



**Another look**  
Sculptures from the 1980s by Katherine Gili

15 August – 27th September 2020  
Felix & Spear, London

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## Foreword

During the decade of the nineteen eighties the sculptor; Katherine Gili radically and controversially changed the direction of her work. Felix & Spear is pleased to present; as her third solo show with us; an exhibition of a selection of sculptures, in a variety of materials, from that period. Included are a number of sculptures never exhibited in this country before. We are delighted to be showing for the first time anywhere, one in particular, a seminal work called "After Matisse" made at the start of that decade that forms the centre piece of this show.

We would like to extend our thanks to the collectors of Katherine's sculpture who have generously lent their works for this exhibition and also to Robert Persey for contributing another insightful and illuminating essay for the accompanying catalogue.

Cameron Amiri

Director, Felix & Spear

## Another look - Sculptures from the 1980s by Katherine Gili

If there is more to see then there is always the need to take another look; for very little reveals itself entirely upon the first encounter. That is what the shift in Katherine Gili's sculpture during the decade of the nineteen eighties was predicated upon. Another look will reveal whether or not a work still has something to say to us or whether it merely bears the look of its time. There is also value in reappraisal, to see afresh maybe find a pattern or patterns in the direction of work at the time that was missed wilfully or sub-consciously. Art has a transformative function; it has to give something that is its own and raise awareness of unknown, unnameable deeper feelings. It cannot languish in the cultural concerns of its day; these will fall by the wayside as each generation forgets. It has to make its way in the world. The path an artist takes is not necessarily a tidy one; it is neither level nor straight, it contains no direction signs and often winds its way through mists and fogs that descend without warning, instinct is the only guide.

For Katherine Gili the first seven years of sculpture making were characterised by her dealing with a relatively small range of decisions each having a large impact within each sculpture. She sought to make her own forms and using the medium of constructed steel to create strong and clear sculptural expressions. She never saw sculpture as an exposition of a theory. It is as possible to make a depiction of a theory as it is to make a depiction of a vase of flowers. To her sculpture had to be an act of discovery within which you had to go deep, find what you wanted to do and risk everything to do it. This was the bedrock, it provided the impetus for sculptural invention but also set the attitude she would take to all phases of the development of her sculpture.

Sculpture is alone amongst the arts in requiring that we actually move in relation to it rather than absorb it from one view or the comfort of our armchair or concert hall seat. To see and realise that something is three dimensional is not simply to see it from one side and then another, it is to know the sum of all the internal influences that act together to generate its physical reality. Three dimensionality as expressed in a sculpture cannot be experienced in a photographic or any purely visual sense alone, because the set of relationships that produce it do not do so by aggregation, they are elusive and need to be felt and this occurs only by confronting its reality. Three dimensionality in sculpture is not literal as is experienced by its presence. It is intoned by an unseen but felt rhythm, a submerged rhythm <sup>1</sup> of spatial vulnerability, of the implication of augmented force and counter force greater than is literally present, of being at rest but never at rest; it is the creation of a sense of time. The sculptor has to contend not just with manipulating the material with actual tools but also with sensing how all these influences will appear and eventually coalesce into an evocation. At the start and in the continuation all an artist can do is approach everything with the sincerity of their own feelings, observations and abilities, avoiding artfulness by an honesty of purpose.

Sincerity has to have a foundation. The painter George Braque said "that an artist should put himself in rhythmic or formal sympathy with nature: he should not imitate it".<sup>2</sup> The Spanish extol the "Duende" as expounded by the poet Lorca of "not asking for forms but for the marrow of forms"<sup>3</sup>, such forms that raise us to the heights of what it feels to be alive, that to which we can all relate in spite of the curse of our level of education. Essentially these restate modernism's

original intention of eschewing fleeting appearances and impressions in favour of a deeper understanding of the visual and physical harmonies that may inhabit our world. These fundamentals, albeit adopted instinctively, would drive the intense activity that characterised the decade of the eighties for Katherine Gili and would carry her beyond. Throughout the seventies each new sculpture announced to her that there was more complexity around sculpture than hereto imagined and that one could not expect expression on any deeper level to just happen. Whatever was undertaken could not be just a “project” it had to mean something on an emotional level at least. But where was this place of rhythmic sympathy to be found? The human body had been the ubiquitous motif of sculptors for centuries, everything else in the physical world was mute in comparison, it was an obvious choice. Working with life models at this time was considered something of a heresy by those involved with the tenets of modernism; this hurdle would have to be overcome. But using the body again was considered by a number of sculptors towards the end of the nineteen seventies, Katherine included and the story of this has been well documented elsewhere. But the past could not be repeated, to use the body again would require fresh examination if anything of lasting value were to emerge.

In turning to the body she would not abandon all the experience already gained. The first pieces made from the body concentrated on simple areas such as the foot and these were made in paper.<sup>4</sup> They could be made with the life model present and the technique

of folding, rolling and gluing parts together was relatively quick, as well as being in itself an approach without history but one based in construction as a sculpture making method. Construction was also the determinant for observation and a driving force of the imagination. The paper was handled in a similar way to the steel in the late seventies sculptures in that a separately delineated part was brought to bear on another such part. But unlike those sculptures the parts relate in more complex arrangements generated by a response to observation and sensing of the forces at play inside something external to her, namely a human body.

The manner of that interplay was a step up for Katherine but not entirely alien to her previous endeavour. Certainly in the seventies work there was a basic concern for clear part to part assembly, as it turns out with simple geometric shaping. But a closer look would reveal a more complex attitude at play. Even as

early as 1974 the use of touch to touch construction, made possible by the properties of welding has been abandoned and in favour of an arrangement of interlocking planes that seek more influence within the expressive nature of the overall structure whilst at the same time avoiding the connotations of mathematical models or the fabrication of box type volumes. Neither were parts used to enclose or put pressure on space. Her sculpture “Splay” in particular exemplifies this most clearly. Relationships between the parts are far from tenuous; they are distinctive in appearance and orientation but connected in the sense that it is their connection



**Splay 1974**

Mild steel, hot zinc spray, painted  
H. 144 cm

which generates their shaping. But also from this purposefulness an exuberant and generous spatial experience extends. There is a deliberation of this nature, careful control but never suffocating, that runs through pretty much all the subsequent sculpture of that decade. It is a determination that whatever is made; part or whole, contributes to a complexity of experience that is weighty in tone but with a rhythm that is submerged, pulsating within the sculpture rather than around it. It speaks of a natural empathy with three dimensional art whose rhythms are neither overt nor superficial. But such rhythms and attendant harmonies derived from complex relationships that have lasting value are hard to create and come down to the unique ability, vision and technique of the artist, developed through sometimes arduous but sustained effort.

The early experiments with paper in 1980 were accompanied by increasingly ambitious approaches to how the sessions with the life model could be fruitfully developed. Looking to the example of Matisse's sculpture Katherine selected a pose similar to his "Reclining Nude 1 (Aurore)" of 1907. This sculpture, made originally in clay has a stable structure, firmly bedded on the ground; it has no aggressive spatial display and unfolds with a calm but emphatic openness. It celebrates the direct opposite of many tight packed reclining figure sculptures that exploit ponderous, grounded mass. One noted aspect of this early Matisse sculpture was its emphasis on clear separation and hierarchical organisation of volumes. Volumes treated, without concern for verisimilitude, as means to a visual end rather than an allegorical one. Matisse's "Aurore" is celebratory, sensual and spatially generous but raw as volume. Any anatomical reference is pared down to its basics, no hint of particular musculature, no virtuosity of modelling; it is indifferent to material qualities but not diagrammatic. Ideas about sumptuous flesh, or ideal body types and conventional

ideas about beauty are eschewed. No lessons of a moral or sentimental life are given and lectures on the correct social attitudes of the day are completely absent. The sculpture seeks no dominion over us.

It is interesting to note that at this stage Katherine was not concerned whether she was making a sculpture per se. She was just trying to see if the human body would prove useful to her purposes, trying to achieve something without reference to existing solutions and to find a way forward. Apart from the attitude of construction everything was unprecedented. The fact that the first result of this endeavour had remained in paper, in a cupboard for forty years, before taking another look precipitated its reaching permanence in bronze, is testimony to her initial doubts concerning its sculptural value.

It is significant that this sculpture is called "After Matisse" rather than From Matisse not simply because of its position in time but because it moves on from Matisse. The pose begins as similar but does not remain so. Katherine deliberately chose to get a life model to take up the pose; crucially it would enable her to sense the pose afresh and build her own response. It could not be an interpretation of or a transcription from the original sculpture. Any abstract qualities; any emotive content would be hers alone. The result has a complexity of relationships far beyond anything achieved in the seventies and they had already proved their compelling nature but this sculpture could not have been achieved without them. Experience is your guide but not your master.

In the "Aurore" sculpture's primitive but supremely raw evocative potential is laid bare. Its submerged rhythms are sculptural rather than painterly<sup>5</sup> and can be found in its spatial organisation of discrete parts. The emphasis upon discrete parts became the cornerstone upon which sculpture of the modern age was built. In

this case, the distinctive nature of parts is governed by what the material will allow and for Matisse it was the body as seen that provided the means for their hierarchical arrangement. However at this point Katherine was concerned to discover her understanding of the nature of the transition from one part to another and the influence of this upon their appearance governed by what her material and method would allow. Something in retrospect she had been inching towards in the seventies, culminating with sculptures such as "Stem" in which parts are brought together which follow through, join in more than one way and change attitude along the way.



**Stem 1979-80**  
Mild steel, painted waxed  
H. 98 cm

The sculpture "After Matisse" in common with its precedent makes no reference to ponderous mass nor mass in the abstract but reinvents the body's volumes to create an expansive and elastic relationship with the ground compounded by a roll within the pelvis which is propelled sideways into the torso, this Katherine makes visible. Unlike "Aurore" where the torso is grounded to share the body's weight, in this sculpture it is slung between pelvis and right shoulder where the whole load is given full expression. Astonishingly the treatment of the other shoulder is looser but suggests compression acting in two directions at the same time. As well as contributing to the lift as the left arm pulls away within a contradistinctive space of its own creation. The transition between the pelvis and the legs which in the dynamic terms of the pose peter out into somnambulance, on the face of it very unsculptural, are treated here with a three dimensional equivalent of slow moving punctuation that is as convincing as it is remarkable. The entire sculpture is built with an inventiveness that confounds the blandness of the verbal descriptions just given. Explanations and interpretations can never entitle one to a complete comprehension nor allow any complete cerebral possession of a work of art. It is our good fortune that this sculpture now exists in permanent form. One needs to experience the life of the sculpture itself and if one has felt something as a result then reflect on those feelings in some way.

The pose that generated the first of Gili's most ambitious sculptures made from the body in steel "Leonide" has no precedent in the history of sculpture as far as I am aware. Contrary to what some commentators have thought; it was not an impossible or painful position to adopt. The sculpture may tell you something about the general state of the body but the sculptor has no control of any viewer's reaction in that way, no artist can dictate nor achieve a complete level of control of how all individual human beings will respond to any

work of art. The point is that it has more to offer; it goes beyond such levels of recognition speaks to many levels of consciousness, a range of sensitivities and imaginations. Katherine explained her first and profound reaction to the pose; the fascination and interest “in how the body could move, how it adjusted itself to forces acting upon it in a particular movement and in how it could maintain itself against gravity rather than the shapes it created.”<sup>6</sup>

The encounter of itself was full of all sorts of experiences not least an excitement in having discovered something with sculptural potential. But the real challenge was in how to absorb the experience and use the material to at least match it.

By this point in parallel with the model sessions and the works done in paper, experiments with using forging to radically change the obdurate nature of steel had already begun. Some headway had been made from modest beginnings in the case of “Steel Foot” to the more ambitious yet still small scale handling of a sculpture such as “Aqui”. The actual business of forging steel is simple, it is heated up until yellow hot and then hit with a hammer. But it is a task requiring great stamina; it does however enable the sculptor to reshape the material via a grudging dialogue in which neither participant can really gain the upper hand. It requires great motivation to achieve even a semblance of what you might have in mind and great sensitivity to recognise that it may have given back something or more of the quality of your desire in spite of any mental image you may possess. The forging allows exploration of its ductile and malleable properties in response to the sculptor’s demands, but the act of construction; of putting together the parts made to interact with one another and articulate in a way that builds the desired structure is no less demanding. Arranging the parts in space, assessing the efficacy of their possible connection, deconstruction, re-forging over and over

until all seems to gel, in such circumstances the initial desire, any observations that could be communicated may have long since vanished, been reaffirmed or transformed in unexpected and even more powerful ways. With the sculptor’s sub-conscious sensibility in play the appearance of a submerged rhythm of stronger resonance has a chance to emerge from the richer pool within, rather than through a hopeful process of febrile placement, or architecturally contrived proximity. The end product contains no trace of the labour and the effort repays dividends of a far greater reward.

In Matisse’s “Aurore” all its parts coincide with actual body parts and the internal relationships are sensed by our basic understanding of our own anatomy they are convincing as discrete parts due to this fact. Yet in “Leonide” and all the sculptures made from the body by Katherine Gili there is no such coincidence. Though some elements arguably approach recognition others do not. The torso is not presented as a single lump but is a construction of its essential functions. There is no contradiction here; all parts and their transitions are constructed in terms of major forces which find character from their sculptural and coincident structural role.

“Leonide” is not an illusionistic rendering of natural appearances. You are not made conscious of an arm, for example and then left unconscious of the fashioned material, forged steel that evokes it. A close look will reveal that the arms in particular are fashioned in a manner as far from imitation of anatomy as one could imagine yet they still convince. Neither for that matter are you just conscious of pieces of steel welded together and not conscious of the arm or the whole body for that matter<sup>7</sup>. In this way “Leonide” stands outside the extremes of imitative figuration and pure non-referential abstraction. It is a transformation that occurs when an altogether different structure emerges



**Leonide** 1981-82  
 Forged mild steel, burnished paint  
 H. 157 cm  
 Bradford Museums and Galleries,  
 City of Bradford MDC

in spite of the configuration. It is the submerged rhythm that gets to you, it tells you something through feeling, through the senses and it confounds your pedantic notions of reality with its attendant obsequious attention to narrative. It brings you to the very "marrow" of form.

"Leonide" may be contained in sculptural terms but its spatial declaration is expansive and yet delicate. "Dendres" which followed on from "Leonide" is based in the same pose primarily because Katherine felt that she had not exhausted its potential. Expression is in the structure not in the surface; the surface is a product of the search for structure. This highlights the old debate

between representation and expression. Representationally Dendres and Leonide are almost identical yet in terms of expression they are as different as different can be. In terms of the material and technique Dendres is a quantum leap. Parts are elaborated, moving through the sculpture in ways that do not necessarily reflect anatomy; functions are shared and handed on in a much more fluid manner. Where Leonide stands firm and reaches out unequivocally, Dendres hovers, stretching forward but opening up in its centre before concentrating its force down on to the standing leg. For all its presence and mass it is sophisticated where Leonide is primitive, though not in the pejorative sense.



**Dendres-Figure 2** 1982-84  
 Forged mild steel, waxed  
 H. 170 cm

Purchased for General Electric Corporation 1991  
 now in collection of Sacred Heart University, Connecticut USA

Although two of these sculptures are not in this exhibition "Leonide", "Dendres" and "After Matisse" changed everything. They were daring but fruitful; the legacy of which can be discerned in the sculptures that followed. Not just through the decade of the eighties; for they opened up a number of new directions for Katherine to follow that she is still exploring now. Because the seventies works were so clear and under the sway of an already formed artistic identity, the challenge of rising to enhanced and complex levels of transformation were possible. The range of decisions made had grown vastly since the seventies, these sculptures were in effect momentous and all-consuming undertakings; there had been little time to take stock. "Aspen" marked a change, explored through several versions until its plasticity came to a point of specific expressive power. Though modest in size it has a monumentality of scale. It realised an ambition that had been growing for some time that the sculpture need not represent nor reflect a pose. And a sculpture such as "Bold" which evokes, without any anatomical reference, the emotional power of material deployed with a sculptural energy that is within it and through it, not just signalled across space.

The sculptures that followed saw the working through of much of what had been revealed, a concentration upon more subtle articulations and a doubling down upon the potential of forged steel to contain condensed energy and movement within the material itself. As such the sculptures become very much smaller in scale inviting intimate involvement. Emphasis moved towards exploring the potential of forging to move steel within itself towards concision and economy, of expressing more with less. Of highlighting the tensile quality of the material its capacity to spring as well as compress. Of how a relationship to the ground was not just a matter of how it stood but of how the whole sculpture responds to gravity. All the lessons learnt from "Leonide" and "Dendres" were explored and deployed.

But by the end of the decade the focus returned to the opening up of structure once again, one of the smallest sculptures "Chine" in retrospect appears as a precursor to the major sculptures that Gili has made in this new century and "Llobregat" prefigures their renewed, enhanced, spatial generosity.



**Chine**1989  
forged mild steel  
H. 42 cm  
Railtrack Collection

Art differentiates and distinguishes itself from objects that are spectacles of effects by concentrating focus upon its internally generated substance, on the connectedness and interdependencies of its components and their ultimate unity. All that is unnecessary has to be eliminated as it is harmful to the artist's and viewer's imaginations alike. That is not to admit that art must be simple or pure, dissonance is as much a player as resonance, though not on its own. The swing between conciseness (not simplicity) and the

complex is part of the general tension in sculpture making as a discipline. The sculptor needs to explore both ends from time to time. Complexity unfolds in degrees with no particular nor guaranteed virtue, what matters is how it pans out, what it contains within itself and how it reveals itself. A complex construction may excite on first glance due to the unfamiliarity of its appearance but unless it provokes through more than just our mental apparatus, our intelligence, our ability to calculate, reason and recall, it will remain a spectacle. For Katherine; whatever the mode there has to be a release of unnameable rhythms that are felt not thought; rhythms that surprise enchant and move us because they have a deep resonance with our own spatial potential and experience.

Robert Persey 2020



**Bitter Joy 2005**  
Forged mild steel, hot zinc spray, patinated, waxed  
H. 149 cm  
Private collection

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Another look Footnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> The Painter As Critic-Patrick Heron-Selected Writings-ed. Mel Gooding. William Tucker–Studio International 1969 vol177 uses the term “Internality” to describe the same thing in sculpture but I prefer this term
- <sup>2</sup> Patrick Heron-Op cit

- <sup>3</sup> Theory and function of the Duende-Federico Garcia Lorca-Translated by JL Gili
- <sup>4</sup> Dress maker’s 200gms pattern paper
- <sup>5</sup> In spite of what Matisse himself claimed
- <sup>6</sup> Transcript of Gili’s lecture at RBS@108, London 2008
- <sup>7</sup> Patrick Heron-Op cit–applies equally to sculpture



**Katherine Gili in her studio 1987**

Photograph - Image Trend



**After Matisse - 1980**

Paper cast into bronze 2020 - Edition 1/5

H. 50 x 40 x 81 cm



**Foot - 1980**

Paper

H. 51 x 31 x 24 cm



**Steel Foot - 1981**  
Forged mild steel, waxed  
H. 35 x 36 x 22 cm



**Aquí - 1981**

Forged mild steel, varnished, waxed

H. 36 x 49 x 45 cm



**Foot - 1981**

Paper

H. 65 x 30 x 17 cm



**Aspen - 1985-88**

Forged mild steel, hot zinc spray,  
patinated, waxed

H. 65 x 63 x 50 cm    Photograph - Orlando Gili



**Hand - 1985**

Bronze, unique

H. 24 x 14 x 15 cm - Private collection



**Offcut - 1987**

Forged mild steel, waxed

H. 32 x 38 x 25 cm



**Bold - 1988**

Forged mild steel, waxed  
H. 59 x 66 x 45 cm - Private collection



**Llobregat - 1989-90**

Forged mild steel, hot zinc spray, patinated, waxed

H. 54 x 56 x 74 cm



**Lacerta - 1989**

Forged mild steel, painted, waxed

H. 33 x 66 x 35 cm



**Sprite - 1989-91**

Forged mild steel, hot zinc spray, patinated, waxed

H. 65 x 64 x 60 cm



**Katherine Gili in her studio 1989**  
Photograph - Tony Nandi

## **Katherine Gili**

Katherine Gili was born in Oxford in 1948; graduated from Bath Academy of Art in 1970 and then studied for two years at St Martin's School of Art. She subsequently taught at a number of art schools; most notably St Martin's and Norwich between 1972 and 1985.

Her sculpture was exhibited for the first time in 1973 and well over a hundred times since. Gili's career is marked by solo shows in London and New York and by contributions to seminal survey exhibitions at major venues such as the Hayward Gallery. She has regularly shown in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibitions and notably in 2013 her sculpture "Ripoll" won the Sculpture Prize.

Katherine Gili's work is represented in Tate, the Arts Council Collection and other public and corporate collections in the UK, Switzerland and the USA. Lord Foster selected one of her pieces to stand alongside the Cranfield University Institute of Technology Library which was designed by Foster Associates in 1992.

Her sculptures can also be found in many private collections in Britain, Spain and the USA.

### **Solo exhibitions**

Serpentine Summer Show 2, London 1977

Salander O'Reilly Gallery, New York 1981

A Career Survey, Poussin Gallery, London 2011

Artist of the Day, Flowers Central, London 2014

Looking for the Physical, sculpture and drawings by Katherine Gili, Felix & Spear Gallery, London 2016

Discovered in the Making, Katherine Gili Sculpture, Felix & Spear Gallery, London 2018

Sparks Fly Katherine Gili Sculpture 1974 to 2018, One Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London 2019

Another Look – Sculptures from the 1980s by Katherine Gili, Felix & Spear Gallery, London 2020

### **Selected mixed exhibitions**

The Condition of Sculpture; Hayward Gallery, an international exhibition selected by William Tucker, 1975

Silver Jubilee Exhibition of Contemporary British Sculpture Battersea Park 1977

Annual Stockwell Depot Exhibitions of Painting and Sculpture 1974-79

Hayward Annual 1979

Have You Seen Sculpture from the Body? Tate Gallery 1984

Escultura Nueva Reino Unido, Centro Cultural del Conde Duque, Madrid 1988

Moving Into View: a major display of the Arts Council Collection, South Bank Centre selected by William Packer, 1993

British Abstract Art, Part 2, Sculpture. Flowers East Gallery, London 1995

British Figurative Art, Part 2, Sculpture. Flowers East Gallery, London. 1998

Steel, Canary Wharf, London. 2006

The Royal Academy Summer Shows 1996, 1997, 2009, 2013-16

### **Awards**

Elephant trust 1994

Elected Fellow of the Royal British Society of Sculptors 1999

Jack Goldhill Award for Sculpture, Royal Academy 2013

### **Selected Public Collections**

Tate

Arts Council of Great Britain

City of Lugano Switzerland

Bradford Museums and Galleries

Sacred Heart University Connecticut USA

Henry Moore Institute

### **Private collections**

The Leo and Eileen Herzel Collection USA

Lord Peter Palumbo, at Kentuck Knob, Pennsylvania, USA

Several collections in Britain and Spain