



KIKI SMITH: PROCESSION “A WONDER VERSION OF LIFE”

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Because when one can control things, one is limited to one's own vision.

Art forces you to submit to the world's reality rather than to your own fantasy of reality.

Kiki Smith, 2008¹

... it's about resistance, but also about creation and making more possibilities.

Kiki Smith, 1990²

Kiki Smith is one of the preeminent artists of our time. Over a period of more than three decades she has created a multifaceted oeuvre that deals primarily with the political, social, philosophical, and spiritual aspects of human nature. Her investigations of the body—without shying away from taboos, awkwardness, or the boundaries of shame—are an aesthetic discourse on the human condition: they deal with birth, age, death and dying, wounding and healing, reanimation, sexuality, gender, identity, memory. This focus on the subject, its corporeality, traumas, and social experiences, broadens in the early nineties to include an appreciation of the larger context, as Smith addresses the individual's relationship to the world of animals, to nature, and to the environment.

Sculpture is her preferred medium—one she has reinvented and breathes life into—in addition to drawing, prints, photography, and video. The wealth of materials she uses is striking: bronze, plaster, glass, wood, porcelain, paper, pigment, aluminum, latex, feathers, beeswax, fabrics, precious stones: the list is almost endless, and she repeatedly experiments with new materials. Kiki Smith's oeuvre is unique in its devotion to the “drama” of the body—usually the female body—and its view of the world, its radical pictorial inventions, and the magic of the materials she selects.

The exhibition weaves together the works selected from her oeuvre to produce a whole, a *summa*. What can the viewer expect? The everyday and the magical, the profane and the spiritual, beauty and horror—everything appears inextricably linked in Kiki Smith's universe. An entire world unfurls, like in an epic poem. It is populated by beings of different cultures in time and space, foreign as well as familiar ones: women and girls in particular, male figures, hybrid creatures, animals of all kinds, plants and heavenly bodies in a variety of forms and materials. Smith tells of forgotten places, individual and social influences, the body, domestic life, nature: the spheres of political, social, and cultural experiences are complex, simultaneous, interwoven. She tells of mythology and religion, fairy tales and legends. She opens up a world of displacement

that they fell from the sky: *Untitled (Crows)* (1995). “She represented the bodies of the lifeless birds in bronze and scattered them across the gallery floor in a dramatic tribute to the victims of this ecological disaster.”⁹² The *White Mammals* (1998–99), eight porcelain reliefs on wooden boards on the floor corresponding to the subjects of the etchings on the wall, are similarly dedicated to species that are dying out in apocalyptic fashion. And Kiki Smith refers to *Black Animal Drawing* as resembling a “death barge.” “Animals lose habitat,”⁹³ and “it’s saying look, the animals—they’re disappearing and saying pay attention. Our environment is something we’re totally contingent on—it’s a paramount situation.” Smith refers to “failed environmental legislation” as a trigger for her installation.⁹⁴ What does the nature that surrounds us mean to us? How do we behave toward creation? “The thing which seemed significant to me was the relationship towards nature, not about nature, about ourselves, about our identity in relationship to the natural, because the natural has been impacted by human beings in the way that living things are threatened.”⁹⁵



UNTITLED (ROSES), 1993/94
#27

FLAPPER, 2002
#28

Procession

Down alleyways / come strange unicorns.
From what field, / what mythic wood?
Closer to, / they seem astronomers.
Fantastic Merlins / the Ecce Homo,
enchanted Durandarte, / Orlando furioso.
Federico Garcia Lorca: Procession, 1927

Like a magical procession or pageant, Kiki Smith’s presentation at the Haus der Kunst opens with the monumental serpent *Hydra*, the water snake, cosmologically the largest constellation in the sky,⁹⁶ together with *Corvus*, the crow, *Noctua*, the owl, and *Felis*, the cat. These are followed by biblical and mythical figures of wax and bronze, puppets, body fragments—limbs, entrails, skin, hair, and fluids—flesh, arms, legs, and a head chained together; a bandaged girl, dead black birds as well as bright and cheerful things: a sun, cloud, moon, and stars in gold and silver; a red sea of stars, images woven on flowing papers like banners, vitrines filled with marvels, magical and fairy-tale creatures, small female figures, *Flapper* (#28), *Mudra*, *Seer*, *Alice*, *Eve*, *Girl*, *Io*, the mortal lover of Zeus (#29), and others “animated by gestures and poses from a distant past”;⁹⁷ *Annunciation*, a male figure, seated and raising its hand like a Buddha, a fabric doll—talisman and amulet, “like household gods.”⁹⁸ From this perspective the exhibition appears as a festive pageant—what a spectacle!

The exhibition as a procession conjures up recollections of the impressive parades of the late Middle Ages, whose choreography in public space ranks among the most dramatic gestures of the period: out into the open, common perception and celebration rather

than individual devotion and contemplation. Be it as a liturgical or a funeral procession and then increasingly as a collective ritual act to ward off disaster (war, hunger, and pestilence), the procession is a forum of self-understanding and self-reassurance, a social instrument of influencing ethics and lifestyles;⁹⁹ a theatrical demonstration that trusted the magic of the sculptures that were carried along, their healing and apotropaic qualities, their “dynamis” or supernatural potency. People worshipped those figures like persons, believing that they had the power to act.¹⁰⁰ “Just to me what is interesting about different times is spectacle, pageantry, things like ceremony, ritual, public display. Some cultures which have this flourishing moment of not necessarily an economic opulence but a visual opulence. ... The imagery is completely important, but the thing is, you are creating meaning. Pageantry is about meaning.”¹⁰¹

Kiki Smith’s *Procession* opens up a discursive field with its narratives and imaginary worlds, its imagery and emotional aura. This, too, is a great strength of the artist’s work, for it does not prescribe explanatory models of the world: “I will not preach. It’s for my own life.”¹⁰² It is left to the viewer to read and interpret the signs—for instance, in terms of political, social, and cultural references—through a physical experience of the ritualized space, or through personal projections, desires, and fears. It is likewise left to the discretion of the viewer as to whether she or he views these various signs as an appeal for moral action.



IO (STANDING), 2005
#29

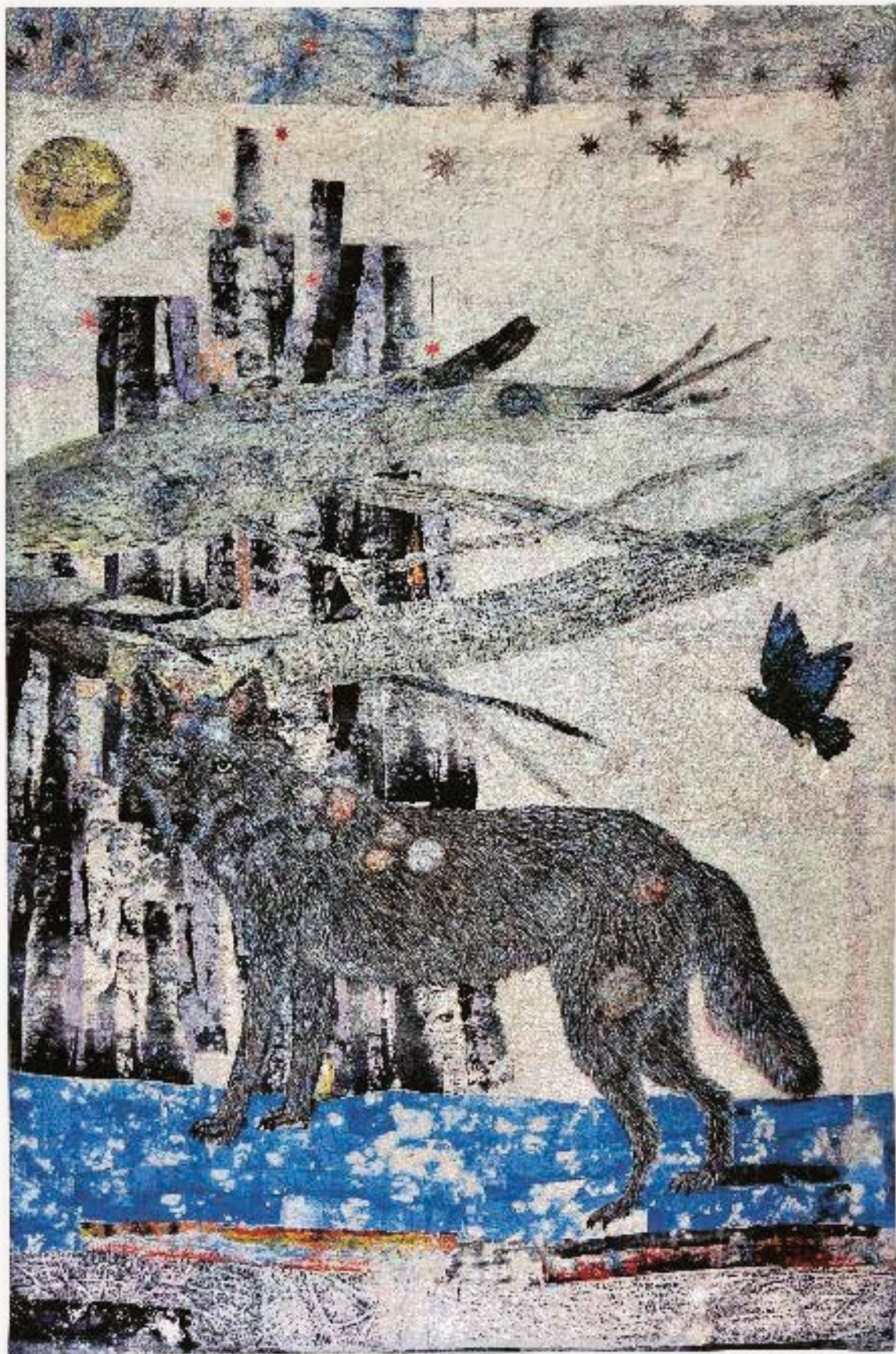




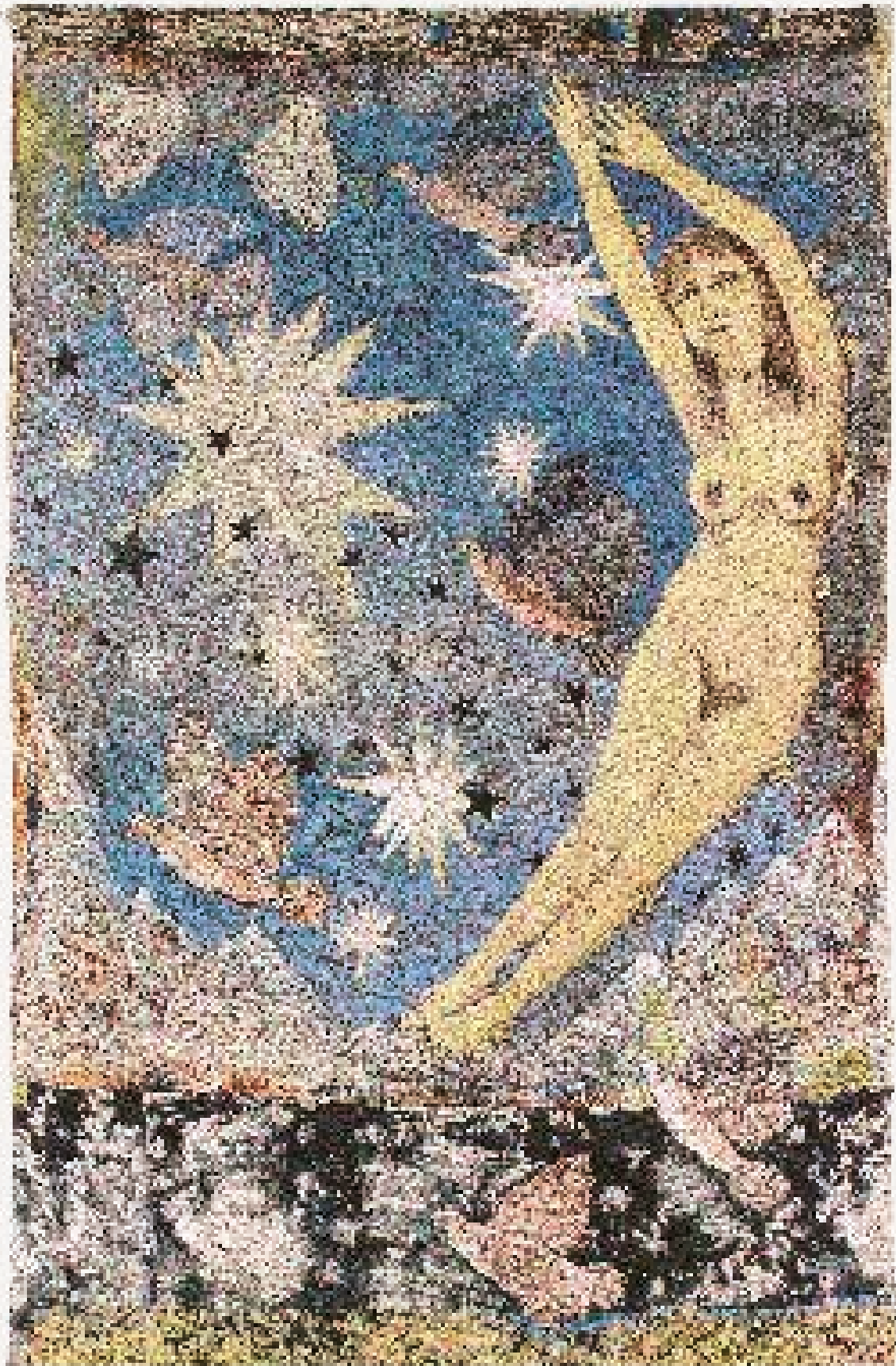
UNTITLED (SKINS), 1992
pp. 46/47

UNTITLED III
(UPSIDE-DOWN BODY WITH BEADS), 1993









UNTITLED, 1992



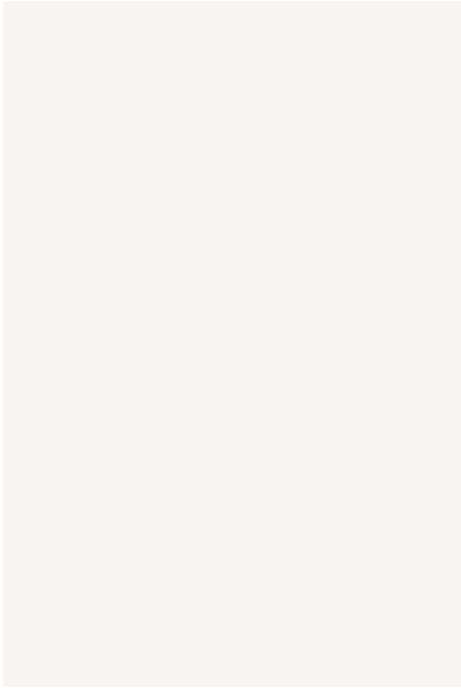


UNTITLED (HAIR), 1990

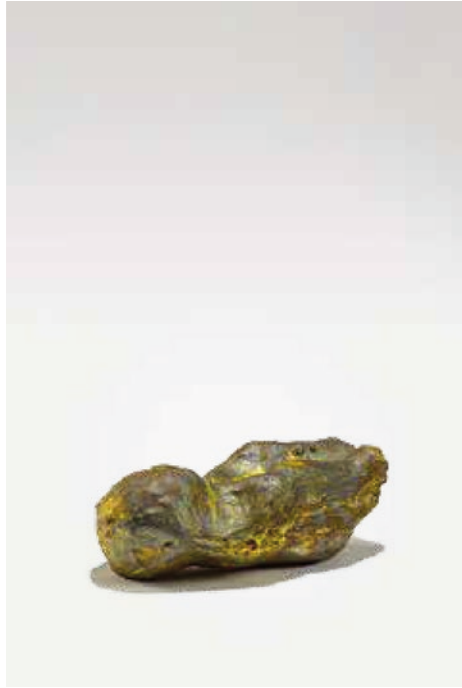




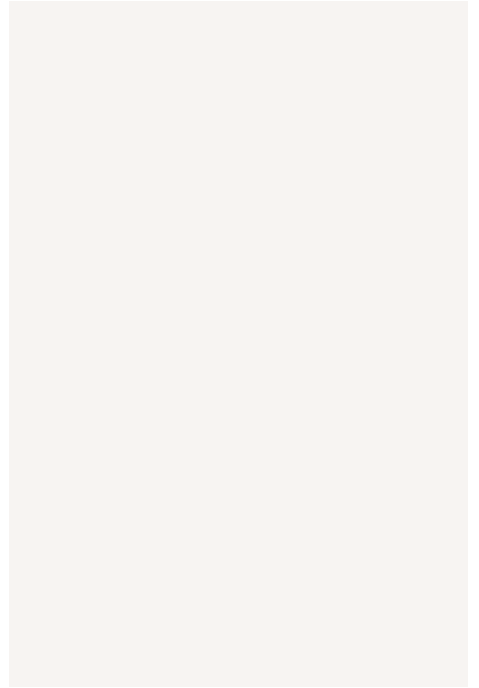




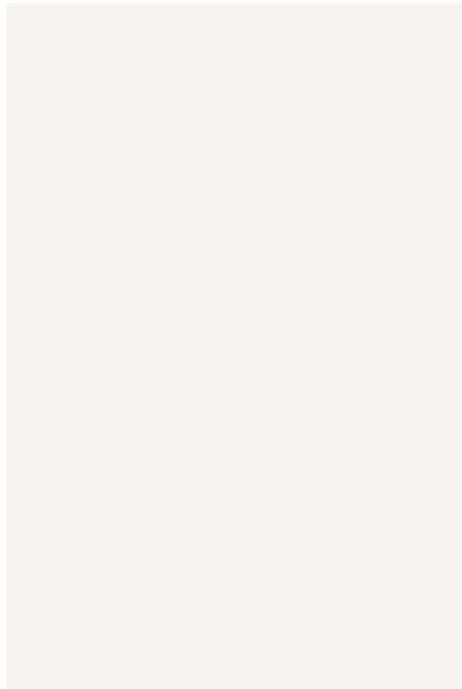
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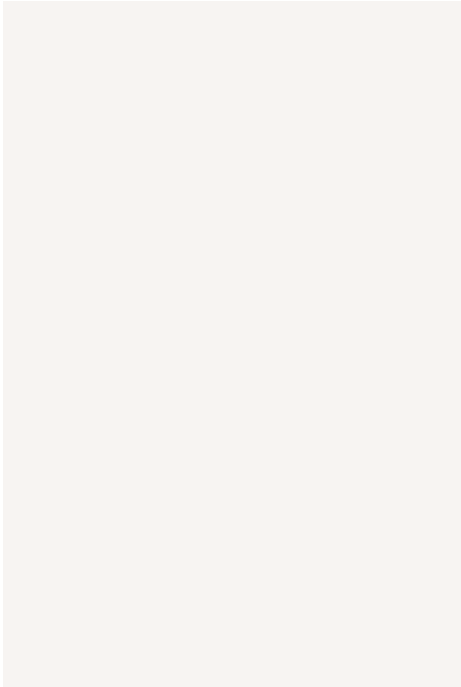
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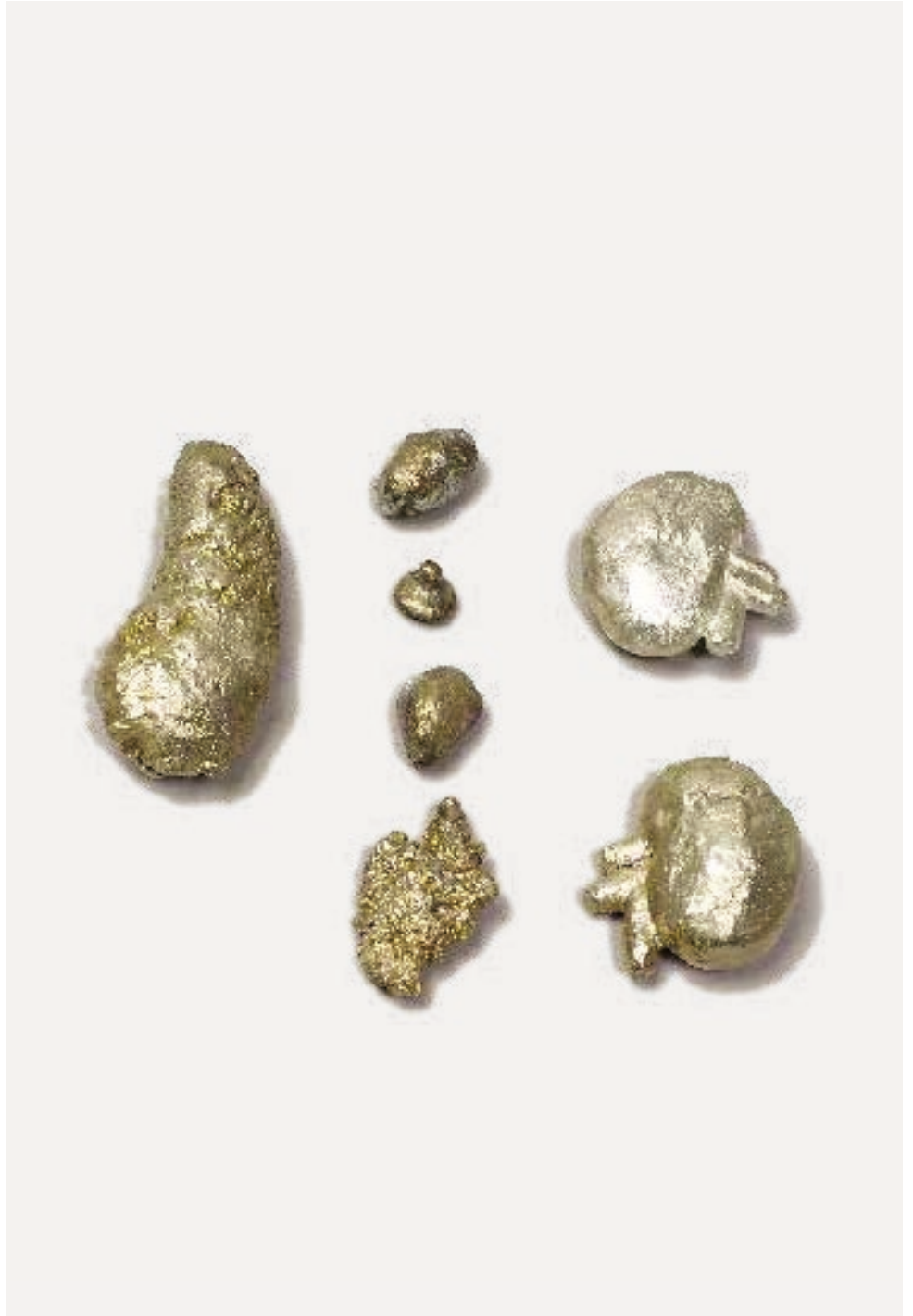
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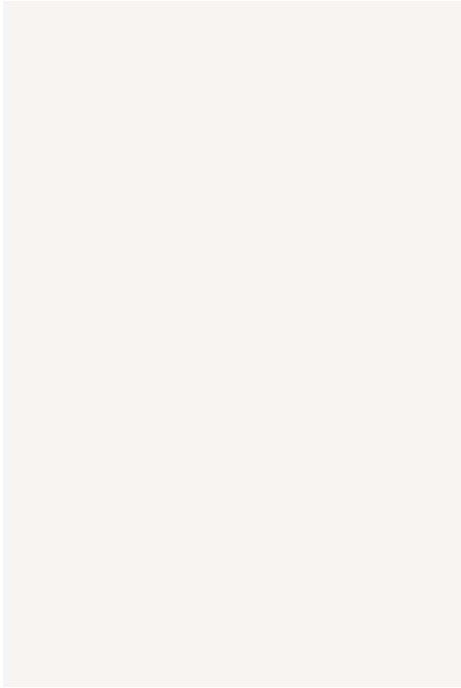
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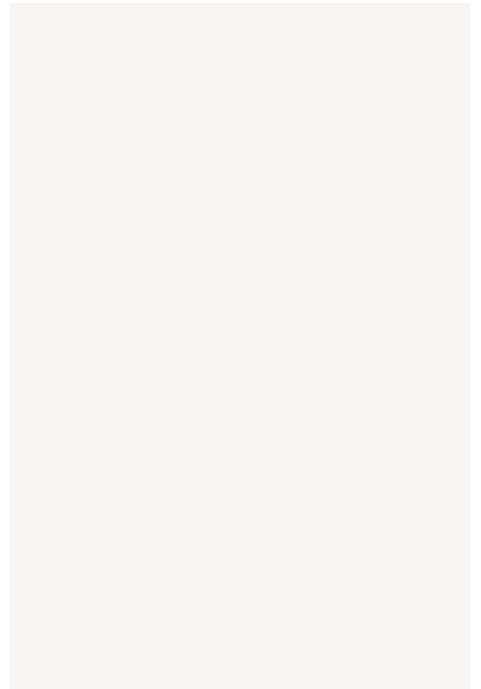
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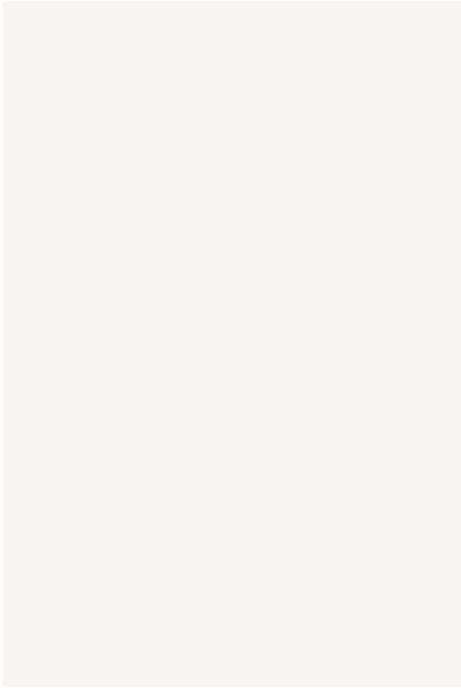
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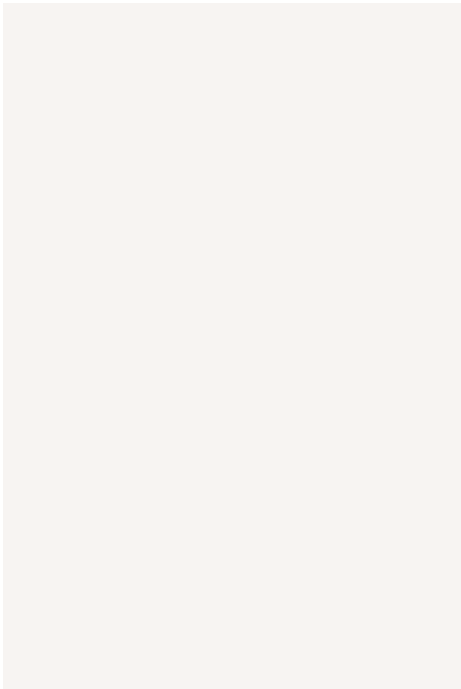
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#46



#47



#48



#49