

KEITH SONNIER
Oriental – Occidental



November 8 – December 14, 1996

University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
State University of New York at Stony Brook

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Donald Kuspit, Department of Art, for his assistance with this exhibition and for contributing his insightful catalogue essay.

I also want to thank Lesley Raeside and Wayne Bartlett, Keith Sonnier's assistants, for their assistance with the coordination and installation of this exhibition.

Thanks also to Leo Castelli Gallery in New York City for their cooperation with this exhibition.

Special thanks are also extended to members of the Staller Center for the Arts staff: Pete Pantaleo, for installation assistance; Mei Huang, Jamie Lin, and Mimi Ng, Gallery Assistants; Hafsa Ali, Christa Forman, Pomon Ng, and Melanie Stout, Gallery Interns; Patrick Kelly, Production Manager, Liz Silver, Technical Director, and the Technical Crew, Staller Center, for exhibition lighting; and Mary Balduf, Gallery Secretary.

Most of all, I wish to thank Keith Sonnier for sharing his work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

Cover: Jingo (Tokobashira Series), 1984
Japanese cypress, tropical hardwood, dry pigment,
and wax, 66 x 66 x 36"

Oriental/Occidental: Keith Sonnier's *Tokobashira* and *Mata Hari* Series

Long before multiculturalism became fashionable, Keith Sonnier was a multiculturalist. Long before hybridism became fashionable, Keith Sonnier was a hybridist. Long before ethnicity and "roots" became fashionable, Keith Sonnier took pride in his, never disavowing them. Long before globalism became fashionable, Keith Sonnier was a cosmopolitan world-traveller. Long before the center disappeared and it became fashionable to be marginal, Keith Sonnier was a decentered marginalist. Long before outsiders became more fashionable than insiders, Keith Sonnier was an insider by virtue of being an outsider. That is, long before it became fashionable to flaunt one's contradictions, Sonnier was struggling with his.

His art—especially the explicitly paradoxical *Tokobashira* and *Mata Hari* series—is incompletely comprehensible without some knowledge of his personal history. He was born (1941) in rural, provincial Louisiana into a Cajun family. That is, he is an Arcadian—French-American—in origin. Unlike other immigrants, the Arcadians did not willingly come to the United States—to Louisiana, once owned by France—but fled Canada after the British defeated them, rather than accept second-class citizenship in Quebec. Nonetheless, they remained marginal—outsiders—in English-speaking American society. They spoke a French dialect, and further differentiated themselves from puritan American culture—Scarlet Letters don't exist in France, or else they are bejewelled and worn with arrogant, exhibitionistic, stylish pride—by their Southern sensuousness and esthetic self-consciousness. As Linda McGreevy has suggested, Sonnier's Southern Cajun roots explains much of his art: its "coloristic sensuousness" and, more generally, its "slow physicality, tactility, and sensuality," that is, intimate and erotic quality.

Paradoxically, its cosmopolitan aspect is also provincial in origin: Mamou, Louisiana, Sonnier's hometown, was a close-knit community of people with French, English, and African-Creole roots. Sonnier was at ease with "otherness" from the beginning. It was his "natural" environment, as it were, and he took to it like a duck to water. Already as a teenager in a local college he painted sensual, worldly, Matissean nudes, and in his early twenties

moved to Paris, where he lived comfortably in a working class district, painting alone—an outsider who felt like an insider wherever he went. It was the first of many trips abroad: to India in 1981, Bali in 1983, Japan in 1984, Brazil in 1985. In all of these places Sonnier sought and worked with local craftsmen, local styles, and local materials—bamboo and native woods, in the *Tokobashira* and *Mata Hari* series.

But at the same time that Sonnier was making these ostensibly primitivist sculptures, he was making—also in Japan—the high tech *Aesthesipol* series: just as constructed as the *Tokobashira* and *Mata Hari* series, but more obviously "modernist." Primitivism and constructivism are equally avant-garde modes, and Sonnier's *Tokobashira* and *Mata Hari* series are primitivist constructions—avant-garde inventions. "Regressive," backward-looking primitivism and "progressive," forward-looking constructivism—in a sense, the antipodes of abstract modern art, as Adorno has suggested (the former exemplifying its expressionistic tendency, the latter its technocratic tendency)—fuse in them. According to Adorno, they're both at their best when they're at their most pure (this has an idealistic Greenbergian sound to it), but that is a modernist idea: both modes have been academicized—reified—by their stylization, and thus exhausted in the very act of becoming sophisticated and commonplace. Only their impure postmodernist synthesis can save them from themselves—use them to exciting new intellectual and emotional effect. Sonnier was among the first postminimalists, and postminimalism, some critic/scholars think, is not just the precursor of postmodernism, but fully post-modern.

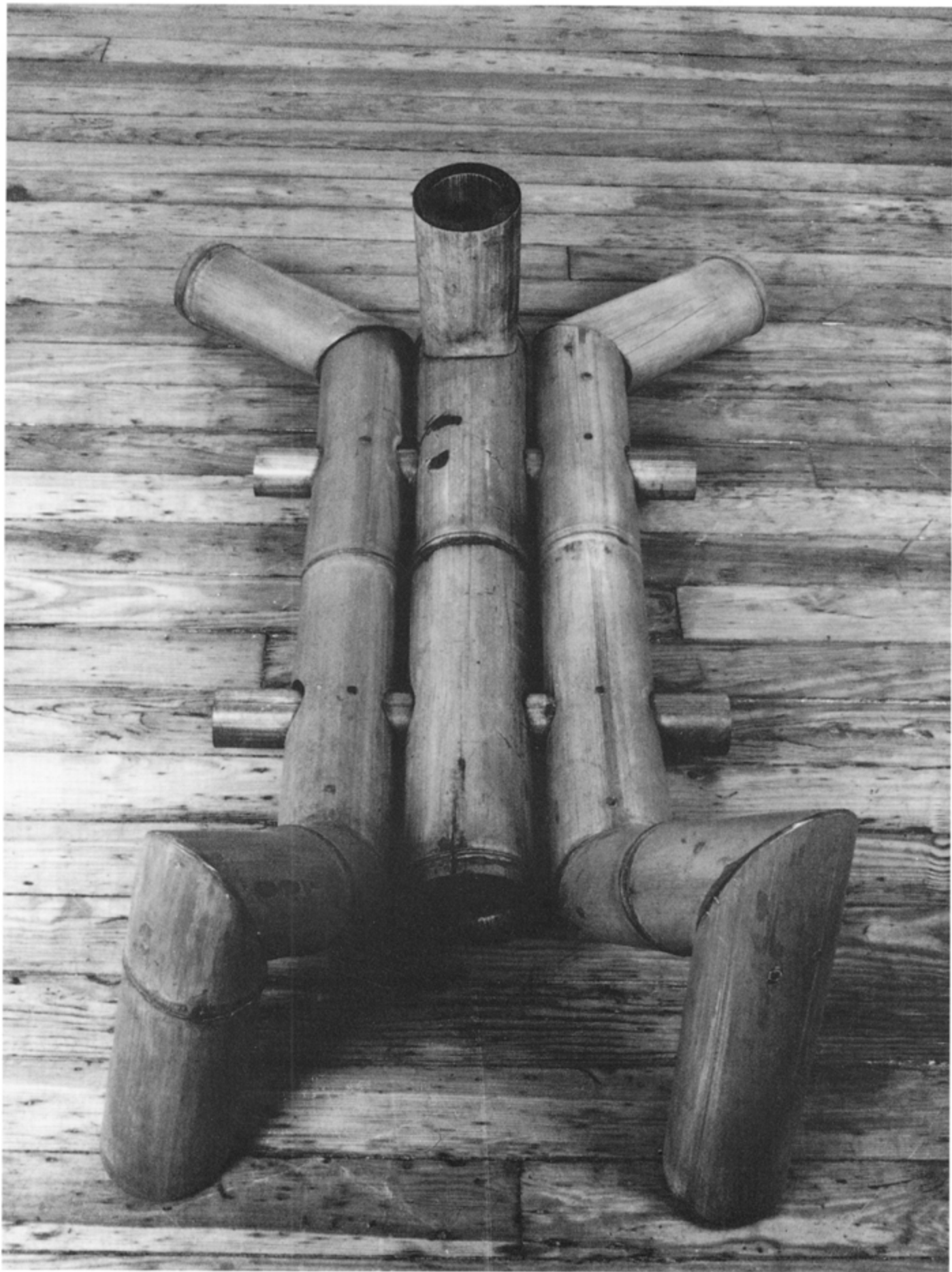
Nonetheless, Sonnier's *Tokobashira* and *Mata Hari* series have none of the "androgynous slickness" (to use an idea of Charles Jencks) and cynical irony so characteristic of postmodernist art. (Supposedly such irony gives it a conceptual edge, but in fact it is a form of self-defeat; that is, it masks stagnancy—disintegrative stalemate between opposites.) They have a psychoesthetic subtlety, correlate with their constructivist subtlety: they evoke unconscious childhood sensation and feeling, rooted in his Cajun experience—"rethink and retouch aspects of the human experience and psyche I had completely

forgotten," as Sonnier has said, specifically alluding to the Tokobashira series—and reconceive constructivism as visceral pictography. Sonnier returns to and re-invents "the moment when picturing and writing were one," as Klaus Kertess has said—the moment when abstract gesture becomes, ambiguously, meaningful glyph and fantastic image, while retaining its raw organic character. Sonnier's Tokobashira and Mata Hari series are at once fantastic, bizarre bodies—agglomerations of incommensurate fragments, material gestures loosely united in what might be called a gesture of "construction" or fantasy of system (as the partial grids on the surface of some of the pieces suggests); visionary writing, that is, a recursive envisionment of writing as a primal act; and sensuous extravaganzas and sexual metaphors, in which idiosyncratic forms seem to dance with Dionysian abandonment, finally ritualistically mating to form elusive feelings. The holes in Aizen-Myoo, Jingo, and Yamato are not just pure forms, nor are the pieces of wood vigorously thrust through them only raw materials.

The figurative, totemic dimension of Sonnier's sculptures—their dependence on primitivist sculpture—is all but explicit in Ganesh, Nyoman, and Wayang. Such sculpture is sacred, all the more so because it is abstract, indeed, a geometrical structure, however much each of its parts is an organic "gesture": organic materials are abstractly combined to transcendental effect, as becomes explicit in the painted bamboo Krishna and Vishnu. The god is at his most perfect when he has been reduced to—concentrates himself in—a letter (not just a name), which makes him more available for contemplation than his bodily manifestation. And yet the abstract letter is his body—a concrete poem in which the physical and conceptual succinctly converge. The god has painted his body to confirm its otherness, yet also to signal that the body is no more than an abstract idea. Finally, Sonnier has acknowledged the shrine-like character of his sculptures, whether free-standing or relief. They mark sites of worship, of alternative presence, like themselves. They are charged with the manna that exists in holy places, and may themselves be the last holy places—abstract art may be the last, narrow site (resting place?) of the sense of the sacred.

In sum, Sonnier's sculptures are ecstatic, mystical constructions: sacred language, incomprehensible except in an ecstatic state—a kind of talking in abstract tongues—that communicates and peculiarly literalizes an eccentric experience of divinity. They convey a sense of the sacred that necessarily takes an abstract primitive form in our secular world. In fact, at bottom the sense of the sacred struggles to master and distill a primitive experience of the inescapably raw, material character of being—being at its most innocent.

Donald Kuspit



Nyoman, 1983
Timber, bamboo, and oil-based paint, 15 x 46 x 32"

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Dimensions are given in inches, height preceding width preceding depth.
All works are lent courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York City.

Sculptures

1. Ganesh, 1981
Bamboo and enamel paint, 51-3/4 x 22-1/2 x 11-3/4"
2. Kali, 1981
Bamboo and enamel paint, 38 x 19-1/2 x 22"
3. Krishna, 1981
Bamboo, wax, and enamel paint, 40 x 20 x 14"
4. Sarasvati, 1981
Bamboo and holi color, 36 x 27 x 12"
5. Vishnu, 1981
Bamboo and enamel paint, 22 x 37-1/2 x 11-3/4"
6. Ktut (Mata Hari Series), 1983
Timber, bamboo, and oil-based paint, 47 x 40 x 20"
7. Nyoman (Mata Hari Series), 1983
Timber, bamboo, and oil-based paint, 15 x 46 x 32"
8. Wayang (Mata Hari Series), 1983
Timber, bamboo, and oil-based paint, 60 x 24 x 16"
9. Aizen-Myoo (Tokobashira Series), 1984
Cedar, spruce, dry pigment, and wax, 48 x 42 x 30"
10. Jingo (Tokobashira Series), 1984
Japanese cypress, tropical hardwood, dry pigment, and wax, 66 x 66 x 36"
11. Kinto (Tokobashira Series), 1984
Cedar, sophora japonica, dry pigment, and wax, 108 x 42 x 36"
12. Suku-na-Biko (Tokobashira Series), 1984
Maple, cedar, tropical hardwood, dry pigment, and wax, 48 x 42 x 30"
13. Yamato (Tokobashira Series), 1984
Camphor, Chinese quince, cedar, azalea, dry pigment, and wax, 60 x 48 x 42"

Drawings

1. Airvatu (India Series), 1981
Permanent felt tip pen, dry pigment, and charcoal on paper, 78-1/2 x 50"
2. Triped (India Series), 1981-1982
Permanent felt tip pen, charcoal, dry and wet pigment on paper, 84 x 50"
3. Untitled Study (Ubud Series), 1983
Color markers on graph paper, 18-3/8 x 18-3/8"
4. Untitled Study (Ubud Series), 1983
Color markers on graph paper, 18-3/8 x 18-3/8"
5. Untitled Study (Ubud Series), 1983
Color markers on paper, 18-3/8 x 18-3/8"
6. Untitled Study (Ubud Series), 1983
Color markers on paper, 18-3/8 x 18-3/8"
7. Untitled Study (Ubud Series), 1983
Color markers on paper, 18-3/8 x 18-3/8"
8. Untitled Study (Ubud Series), 1983
Color markers on paper, 18-3/8 x 18-3/8"
9. Enzo II (Tokobashira Series), 1984
India ink and pastel on handmade Japanese paper, 42-1/2 x 30-1/2"
10. Jingo (Tokobashira Series), 1984
Pastel and charcoal on paper, 60 x 43-1/2"

2 TONY
1 BOB

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

- | | | | |
|------|---|------|--|
| 1975 | FACULTY EXHIBITION | 1987 | HANS BREDER: ARCHETYPAL DIAGRAMS
MICHAEL SINGER: RITUAL SERIES RETELLINGS
JUDITH DOLNICK/ROBERT NATKIN
MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE: THE HUMANITARIAN
VISION
MEL ALEXENBERG: COMPUTER ANGELS
STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA: THE WEST |
| 1976 | MICHELE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS
SALVATORE ROMANO | 1988 | THE FACULTY SHOW '88
ROBERT WHITE: SELECTED WORKS 1947-1988
LEE KRASNER: PAINTINGS 1956-1984
EDGAR BUONAGURIO: PERMUTATION AND
EVOLUTION 1974-1988
JOAN SNYDER COLLECTS JOAN SNYDER |
| 1977 | MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
HERBERT BAYER | 1989 | THE M.F.A. SHOW '89
ROBERT KUSHNER: SILENT OPERAS
HERMAN CHERRY: PAINTINGS 1984-1989
HAITIAN ART: THE GRAHAM COLLECTION
FIBER EXPLORATIONS: NEW WORK IN FIBER ART |
| 1978 | LEON GOLUB
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL | 1990 | THE M.F.A. SHOW '90
PRINTS BY PRINTMAKERS
KIT-YIN SNYDER: ENRICO IV
FANTASTIC VOYAGES
POETIC LICENSE |
| 1979 | SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONFIST
HOWARDENA PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN | 1991 | M.F.A. 1991
FREDERIC AMAT and ROBERTO JUAREZ
ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: EPIC ART
THE MONOTYPES OF ADOLPH GOTTLIEB
THE FACULTY SHOW '91
NEW TRADITIONS: THIRTEEN HISPANIC
PHOTOGRAPHERS |
| 1980 | BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTO PIENE
STONY BROOK II, THE STUDIO FACULTY | 1992 | M.F.A. SHOW 1992
JULIUS TOBIAS
REUBEN KADISH
CITY VIEWS
GEORGE KORAS |
| 1981 | ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER
LEON POLK SMITH | 1993 | M.F.A. SHOW 1993
CONCEPTS WITH NEON
WARREN BRANDT: A RETROSPECTIVE
JOHN FERREN: IMAGES FROM NATURE
WOOD |
| 1982 | FOUR SCULPTORS
CECIL ABISH
JACK YOUNGERMAN
ALAN SHIELDS
THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
ANN McCOY | 1994 | M.F.A. SHOW 1994
PAPER WORKS
ROBERT RICHENBURG: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST
THE FACULTY SHOW '94
MAURA SHEEHAN: DORA: BIG GIRLS DON'T CRY |
| 1983 | THE WAR SHOW
CERAMIC DIRECTIONS: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW
CINDY SHERMAN
THE FACULTY SHOW | 1995 | M.F.A. SHOW 1995
EIGHTEEN SUFFOLK ARTISTS
PAT HAMMERMAN and BURT HASEN
<i>art AND technology</i>
PRIVATE ART/PUBLIC ART: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE
COLLECTIONS OF CITIBANK AND JOHNSON & JOHNSON |
| 1984 | BERNARD APTEKAR: ART AND POLITICS
ERIC STALLER: LIGHT YEARS
NORMAN BLUHM: SEVEN FROM THE SEVENTIES
EDWARD COUNTEY 1921-1984
CARL ANDRE: SCULPTURE | 1996 | M.F.A. SHOW 1996
JOHN HULTBERG, VINCENT PEPI, and
EDVINS STRAUTMANIS
ROGER ARRANDALE WILLIAMS: THE AMERICAN
TERRAIN |
| 1985 | LEWIS HINE IN EUROPE: 1918-1919
FRANCESC TORRES: PATHS OF GLORY
HOMAGE TO BOLOTOWSKY: 1935-1981
FREEDOM WITHIN: PAINTING BY JUAN SANCHEZ/
INSTALLATION BY ALFREDO JAAR
ABSTRACT PAINTINGS REDEFINED | | |
| 1986 | KLEEGER: METAL SCULPTURE
TOBY BUONAGURIO: SELECTED WORKS
YANG YAN-PING and ZENG SHAN-QING
EIGHT URBAN PAINTERS: CONTEMPORARY
ARTISTS OF THE EAST VILLAGE
TV: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT | | |