Yvette Kaiser-Smith A Matter of Math

By John Brunetti

For Chicago sculptor Yvette Kaiser-Smith, the logic of math and the skill of crocheting provide a means for ordering a chaotic world. Born and raised as a child in the Communist society of Czechoslovakia before moving with her family to Texas in the late 1960s, Kaiser-Smith addresses the relationship between displacement and identity that has been shaped by her own life experiences. The title of Kaiser-Smith's exhibition, *Digits*, alludes to the individual who can become, or not become, part of the greater community as represented by the structure of the mathematical formula. Is this a sentiment that echoes dormant socialist values or the propaganda of American marketing that suggests belonging is linked to shared consumer values, whether it is what we buy or who we vote for? In keeping with her Post-Minimalist predecessors, Kaiser-Smith allows that question to remain locked in the clarity and beauty of numbers.

Since the mid-1990s, Kaiser-Smith's signature material has been fiberglass roving. With this soft material she crochets airy lace-like planes which are then soaked, stretched and hardened through the application of polyester resin. The resin also facilitates the transformation of the fiberglass into architectural forms that display her deft use of gravity and armatures to turn two-dimensional pattern into three-dimensional structure. Through her accentuation of the elasticity of soft materials and the domestic symbolism of crocheting, Kaiser-Smith reveals her debt to Eva Hesse's ground-breaking minimalist/feminist sculptures of the mid-60s. Kaiser-Smith shares with Hesse, herself displaced from her native Germany, a continuous dialogue on how a person is connected to, or disconnected from, society and the issues of personal identity that arise as a result. Yet, Kaiser-Smith's sculpture is unusual in that it also embraces the formal rationalism of Minimalism's "boys club" of sculptors Donald Judd and Carl Andre for whom sequential logic, removed from subjective feelings, articulated a framework for perception. It is this balance between the intuitive and the objective, the feminine and the masculine, the insider and the outsider that lends Kaiser-Smith's work its special quality.

A trip to Prague as an adult made Kaiser-Smith aware of her native country's deep lace tradition as she saw multiple uses of its patterns throughout people's homes. This experience gave her "permission" to further exploit the crochet process she previously had begun using as she intuitively realized a conceptual connection between this visual DNA imprint of her ancestors' craft tradition and the man-made social structures created by political and economic systems of East and West that contribute to molding an individual. As someone with a place in two very different cultures, she began to ask herself "How does a person change within the dynamic of a specific group?" Through her process she saw herself attempting to reconcile the old world of Prague (symbolized by the crochet tradition) with the new world of America (defined by the modern industrial material of fiberglass) as she sought to define herself.

Math originally entered Kaiser-Smith's abstract vocabulary as a means to find form. She was introduced to its inherent beauty by her "math nerd" husband Tim. Math, however, also quickly became inseparable from how she chooses to address the nature of individual and collective identity. Central to these themes is her obsession with prime numbers (a number divisible only by 1 and itself). Prime numbers stand out from a sea of numbers as they are the multiplicative root of all other numbers. They are the beginning, yet there are an infinite number of them, they cannot be contained. Often, nature grows in primes. Examine random flowers and plants and one may find clusters of 3s, 5s, 7s, perhaps 11s. For Kaiser-Smith, these attributes of prime numbers express the issues of identity and uniqueness that are at the core of her sculptures. In her pieces, wherever possible, she pushes the number of rows, columns, or components to the nearest prime number, which provides a visual balance and aesthetic correctness.

The discipline that Kaiser-Smith displays with her use of mathematical sequences echoes the use of repetition and numbering systems used by Minimalist artists such as Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner. Bochner's own use of the Fibonacci Progression in the mid-60s to create some of his sculptures and drawings is an important precedent for Kaiser-Smith's own use of such number sequences. But, departing from Bochner's more playful use of math from this period, which often referred to the potentially constructed work, Kaiser-Smith's collaboration with math is always in pursuit of a concrete object.

In addition to prime numbers, the transcendental numbers of e and pi provide crucial systems for the development of her current body of work. As she explains: "The digits in a transcendental number never repeat. Similarly, an individual's identity can never be repeated. Even if you clone a person, their individual experiences will still make them unique. Any segregated section taken from a transcendental number is unique and individually beautiful, yet the number's true meaning requires the collection of all the digits which never end, so the true meaning is infinitely unknown."

Identity Sequence e 4 is constructed from 323 units, 17 rows by 19 columns (17 and 19 are primes). Kaiser-Smith saw this sculpture as an enlarged section of a microscopic organic blueprint. An internal organic code influenced the crochet stitch chosen by Kaiser-Smith while the four molecule sequence of human DNA determined the use of four alternating colors (orange, brown, red-violet, blue) which serve as the space between each flesh-toned digit. Structure in her art is not subjective. Yet, the thousands of hours of handwork Kaiser-Smith has put into crocheting each slightly "irregular" digit implies individuality cannot be totally removed from the success of the whole and that truth, ultimately, is defined not by the implied perfection of logic, but by the inconsistencies of human flaws.

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