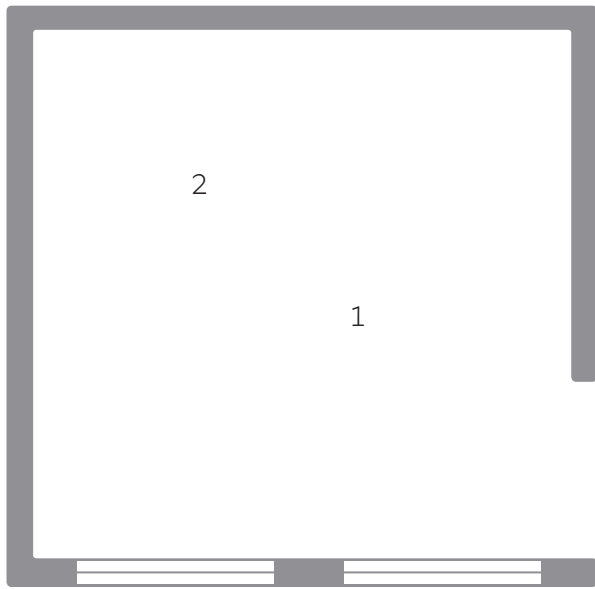


Birth and Death

January 18 through April 10, 2017



1 ***Birth***

1934
Travertine

Originally larger;
reduced to present
size by the artist
prior to 1946.

2 ***Death
(Lynched Figure)***

1934
Monel metal, steel,
wood, rope

The figure was
originally hung by
a single cord of
rope on a gallows
(as here); it was
transferred to a steel
and wood support
at a later date.

Noguchi originally intended to show *Birth* (1934) and *Death* (1934) together in a 1935 exhibition at the Marie Harriman Gallery on 57th Street. Harriman purportedly found the combination too provocative, and so *Death* was included in the show and *Birth* was not—which has always been a bit perplexing to those interested in these objects.

Death, or *Lynched Figure*, was a direct response to the lynchings that plagued America after the Civil War. The widespread media attention to lynchings took far too long to develop. When it finally did, in the 1930s, it contributed significantly to the mainstreaming of the civil rights movement. Noguchi called *Death* a “social protest,” and it was part of a large and sustained outpouring of artistic activism.

Perhaps the most notorious lynching in American history, the one most often cited as galvanizing that movement outside of the African-American community, occurred not in the South, to which the crime of lynching is often rhetorically limited, but in Marion, Indiana—just an hour from where Noguchi went to high school. There, two African-American men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, were dragged from jail, where they were being held as suspects in the killing of a white man and the rape of a white woman, and murdered by a mob on August 7, 1930. Thousands of copies of a post-mortem photograph of the victims taken by a local photographer were sold, and the image was widely reproduced in the media, as well as by those working to eradicate the practice. This picture inspired the song “Strange Fruit,” an early civil rights anthem made famous by Billie Holiday. It also led to a number of anti-lynching exhibitions in which Noguchi participated.

However, that photograph is not the one on which *Death* was based. That ignominious distinction goes to a picture of George Hughes (burned alive in the vault of the courthouse where he was being tried in Sherman, Texas, in 1930), which was widely published in civil rights publications. A mob burned the courthouse to the ground, dragged Hughes’ corpse from the remains, hung his body from a tree, and burned it again. Most lynchings ended with hanging and produced straight corpses. Noguchi’s *Death* was clearly calculated to invoke the highly contorted bodies produced by the even more gruesome practice of burning the victims before and/or during hanging.

Birth, the figure of a woman with her head thrown back, the upper half of her torso arched in effort, recalls masterpieces as diverse as Alberto Giacometti’s *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (1932) and Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1647-52), placing it squarely in the then-avant-garde

(continued on reverse)

(continued from front)

surrealist tradition of bridging sex and death. Noguchi later wrote that he was inspired to make it after seeing a woman give birth at a local hospital.

What Harriman must have seen at the time was that by combining *Birth* and *Death* (in a Surrealist-style juxtaposition of sex and violence), Noguchi meant to suggest the possibility of any one of a number of highly inflammatory black man (monel metal)/white woman (travertine) lynching narratives, of the sort that were almost always, and often falsely, used to justify racist mob behavior. In retrospect, and in fairness to Harriman, she likely wanted to support the anti-lynching message—and the movement it was part of—without creating a riot, which is why *Death* was shown alone.

In the brief (forgetful or disingenuous) account in Noguchi's autobiography, published more than thirty years later, he gives no indication that he was conscious of the implications of combining *Death* and *Birth* in this way. But the changes he made to both works were no coincidence. *Birth*, which began as a much larger and more provocative full length figure (Fig.1), was cut down to its present state, a mere bust, sometime before 1946. (It is not known whether he considered it a different finished work in its current state.) It is also unclear when Noguchi transferred *Death* from the original gallows-style support (Fig.2, lost) to the current more abstract frame (Fig. 3) in which it is—with the exception of this exhibition—now shown. Both changes can be viewed generally as in line with Noguchi's gradual move away from explicit social realism and towards more abstract means of producing social effects.

The story of these two works and the relationship between them has an interesting Noguchi-esque coda. At the 1986 Venice Biennale, where Noguchi represented the United States, he brought the idea of combining the concepts of birth and death in a single show full circle—finally creating the conjunction he had failed to achieve in 1935, but in an abstract, metaphorical form. There, in the American pavilion, he showed two multi-element stone pieces entitled *Beginnings* and *Ends*, both 1985 (Figs. 4 and 5), a beautifully deepened critique of America at its open-ended and closed-minded extremes.

Featuring a recent recreation of the steel gallows from which *Death* was hung in the Harriman exhibition—emphasizing the direct connection to the horrific reality of lynching—and *Birth*—in its now simplified (maybe unfinished) state—the current installation approximates the raw and explicit quality of Noguchi's intent in 1935 as closely as it is now possible to do.

—Senior Curator Dakin Hart



1 Vintage photograph of *Birth*, 1934. Photographer unknown.



2 Original frame for *Death*, 1934. Photograph by Berenice Abbott.



3 Frame created at a later date. Photographer unknown.



4 *Beginnings*. 1985. Andesite. Installation view of *Isamu Noguchi: What Is Sculpture?*, 1986 Venice Biennale, June 29, 1986 through September 28, 1986. Photo: Shigeo Anzei.



5 *Ends*. 1985. Swedish granite. Installation view of *Isamu Noguchi: What Is Sculpture?*, 1986 Venice Biennale, June 29, 1986 through September 28, 1986. Photo: Shigeo Anzei.