

# the inner light

## Yvette Kaiser Smith, step by step

By Victor M. Cassidy

Wherever she goes, Yvette Kaiser Smith carries a purse-sized notebook in which she records things that impress or interest her. Her notes may be doodles, sketches or words—whatever seems right at the moment. At home, she throws this material into what she calls her “idea pile.” When she starts thinking about new work, she uses these notes, which become her starting point. As she makes art, she may transform this original stimulus out of all recognition. But this is how she begins.

Kaiser Smith makes abstract wall-mounted sculptural constructions that may measure 9' x 12' or more. A typical piece is composed of flat, pale-colored geometric forms that she crochets from fiberglass yarn (roving) and stiffens with color-infused polyester resin to create translucent constructions that cast patterned shadows.

The artist's goal is “to articulate narratives of identity in the language of crocheted fiberglass—and to disintegrate and redefine expectations of a sculptural object by unraveling preconceptions of materials, forms and categories in art,” according to Smith. Her work is neither sculpture nor painting, but a hybrid form. Influenced by Eva Hesse and her “spirit of experimentation,” the artist said that her artistic roots are in Post-Minimalism, Arte Povera and process art.

### Pascal's Triangle

Kaiser Smith is preparing for a solo exhibition at the Alfedena Gallery in March of 2008, which will feature five large and four smaller wall pieces in two rooms. The show is “completely planned out,” she said, and the new work will be based on number sequences. One piece that's pretty far along in the studio will look like a triangle pointing up, with another triangle on top of it pointing down to make an exaggerated hourglass shape. This work, which will cover an entire wall in the gallery, is based on the number sequence called Pascal's Triangle.

As Kaiser Smith has planned it out on graph paper, the Pascal's Triangle piece will be made from 126 rectangles, each measuring 6" x 7" wide and colored in pastel tones of red and orange. Overall, the piece will be 72" x 224" wide. The artist is crocheting the rectangles from fiberglass yarn, following a pattern in a hobby book. The crochet pattern adds visual richness to the work and complexity to the shadows it casts.

Once she's done crocheting, Kaiser Smith mixes color into polyester resin and brushes the resin onto the rectangles, leaving an untreated area

at each end that she uses to hang the rectangle upside-down on a special rack. The rectangle stiffens as it dries. Turned right side up, it suggests an arch. She treats the area at each end of the rectangle with resin, dries it, and continues until she has 126 stiff, colored arch-like units, which she then sands to remove irregularities and fiberglass shards.

After this, “the fun part” begins. She will lay the 126 units out on the floor and experiment with orienting the arch forms. She may place them side-by-side to create tunnels, arrange them so each unit stands on its own or choose some other scheme. Once these decisions are made, she will connect the arch units into subassemblies for transport to the gallery.



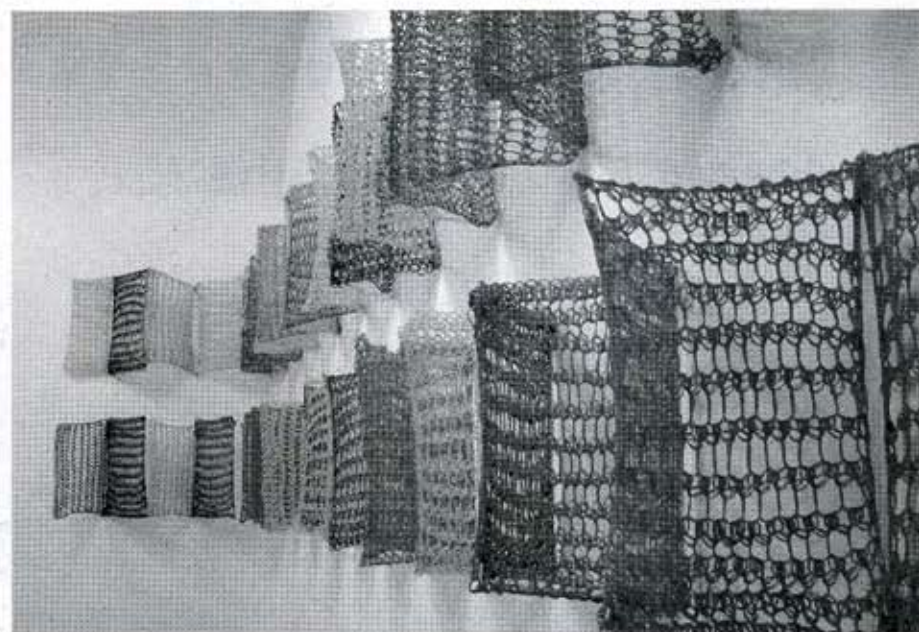
The process...the artist holds fiberglass yarn (roving) which she crochets...into rectangular forms, colors and stiffens with polyester resin, and dries on a special rack...the colored arch forms await final assembly for a finished work.



### “Checkpoint Charlie”

Kaiser Smith confesses that she's a very formal, process-oriented artist with a huge capacity for grunt work! At the end of each step in her process, she reaches what she calls a “Checkpoint Charlie,” where she reviews results and decides what comes next. She often innovates as she goes, fully aware that her options shrink with every step she takes. “Once I get halfway in,” she said, “I must make it work.” She revels in this challenge, for she never quite knows how a piece will turn out.

Kaiser Smith takes safety precautions in the studio and paces herself carefully. Polyester resin produces toxic fumes, which can be absorbed by



“Manufactured Status” (2005) is a 59 x 221" long, 10" deep wall piece made of 12 x 19" rectangles that the artist attached and installed to look like peaked rooftops.

inhalation or through the skin. The artist ventilates her studio, covers her hands, arms and face and wears a mask. “I can work in resin for three hours and then I must stop,” she said. “I shower and do something else for two hours before returning to the studio for three more.” Often she has three sessions in the studio and two periods of rest for a 13-hour workday. When she's too tired for cooking, she gobbles sugary cereal to keep going.

The artist's work has grown in boldness and clarity as she has come to terms with her family heritage and transformed crochet into something fresh and expressive. Born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, Kaiser Smith came to the U.S. at the age of ten and completed her MFA at the University of Chicago in 1994. After graduation, she discovered fiberglass yarn and began to crochet it into doily and runner forms, feeling a bit defensive about her use of such an old-fashioned technique. In those days, her art was “stories from the body,” as she put it, with suggestions of the spine.

In 1998, Kaiser Smith visited Prague for the first time in 30 years. “My childhood came rushing back to me,” she said. “I was like a sponge filling with water.” She saw lace everywhere—in curtains, runners and shawls. “I had not considered my heritage before,” she said, “and I returned to Chicago with patterns in my brain. I began to see people as patterns—genetics that determine individual nature and group dynamics that influence social behavior. That brought me out of the body in my work.”

While she's working on a piece, Kaiser Smith focuses tightly on it and closes herself to distractions. But once she's done, there's always something left in her mind, which leads her to the next piece...

Victor M. Cassidy is an art critic and journalist. His work has appeared recently in *Chicago Life*, *ArtNet*, *Art in America*, *Fiberarts* and *Sculpture Magazine*.