”, thereby indicating profound intellectual resonance between contemporary feminist theory and artistic practice.

4. Symbiotic Connectivity

Kiki Smith's bronze sculpture “Rapture” (2001) can be understood as reinterpretation of same symbolic scene previously explored in “Daughter” and “Born” through different material medium, where in this work, narrative moment is again emergence, with “Little Red Riding Hood” symbolically re“Born” after passing through interior of wolf's body, and Smith herself has compared female figure in “Rapture” with iconic depiction of Venus in Botticelli's “The Birth of Venus”. However, unlike Botticelli's Venus—whose posture conveys delicate elegance and mythological serenity—female figure in Smith's sculpture appears more open, confident, and physically liberated, while title “Rapture” itself emphasizes this emotional intensity.

Emotional and bodily openness of this image originates from transformation process implied in sculpture, and in act of rebirth, female subject dissolves boundaries that traditionally separate humans from nature and women from animals, which emerges from this dissolution can be described as newly constituted vitality, a generative energy “Born” from cross-species and ecological fusion, with such new power inevitably raising further questions about what kind of relational existence this energy might lead women, animals and nature toward, while Smith's subsequent artistic practice provides a convincing response.

A particularly enlightening example can be found in Smith's etching print “Companions” (2008) (Fig. 4), which resonates strikingly with the epistemological shift unfolding in contemporary ecofeminist thought, with the print depicting a moment derived from the “Little Red Riding Hood” narrative, where a girl encounters a wolf on her way through the forest to deliver food to her grandmother, but Smith fundamentally reconfigures the emotional atmosphere of this encounter, as the image presents not hostility or predation, but a scene of mutual trust and quiet “Companions” hip.

In this work, the image of the wolf has a dramatic difference from its traditional depiction as savage and malicious, with its body looking relaxed as it sits comfortably on the ground, turning its chest and abdomen toward the girl—this is an unmistakable gesture of vulnerability and trust. On the right side of the wolf stands a female figure wearing a red cloak, holding in her hand the familiar food basket prepared for her grandmother, which clearly indicates she is “Little Red Riding Hood”, and her manner is calm and unguarded. She neither retreats nor shows the fear or panic traditionally associated with encountering a wolf in fairy tales, instead, her posture is natural and composed, thereby suggesting that what is shared between these two figures is not a threatening relationship, but a relationship of recognition and coexistence.



Figure 4. Kiki Smith, “Companions”, etching, 162.5 × 132 cm, 2008.

Image source: Galerie Lelong & Co.

Smith's use of fairy tale imagery has continued into the 21st century, and her 2019-2020 solo exhibition *I am a Wanderer* at Modern Art Oxford comprehensively displayed her artistic trajectory through three thematic sections, which includes early small-scale sculptures created in the 1980s, later print works, and a series of Jacquard tapestries created since 2012, with early sculptural works strongly focusing on the human body, thereby exploring themes such as pain, taboo, decay and death, as these bodily forms constructed from multiple materials often evoke a visceral sense of

fragility, inviting viewers to confront the vulnerability of embodied existence.

In the second part of the exhibition, the print “Homecoming” (2008) (Fig. 5) appeared, which was created in the same period as “Companions”. Both works draw inspiration from fragments in the “Little Red Riding Hood” narrative.



Figure 5. Kiki Smith, “Homecoming”, etching, 37.8 × 55.4 cm, 2008.

Image source: Modern Art Oxford

In traditional fairy tales, “Little Red Riding Hood” arrived at her grandmother's house, only to find the wolf had already devoured her grandmother and was disguised as her lying there waiting, but in Smith's reinterpretation, the narrative tension was quietly subverted. The wolf reclined comfortably on the bed, playfully extending part of its tongue, with its front legs hanging loosely over the edge of the bed, without any attempt at disguise or deception. Meanwhile, “Little Red Riding Hood”—still wearing her red cloak and carrying her basket—pushed open the door, preparing to enter, while her facial expression remained calm and peaceful. She showed no signs of fear or panic; instead, her demeanor suggested familiarity with this situation, as if such encounters were completely ordinary things.

Title “Homecoming” itself reconfigures narrative logic of fairy tale, as this title does not suggest predatory ambush, nor is it trap set by wolf waiting in house, but evokes sense of return, sense of belonging and sense of relationship continuation, with house no longer being a dangerous place but becoming shared space.

Comprehensively speaking, “Homecoming” and “Companions” demonstrate Smith's efforts, as she wants to transcend the traditional framework that dominates the relationship between “Little Red Riding Hood” and the wolf, which is a rigid binary framework. After first dissolving the confrontational opposition between these two images, Smith then imagines an alternative relationship structure—this is a structure established on the foundation of mutual recognition, coexistence and symbiosis. By doing this, she articulates a unique holistic perception in her artistic practice, with her works not only focusing on women but also on the broader life network, thereby expanding the aesthetic and ethical horizons of feminist art.

This artistic strategy, its significance lies in invitation to audience, where through female image's embodiment of care, alliance and redemptive action toward 'the other', audience is encouraged to critically reflect on androcentric and logocentric discourse structures that have historically legitimized domination in Western culture, and through gradual dissolution of boundaries of gender, species and hierarchy, Smith's work points to possibility of forging path toward collective redemption and common coexistence.

5. Conclusion

Carefully examining Kiki Smith's artworks inspired by the image of “Little Red Riding Hood”

and wolf, one can discover she continuously focuses on epistemological transformation represented by ecofeminist thought, and through two symbolic strategies of boundary dissolution and symbiotic connection, Smith challenges deeply rooted binary oppositions—between male and female, between human and nature—thereby attempting to imagine alternative modes of relational existence.

Reconciliation between “Little Red Riding Hood” and wolf is therefore not merely a revision of a familiar fairy tale, but it marks a convergence point between contemporary feminist art practice and continuously evolving epistemological landscape of feminist theory, while at the same time articulating a hopeful vision: a future where diverse life forms coexist in harmonious, pluralistic and non-hierarchical ecological community.

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