

**STEVEN A. NASH, PUBLISHED AT THE OCCASION OF  
THE EXHIBITION KIRILI : DIALOG WITH RODIN**

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WHY KIRILI AND RODIN? The Legion of Honour has been inextricably identified with the art of Auguste Rodin since its inception in 1924, when founder Alma de Bretteville Spreckels placed on view her personal and sizable collection of Rodin sculptures in different media from all periods of his work. Alain Kirili, who has made his own important contribution to the tradition of modern sculpture, acknowledges Rodin as a powerful influence in terms of key formal ideas but also in regard to the intense subjectivity and true drama of human emotion invested in his art.

It is an equation that is far from obvious. Kirili's art, on the one hand, seems to derive from minimalist concerns with primary structures and mutely additive principles of composition. However, his work can be better termed post-minimal, given the rich metaphors that gradually emerge and the work's ability to condense or encapsulate powerful forces of transformation. Rodin, on the other hand, may be hard to see these days as the protean, sensual genius that he was, so familiar has his work become and so weighted by the glut of posthumous casts. Yet his impact was immense on the early modern sculpture of, for example, Matisse, Brancusi, and Picasso, resonating even today: Joel Shapiro's semi-abstract figures, often pirouetting in strenuous positions, owe a distant debt to Rodin's revolutionary studies of Nijinsky and other dancers whose bodies are stretched in poses that defy gravity and muscular limitation. The solemn, headless bodies modeled by Magdalena Abakanowicz are modern descendants of Rodin's *Walking Man* and his many "other tormented beings". And Mark Quinn's self-portrait as the limply hanging skin of his own body references, among other sources, the amazingly forthright depiction of aged, sagging flesh in Rodin's *She Who Was Once the Helmet-Makers Beautiful Wife*. For Kirili, the associations with Rodin come not so much from single works as from compositional types and general attitudes about art making. The current exhibition, juxtaposing works by both artists, allows an examination of his particular past-present exchange. The dialogue is further expanded by positioning Kirili's sculptures with other works in the permanent collection, including sculptures by Carpeaux and Picasso and even the ephemeral *Water Lilies* by Monet.

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For more than twenty years, Kirili has situated himself between two cultures – French and American – and has drawn importantly from both. After studying painting and calligraphy in art school in France, he first visited New York in 1965 and established a studio there in 1975. He moved to New York in 1978 and has divided his time more or less equally between Paris and New York ever since.

The former has remained important as a nexus of communication with French culture in general (speaking of puritanical America, he once exclaimed, “I cannot be assimilated”) and European modernist traditions. This dedication is expressed in his art but perhaps most directly in activities as critic and curator, with writings, for example, on Rodin, Matisse, Picasso and Giacometti, and with his recent, remarkable achievement of a permanent installation in the Tuileries gardens of modern sculpture, which includes works by Rodin, Miró, Dubuffet, and Germaine Richier, among several others. New York, on the other hand, provided a crucial push out of the past and into the present through immersion in the crucible of sculptural ideas developing there in the 1970s.

Kirili’s early work from 1977 to 1978 generally consisted of spidery thin shafts of metal lifting upward from bases of steel or terracotta on the floor, like confident, sleek calligraphic strokes. Sometimes they arced sideways to engage a wall, but the most common format was resolutely vertical. They can be compared to the most delicate linear sculptures to come from minimalist investigations of the 1970s, including works by Richard Tuttle and Fred Sandback, but even in these earliest phases Kirili’s sculpture had a sense of the handworked and of the transformative power of metalsmithing, so that his calligraphic stroke related more to the metal “drawings in space” by Picasso and Julio González. The closest formal analogies exist with the elegantly slender but sturdy vertical forms forged by David Smith and modeled by Giacometti. Such titles as *Adam* and *Sublimis or Sublimus*, however, alert us to biblical, spiritual, or mythological associations inherent in Kirili’s ascendant, vertical notation, an iconographic potential perhaps most famously represented in postwar sculpture by Barnett Newman’s *Here I*, *Here II* and *Here III* of 1950, 1965, and 1965-66, respectively. Also relevant for Kirili were the “zips” or vertical stripes prominent in paintings by both Newman and Clyfford Still, creases of energy within the mysterious depths of these works. Obvious, too, are references to sexual energy in Kirili’s phallic forms, a force he finds explicit in much work by Rodin and which refers to his interest in the religious and mythological importance of the lingam in Indian culture:

**Discovering the Hindu yoni/lingam sculptures was a wonderful thing, an encouragement. Sivaism has taught me that a plinth is a female organ which requires a lingam to become God. The feminity of Sivan sculpture is worshipped by 700 million believers.**

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the morphology of Kirili’s vertical metal forms had become heavier, more corporeal, and the forging process more explicit, with bends, pinches, and dents at the tops of the shafts creating “finials” or “heads” that suggest ancient letters or signs but also express directly the malleability of red hot steel and the force of the shaping process. Part of the language of these works is the strong empathetic response they arouse toward the human, physical working of steel in both hard and ductile states. Blackened colors and blistered textures further stress the origins of these objects in intense

heat. Shorter, squatter objects began to appear, often folded over or joined together with knifelike splits down centers, and in 1980 Kirili made his first of his *Commandment* compositions, initiating a series that has lasted to the present with many variations and permutations.

In these works, short and heavy shafts of steel sit directly on the floor, topped with basic geometric shapes that again suggest a vocabulary of ancient signs. Kirili himself has indicated that certain of these shapes were inspired by the ends of Torah scrolls and Hebrew letters. The title of the series reinforces an association with the sacred literature, making it clear that Kirili intends to carve out with sculptures a contemplative space much differently charged than the reductive, self-referential floor pieces by artists such as Carl André and Donald Judd. The horizontal spread of multiple elements in the *Commandment* series contrasts with the verticality of earlier works and creates a manmade landscape of solid forms, pulling the viewer's awareness laterally through squat, heavy, ground hugging configurations that make palpable the downward tug of gravity. Sometimes Kirili sites these works outdoors making apparent their commonality with the natural landscape. Whether indoors or out, they have a solemnity that commands attention and, while free of specific religious dogma, proclaims a faith in an intuitive, innate spirituality. This connection with religious art, not overstated, is nevertheless important. "I escape in our cathedrals," Kirili has noted, "in Rome, India, to salute the great liturgies which offer us the greatest art." And he finds guidance in Barnett Newman's statement that "the sense of place has not only a mystery but has the sense of metaphysical fact."

Donald Kuspit has characterized Kirili's work as a balance between the sacred and the profane, privileged both its metaphorical quality and the muscular, bodily references in its shapes and in its making. The latter are particularly clear in his modeled works in terracotta and plaster, some of which have been cast in bronze. Here the energetic action of the artist's hands and fingers is manifest, and the forms that emerge often seem a short step away from real anatomy and flesh. Analogies immediately arise with such great modelers in the French tradition as Clodion, Rodin, and Carpeaux. Kirili's abstract surfaces—pummeled, squeezed, kneaded, and broken—play with light and shadow, texture, and the organic unfolding of form in three dimensions with the same confident improvisation that these earlier artists brought to the modeling of the human figure; sometimes the correspondences of form, as between his *Ivresse VI* and Rodin's daring treatment of female genitalia in *Iris, Messenger of the Gods*, are too close to be coincidental. Kirili has described his joy in working this medium:

**Modeling is the most subjective form of art. The earth-made flesh can be felt like a body. The baked clay has a moving tenderness. I like communicating the sensations of a living model in the studio. This presence is the essential condition for life in my sculptures... Flesh was... what made us want to model clay and to forge metal.**

In recent years, the development of Kirili's art has been mostly a matter of elaborating and further exploring earlier themes, while he has also placed more and more emphasis on working with musicians and dancers in collaborative performances involving his sculptures. Introduction of aluminum shafts into the forging process resulted in some distinctive and important variations on the vertical monolith. In the heating process, the tops of these shafts would literally explode, creating "crowns" of jagged and curled aluminum shards that give physical form to releases of tremendous energy. The beautiful heat-induced coloration is a payback from Kirili's skillful involvement with controlled chance. Iron, aluminum, and terracotta or plaster pieces are sometimes joined in multipartite family compositions of works in the same or different materials, producing juxtapositions that recall Rodin's technique of creating totally new and surprising compositions by joining formerly separate units. Three individual shafts for example, when joined together take on a new character related to the theme of trinity in much the same way that Rodin produced his *Three Shades* through multiplication of the single figure of *Adam*. Juxtapositions of steel and aluminum with terracotta serve to heighten, by contrast, our tactile awareness of each. A congregation of several forged elements on a steel or wooden base rings with analogies to the sculptural tabletop still lifes or figural encounters by David Smith and Giacometti, among others, often with a strong sense of psychological interaction between the different elements. In certain compositions, the grouping of tall iron works with spread "legs" provides a direct reference to the *pleurants* often found in medieval Burgundian tomb sculpture. The rendering of the *Commandment* format into huge, roughly hewn blocks of stone in *Calvaire (à Max Roach)* of 1992 produces, in its outdoor installation, the sense of a Neolithic shrine long implanted into the earth, giving new monumentality to Kirili's work. Scarification patterns down the fronts of very recent iron totems make explicit a debt to tribal sculptures previously only hinted at. The painting of certain works with strong colors – mostly red, white, or blue – lends a new surface finish very different from that of raw metal and allows the works to demarcate space more aggressively.

Kirili finds in American jazz a model for spontaneity, improvisation on a theme, and rhythmic intensity that he feels nourishes his sculpture, an interest that recently has become a primary concern. He has designed a number of large-scale sheet metal sculptures to be "played" as musical instruments. In performance works in galleries and his studio, some recorded on film and/or tape, jazz musicians such as Sunny Murray, Thomas Buckner, Matthew Shipp, Cecil Taylor, Billy Bang, Joelle Leandre, and Daniel Carter, and sometimes Kirili himself, interact with these sculptures as percussion instruments, deflectors of sound, and large, dark, rather mysterious *dramatis personae*. Other of his works also have provided locales (Newman's "sense of place" again) for performances and concerts, and dancers such as Maria Mitchell have worked with some of the *Commandments*, adding live action to the special dynamics they provide. Dancers move between and over, lift, lean on, and pull against the sculptural

forms, contrasting with their own bodies the bodily references the works contain.

In staging such events, Kirili breaks down barriers between disciplines and gives sculpture a life beyond its role as untouchable museum artifact. That professional musicians and dancers are able to find inspiration in his work is a source of pride and also a confirmation, he feels, of its inherent multiculturalism. Again, the example of Rodin can be invoked. The urge to break from tradition and convention, to proclaim through sculpture a vitality of life drawn from widespread sources and forces – whether musical, multicultural, sexual, historical, or other – are aspects of his creativity that continue to impress. Rodin's captivation, for example, with exoticism of Cambodian dancers who performed for him while he drew has a parallel in Kirili's interest in the totemic structures of tribal art and his attempts to partner sculpture and music. The constant disregard of Rodin for the sanctioned sculptural proprieties of his day is still inspirational and provides at least distant historical encouragement and provides at least distant historical encouragement for Kirili's efforts to redefine basic roles for his art. And the physicality, even carnality, of Kirili's work has its most meaningful precedent in Rodin's powerful oeuvre.

The chance to bring work together by these two artists in the current exhibition is, therefore, a special opportunity, bound to yield results that are sometimes expected, sometimes surprising. How, for example, will the sleek verticality of Kirili's aluminum shafts with their exploded tops interact with Rodin's *Age of Bronze*, which features an elegant flow of contour around and up a thin, finely muscled body, culminating at the top with the upward tilt of the head and raised arms? Beyond certain formal resemblances in the play of figuration and abstraction, will the suggestive poetics of the former – involving an awakening of self-awareness and a lifting of the human spirit- have any echo in the ascendant line of the latter? We will see if a composition of Kirili's short, iron totems can capture a psychological tension similar to that in the milling group of doomed souls in the reduced-scale version of the *Burghers of Calais*. It is a presumption that the energy of modeling and covert references to anatomy in Kirili's plasters and terracottas will speak some of the same language as modeled plasters by Rodin, Carpeaux, and Picasso, each helping to add fresh perspective to the other. But how will the flattened geography of *Commandment xiv*, with its geometric forms floating on small flat shelves, react with the flattened pictorial space of Monet's large *Water Lilies*, with its floating lily pads and flowers? How will the density of the sculpture play off the ephemeral lightness of Monet's expanse of light and reflection?

These are all encounters that we look forward very much to testing and experiencing. We hope that experimenting with this contemporary-traditional dialogue will show that new art can change perspectives on older art, just as work in the permanent collection by Rodin, Carpeaux, Picasso, and others can lead to new understandings of the substantial achievements of Alain Kirili.