

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324894104578115203181580238>

MAGAZINE - PARTNERSHIP

A Tale of Two Sisters

Though fiercely independent in their careers, artists Kiki and Seton Smith's bohemian childhood—and shared country house—bind them together

By **PENELOPE ROWLANDS**

Nov. 29, 2012 5:08 p.m. ET

FROM THE OUTSIDE, THE HOUSE in which the artists Kiki and Seton Smith were raised resembled all the other rambling Victorians in South Orange, New Jersey. But inside, an entirely different aesthetic prevailed: Abstract Expressionist paintings by family friends and frequent visitors like Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman were positioned beside Minimalist sculptures by the sisters' father, Tony Smith, who was both a celebrated art theorist and something of a homebody. Their mother, Jane, was an actor and opera singer. Meals at the Smith home tended to draw a lively



KINDRED SPIRITS | Seton, left, and Kiki Smith photographed in Manhattan's Tompkins Square Park.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN DONNOLA

crowd.

Three talented young daughters—all teenagers in the 1960s and early '70s—were deeply influenced by this rarefied air. Chiara, known as Kiki, was drawn to traditional crafts, while Seton, one year younger, was a budding visual artist. Seton's twin, Beatrice, loved the theater, like her mother. After her untimely death from AIDS in 1988, the surviving sisters became even more tight-knit.

Today the Smith women live within a few blocks of each other on Manhattan's Lower East Side and share a weekend home in upstate New York. Their relationship might seem prone to sibling competition, but in reality there are few traces of rivalry. The stark differences between the sisters' work may explain why. Blonde and ethereal, Seton, a photographer, is the quieter force. Her images are inquiries into space, architecture, landscape and the medium photography—entirely devoid of human subjects. By contrast, the body is an

enduring motif in Kiki's work, which is considered part of the feminist canon. Kiki has been an internationally famous artist since her first show at New York's Museum of Modern Art ("Projects 24: Kiki Smith") in the '90s. She exudes confidence and authority, working across a variety of media, most famously in sculpture.

This fall, an exhibit at Germany's Kunsthalle Bielefeld—timed to celebrate the centennial of Tony Smith's birth—brought together the clan's disparate work. Though far from South Orange, it was a perfect homage to this deeply visual family, one that prizes instinct and impulse above formal education. No matter the medium, the Smith sisters communicate in the language of art.

Seton on Kiki

PEOPLE SAY THAT KIKI AND I LOOK SIMILAR, that they can tell we're sisters. We understand each other's language. We grew up in the house in New Jersey where our father had grown up. The interior was extremely sparse, except for a couple of Abstract Expressionist paintings. Kiki has always said—and there's a lot of truth in it—that she and I are connected to the house we grew up in by a piece of string.

My father had a big studio in a part of the house that was once a gym. We knew that our father was well known—even if it was only in the tiny art world. And we didn't know much beyond Abstract Expressionism. I didn't know about Andrew Wyeth, for example, until I went to college. I knew della Francesca, da Vinci, Matisse and Bonnard. I didn't know much else.

When Kiki was a teenager she started making art, but it was more craft-oriented. Our work was completely different from the start. My work is about moving around in space, navigating space. Kiki approaches things about our childhood



Seton Smith *PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN DONNOLA*

in a more symbolic, figurative way. She started out making crafts, but it's evolved into something more complex.

For a long time Kiki and I lived near each other. Then I left to live in Paris. Kiki became famous after I moved to France, starting with her first show at MoMA. The world was in sync with what Kiki was doing at the time. She has enormous energy and interest and was working in a sociopolitical way, so in a sense her becoming famous was just a natural thing. After I returned to New York, I bought Kiki's old loft. I had a bit of being "Kiki's sister" when I got back, but I also had my own life.

House museums are an enthusiasm we share. I've photographed a lot of them, and Kiki is very interested in decorative

arts. She's really fascinated by how things are made and just knows volumes about different metals, glazes and glass.

The interesting thing about family members is that it's a very long dialogue. When we drive up to the country together, we cover a lot of territory. We talk about each other's work; there aren't many people in life you get to do that with. Kiki is exposed to a lot of people. She's coming and going all the time. She has different information about the world. We're very close, and yet we have our

own lives.

“After I returned to New York, I bought Kiki’s old loft. I had a bit of being ‘Kiki’s sister’ when I got back, but I also had my own life.”

Kiki on Seton

MANY PEOPLE DON’T HAVE RELATIONSHIPS to their siblings in adulthood, or they have superficial ones. It’s sort of unfashionable, particularly in America, to be close to your family. It doesn’t fit the upper-middle-class version of what life should be like—that you move away from your hometown and your family. There’s this idea that families are stifling. To me, that’s perverse.

Since we got our house upstate—it’s Dutch, and dates from 1690—we often spend weekends together. The place affords us a relationship to landscape and nature, which is important in our work. We visit historical houses a lot and take pictures. When we go into Hudson, New York—the town near the house—people don’t know our relationship. If you’re lovers it’s much easier. If you say you’re sisters, it has this spinstery 19th-century feel to it.

In our family there wasn’t anything else besides art. Nothing else in the world existed. My father never spoke about going to a movie or listening to music, other than my mother’s singing. I didn’t start to be an artist myself until I was



Kiki Seton PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN DONNOLA

24. Seton knew all along. I wanted to be a craftsperson, but then I didn't know what to do, so I became an artist.

My father's sculptures were big and Seton always had that scale. Some of Seton's architectural work relates to our father's interest in architecture and his particular way of living in space—like the fact that we had no furniture in our house. We grew up in the house my father had been born in and maybe his mother, too. There were parts of it that were like death wings, with objects left over from my father's parents and grandparents.

Our parents didn't focus on education; they always said, "Oh, we thought you'd find yourself and your own interests." So we had very little education. Still, Seton

is more intellectual. She's more rigorously engaged mentally, more culturally engaged. She goes to the theater, films and lectures.

It's really special when you share history with people and are in the same field. We come from a background where it's completely natural for someone to devote their life to a vision. It's an unsaid vision, one that's constantly moving and falling apart, and sometimes there are really still periods. Artists live in unknown spaces and give themselves over to following something unknown. I

see that in Seton's work and in mine.

“People don't know our relationship. If you're lovers, it's much easier. If you say you're sisters, it has this spinstery 19th-century feel to it.”

—Edited from Penelope Rowland's interviews with Kiki and Seton Smith.

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.