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FEATURED REVIEW

DAVID SMITH: CUBES AND ANARCHY
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

BY JOHN O'BRIEN

THE MOST SURPRISING PART of seeing "David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy" was to realize how easy it is to overlook the complexity of a significant figure from the history of modern American art.

Certainly, a sculptor whose art nearly defines post WWII American art is subject to compression in our collective memory ("it's big metal stuff") and an overarching criticism about his success in light of the way New York was positioned to steal the avant-garde from Paris during the Cold War. However, both approaches miss the point of his life in the arts. At a distance of 35 years from his death, the exhibition put together by curator Carol Eliel reveals the depth of that life and places his production in a larger historical and stylistic context. Along with the expected masterworks, there are rarely-seen Smith sculptures that are correlated to his lifelong work as a painter, as well as his knotty set of jotted-up notebooks, and drawings of all types (gestural, spray painted and finely delineated). The show even engages his little known work in photography. What emerges is a nuanced and fascinating accounting of David Smith as an artist and visual thinker.

The group of works at LACMA are an overview of his production; the curatorial intent is to demonstrate how a sense of geometry underscored every aspect of Smith's work. Fortunately, it tracks across an amazing range of work from different periods and different styles that Smith worked with over time. There are early works such as *Saw Head* (1933) in which the influence of Julio González and Picasso are clear. Other works such as *Growing Forms* (1939) in which echoes can be seen of Constantin Brancusi, or the

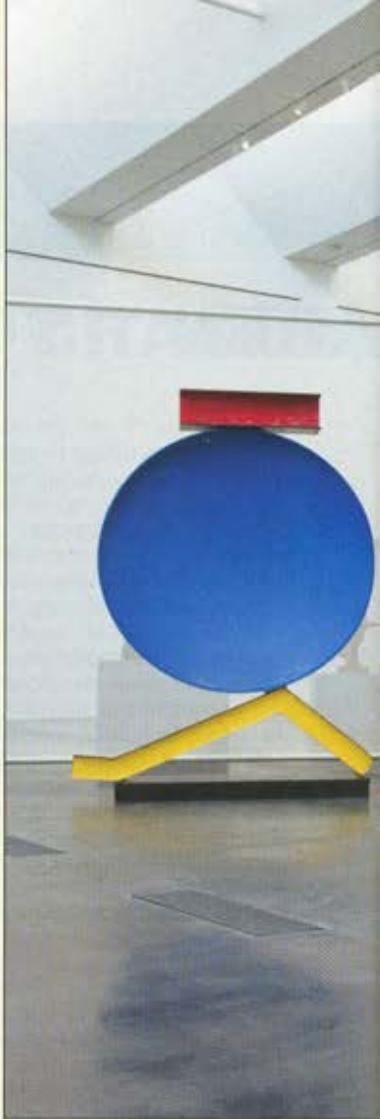
Polish-American artist Theodore Roszak, segue to *Primo Piano III* (1962), where the biomorphic and translated figurative traces of surrealism have been eliminated.

The exhibition design in the museum hall features light, translucent scrim panels, allowing the visitor to move between the different works in a way that is not entirely determined by chronology and where the nearby works can be seen through the scrim facilitating a less didactic dialogue among the periods. The walk can yield very satisfying juxtapositions such as that of the painted works from the 1960s (*Bec-Dida Day*, *Circle III* and *Tanktotem VII*) visible through the smaller more built-up works from the 1930s (*Blue Construction*, *Vertical Structure - Vertical Construction* and *Suspended Cube*). The synergetic interconnections within Smith's production are highlighted by this design, and it gives perspective to Smith's thinking through of style, form, sculptural technique and color.

Color is also not generally associated with Smith's best-known output. He was a painter throughout his lifetime, but most of his two-dimensional works are seen as preparatory sketches and ancillary to the three-dimensional work. Within this exhibition, color and his paintings are integrated into his overall production. So, in works spanning the bright colored forms of the fifties (*Big Diamond*, 1952)

to his experimentation with primary colors in the '60s (*Bec-Dida Day*, 1963), and finally resulting in the more embedded color of the overall painted gestures visible in the *Zigs*, we can follow how Smith experiments with form and surface color to flatten, modify or accentuate those forms in space. His untimely death left us with one last experiment in grinding and scoring curves into the raw metal surface as though using paint on a brush; seen in the context of his paintings we can only imagine the synthesis, had Smith lived longer. The accumulated body of work reveals a complicated and constant repositioning of color that oscillates in and out of Smith's practice.

Untangling the links between an artist's notebooks — the paintings and drawings, and the sculpture — is an active principal in this exhibition. The complex layered field of crisscrossing endeavors Smith left behind for us to excavate is exciting for the scholarship it offers about the period, for what it adds to our understanding of this prolific artist, as well as for the



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philosophical implications of how modernism was evolving during its evolution and subsequent mythologizing. The photographs in the exhibition that Smith took of his work also reveal how he perceived his own art and how that is different from the textbook version. Also, the catalog is beautifully designed, written in a way that is significant for scholarship and yet pleasurable for the general arts reader. The broad set of images of work in and from the studio provides entry into the story of this pioneering artist's life and art, and constructively diversifies David Smith's practice by bringing us into his process when he was working out changes.

"Cubes and Anarchy" does not just celebrate that which we already know about David Smith but what makes him an interesting, significant and relevant artist to look at once again. **a**

"David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy" runs until July 24, 2011.; for info www.lacma.org