

Alain Kirili

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Jazz music fills the lower gallery of the Alain Kirili exhibition in Norwich. The source is a video which shows the artist sculpting in a jam session with the drummer Roy Haynes, both improvising, both working fast. As Haynes plays, the artist manipulates sizable blocks of clay, kneading the material, or violently slamming it into the worktop. The resulting 'action sculptures' are self-contained sketches, an unusual modelled abstraction often suggesting the forms of ruins, shattered heads or strange creatures entwining.

Kirili is a French sculptor who spends much of his time in New York; his work has received a good deal of attention in France and the United States, but this is the first opportunity to see it here. He uses many materials and techniques. The larger pieces typically involve combinations of metal, wood and stone, and oppose rigid supporting elements with free-form superstructures. In *Spirit of Mingus* regular painted iron plinths support a variety of found and altered metal fragments, each gesturing dramatically at the others.



Figure 1 *Spirit of Mingus*

Kirili's work is often presented as a hybrid product of French and American sensibilities. A warm, sensual, southern spirit is tempered and fertilised by the cold, Puritan, minimalist discipline of the U.S.A. So hot orange granite blocks top a sequence of rectangular iron posts in the aptly named *Nord-Sud*. The firm, upright columns marking the beat of



Figure 2 *Nord-Sud*

Weberian rigour are contrasted with a supposed Gallic predilection for a feminine sublime of 'gracefulness and seduction'.¹ In Kirili's opinion, 'The presence of woman as muse, inspiration, creative stimulus is crucial to art in France: a hymn to flesh without morbidity'.² The opposition is also evident in many of the terracottas where iron rods and tubes have been stabbed into the yielding clay.

For post-modern theorists the contact of these two incompatible temperaments brings about an ineffable but fragile resolution. Julia Kristeva asks, '[...] overwhelmed by stresses and viruses, bombarded by images and missiles, given up to solitude and the crowd, does the modern body still exist, has it parted with its soul?', but finds that a new body is born in Kirili's sculpture which 'signals to our intimate imaginary, and resonates with the tortures and joys for which we still have no words but nonetheless feel in dreaming'.³ Kirili's is a conservative art, which follows Eliot's prescription that meaning can only be generated through a deep engagement with tradition, in this case with an eclectic mix of Rodin and Smith, Carpeaux and Pollock. This conservatism has certain advantages; the sculptures are beautifully and thoughtfully made, and in the excellent installation at Norwich they achieve a certain presence. Yet this hardly outweighs the negative consequences of such an attitude: the work's conservative characterisation of gender and its reliance on an undefined sense of myth and mystery (as in the series of *Constellations*, usually described as 'sacred' signs); above all, since such an expressive conservatism is only possible as one option among many, the elements lose their immediacy, becoming mere signs of tradition, referring inwards in a complex but autonomous art-historical game. That post-modern theory can seize on this work with the same effusion (and conclusions) as it displays in dealing with the innovations of, say, Holzer or Schneeman, proves the infinite arbitrariness of its methods.

Alain Kirili: Open Form Sculpture is at the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich until 15th May 1994. The exhibition then continues to the French Institute, London and the Talbot Rice Art Gallery, Edinburgh.

¹ Interview between Kirili and William Jeffett in the catalogue, *Alain Kirili: Open Form Sculpture*, Sainsbury Centre, 1994, p. 41. The catalogue also contains an essay by William Jeffett.

² Kirili cited in 'The Peripatetic Artist: 14 Statements', *Art in America*, July 1989, p. 136.

³Kristeva, 'The Imaginary Sense of Forms', *Arts Magazine*, September 1991, p. 29.