Sister artists return to South Orange

Dan Bichoff
For The Star-Ledger

Artist Kiki Smith remembers growing up in South Orange in the 1960s as a long summer day under huge trees, where she played hickory-stick. She says, the kids on her block used to find dead animals—birds, mostly—and wrap their corpses like mummies, place talismans in the folds, and then dig them up in the back yard, where they were buried with pomp.

Her sister Seton remembers their father, the sculptor and architect Tony Smith, building a "playhouse" out of old screen doors in their double-deep lot on Stanley Road—a see-through, Philip Johnson sort of playhouse—just what you would expect from a theorist of minimalism.

Both artists are returning to South Orange on Sunday for a "Sense of Place," a self-curated exhibition co-sponsored by the Washik Gallery at Seton Hall and the Lennie Piro Memorial Art Foundation.

Both women have become internationally recognized artists. Kiki, 63, is known for her sculpture and prints, which often use fairy tale or feminist themes. Seton, 62, for her natural photography of tautly aligned interiors and modernist furniture and architectural views devoid of any human presence.

"A Sense of Place" is a hometown show for sisters who represent three generations of Smiths from South Orange. Tony Smith was born in the house on Stanley Road. The Irish grandfather he was named after established a foundry in Newark that made equipment for the East Orange Water Co. and other waterworks, and Tony’s father sat on the village council for many years.

"I think the library is attached to South Orange," says Judy Washik, director of the Piro Foundation, which was named for her late husband, Lennie Piro, an artist and professor at Kean University who also lived in the village. "That house is their childhood, and it’s also the place where, under Tony’s eye, they became artists."

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Tony Smith studied under Frank Lloyd Wright and became a respected professor, designing exhibitions for the Abstract Expressionists and later helping to create the University of Pennsylvania’s fine art program in the late 1960s. His home became a meeting place for artists and students and a kind of gallery where works by friends, like Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman, were displayed in largely empty rooms. His own sculptures, usually assembled from smaller geometric shapes like diamonds, were scattered throughout the house and in the yard outside.

Kiki and Seton’s mother, June Smith, was an opera singer and actress who was close to playwright Tennessee Williams, who also lived in the house from time to time. Williams was planning to move to South Orange the day he died. Jane and Seton were actually at their hotel to help him move when his death was announced.

South Orange already has a monument to the Smiths in Meadowlands Park, where Tony Smith’s TAIL, a black steel abstract sculpture named for the Greek word for the letter T, was erected in 2006 (but without some controversy over public installation costs, about $200,000, though the sculpture fabrication was paid for entirely by private fundraising).

Tony sometimes had a complicated relationship with his hometown. For much of the 1960s, Smith was a struggling architect, and the family had very little money. He sold the finest pieces of his parents’ furniture to make ends meet, and the sisters remember a house with no couches and only card table and folding chairs. They had no TV.

A Sense of Place: Kiki and Seton Smith

Where: Washik Gallery, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange Ave, South Orange

When: Through Dec. 9. Open 9:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday

How much? Free. For more information call (973) 275-3033 or e-mail info@washikgallery.com

What else? An opening reception in the Washik Gallery with both artists is set for Sunday, from 1 to 4 p.m. They will return for a talk about their work, and their lives in South Orange, with cultural critic and School of Visual Arts professor Roberta Krimkin on Sunday, Dec. 6, at 7 p.m. in Jubilee Hall on the Seton Hall campus.

"The house was a stimulus to the kids of the imagination, and we were always playing, and the house was a place to play," Kiki says. "We did not have a yard, but we had a lot of space to run around and just be kids."