

## Alain Kirili: *Who's Afraid of Verticality?*

By [Susan Harris](#)



Installation view: *Alain Kirili: Who's Afraid of Verticality?* Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, 2019. Photo: Adam Reich, NYC. Courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

Entering Alain Kirili's exhibition, *Who's Afraid of Verticality*, is like joining a gathering of benevolent beings in a space that lifts one's gaze and spirit. An energetic connection is made with the upright sculptures as one walks through and around this mini-retrospective of forged, freestanding iron and copper totemic sculptures and a recent wall installation. Conceived by Kirili as "a vertical forest" of 20 years' work—alluding to Alberto Giacometti's 1950 sculpture *The Forest*, with seven tall figures and a head—the varied and vibrant exhibition of Kirili's slender yet physically robust sculptures compels visitors to move around them and experience their shifting profiles and tactile surfaces. Feeling "included" by Kirili's installation is hardly surprising in light of the inimitable generosity and exuberant curiosity that define his personal and professional disposition, one that has given rise to collaborations and connections with many other artists' work throughout his career.

A French-American sculptor born in 1946 in Paris who has been successfully working both in the US and France since the early 1970s, Kirili positions himself in a historical continuum of classical, organic abstraction among painters and sculptors from both sides of the Atlantic. Seeing David Smith's *Cubi* sculptures at the Musée Rodin in Paris was the catalyst for his first visit in 1965 to the United States, during which he made a personal pilgrimage to numerous art centers to learn about American art. He encountered Abstract Expressionism, of course, which he loved for its sense of urgency and improvisation and the concomitant emphasis on tactility and emotion, qualities he admired in Smith's sculptures. In a recent conversation, he spoke of being part of the tradition of *fa' presto*—a term relevant in music and the visual arts for quick and tactile execution. Impassioned about a creative process, the physicality of which lies between the realms of sexuality and spirituality, Kirili developed a sculptural practice of blacksmithing, rare in contemporary art, that required working fast and spontaneously with his hands while the iron was hot and malleable. Imprints, marks and traces from Kirili's rapid and intuitive manipulation and articulation of his material with tools are evident throughout the show as, for example, in the series of flattened, elliptical "bulges" and vertical striations that line the sides of a 7-foot high red totem titled *Adam III* (2010) and in the holes, gestural "smudges" and indentations left across the copper surfaces of *Totem* (2004).

The soaring verticality of the New York skyscrapers and skyline must have been exhilarating to Kirili during that first trip. An inveterate optimist, he speaks fervently about the necessity of art to elevate—literally and figuratively: "I need verticality; it's part of my means of survival, of my dignity even." *Ascension II* (2018), a poetic yet imposing wall installation of sinuous lines of iron against tall, painted rectangles in grey, pink, and yellow brings together Kirili's passion for vertical presence with sensuousness and spirituality through an eloquence of line, color, tactility, and elevation.

*Telem II* (2000), *Segou* (2004), and *Forge* (2010/19) are lofty sculptures that, along with the smaller *Totems* of 2004 and *In the Round I* (2015)—a more recent sculpture that reads like a linear dance

or drawing in space—evoke potent archetypes of humanity. Kirili forged *Segou* and *Forge* in Mali working alongside Dogon blacksmiths who have a long history with metalworking. The sculptures' attenuated proportions rising from and merging with their bases together with vibrant surface markings that activate their surfaces bring to mind Giacometti's gaunt *Femme de Venise* sculptures that bore themselves with heroic, if vulnerable, humanity. Influenced, too, by the spirituality with which Indian Shiva sculpture is regarded and the symbiotic relationship of the Hindu lingam—or vertical phallic element—and its yoni—the base, symbolic of the female sex—to represent the deity Shiva, Kirili believes in the spiritual quality of sculpture and considers the supporting base of a sculpture as important as its vertical element. The flat, red shaft of *Adam III*, for example, merges persuasively with the white, fleshy plaster mass that is its base. And whether one sees the vertical shaft in *Forge* as emerging from, being submerged in, or resting on a mound of shiny coal pieces (residue from the blacksmithing process itself), the work is an interdependent unity of sculpture and base.

*Who's Afraid of Verticality* does homage to the timelessness and universality of a genre of sculpture that has been often overlooked in the race to discover something new. Kirili's sculptures are bestowed with grace and guts, sexuality and spirituality, and humanity and aspiration. I would say that is exactly what we need today.