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DAVID SMITH

Moments of Invention and Experimentation

BY JOHN O'BRIEN

The work of David Smith is a monolith in the history of modern American art. And like all monolithic structures, it is surrounded by a simplified, essentialized, almost mythological narrative. Now, 35 years after his death, two exhibitions have begun to explore his prodigious output in a much more comprehensive manner. The myth might remain—the solitary welder staking out an American chapter in postwar three-dimensional art—but “David Smith Invents,” shown at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, and “Cubes and Anarchy,” on view through July 24 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, revealed important aspects of his production and placed them in context. Ranging from rarely seen sculptures and numerous paintings (which is where Smith started) to notebooks, drawings, and relatively unknown photographic works, these two shows offered a nuanced and fascinating account of Smith in an expanded field.

The Phillips exhibition began with the 2008 donation of two works, the sculpture *Bouquet of Concaves* and an untitled black drawing (both 1959). From there, curator Susan Behrends Frank widened the scope to take a fresh look at Smith’s practices as painter, draftsman, and photographer at the time of his move away from abstracted figuration into a more deliberately geometric mode. LACMA’s “Cubes and Anarchy” started as a labor of love on the part of curator Carol Eliel. From the onset, it proposed to re-visit Smith’s overall output in order to chart how geometry threaded through the course of his career. Taking separate but intersecting paths, the exhibitions articulated details of Smith’s artistic practice in depth, providing a chance to see some wonderful work and delve into the multifaceted nature of Smith’s creative process.

At the Phillips, Behrends Frank used *Bouquet of Concaves*, together with the related *Bouquet of Concaves II* and *Black Concaves* (both 1960), as a pivot point in Smith’s stylistic evolution. This trio of steel sculptures stands between the preceding Tanktotems, which still contain ample vestiges of representation, and the fully abstract Zigs and Cubis. Tracing the evolution of this work concurrently with paintings and drawings from the same period, it becomes clear that Smith was definitively moving away from figuration and looking at the primacy of raw welded metal as a root source and symbol. While the *Concaves* are less directly influenced by translated figure studies, they still allude to nature, a parallel that Smith underscored with the word “bouquet.” The clustered forms are reminiscent of earlier work, such as the Ravens, but Smith has pared back any formal hint that the viewer might use to conjure something other than the metal itself. In his paintings, the split is even more pronounced: swirling gestures take over and obliterate the figural residue. During this same time frame, he begins to use commercially available spray cans, “drawing” directly on paper with steel forms.

Throughout his life, Smith felt closely allied with social and political movements that protected workers and honored manual labor. In turning away from figuration, he was no longer able to exalt these ideals through tradition representation, so he transformed the physical presence of industrial materials (following the example of the Constructivists) into a formal language that



Opposite: Installation view of “David Smith: Cubes of Anarchy,” at LACMA, 2011. Above: *Black Concaves*, 1960. Painted steel, 34.75 x 25 x 10.25 in. Below: *Untitled (Cube Totem, Sentinel, Cubi IX, Cubi III)*, 1963. Gelatin print, 24.3 x 19.8 cm.





Above: *Bouquet of Concaves* as photographed by David Smith at Bolton Landing, 1959. Below: *Bouquet of Concaves*, 1959. Painted steel, 27.5 x 38.5 x 8 in. Right: *Blue Construction*, 1938. Sheet steel with baked-enamel finish, 92.1 x 72.4 x 76.2 cm.



allowed him to maintain his social and political beliefs. In celebrating the material transformation of industrial America, Smith allied himself, in spirit, with the welders of skyscrapers and automobiles and, in practice, allowed his art to go beyond abstraction of European descent and reach a more pragmatic deployment of his chosen forms.

The evolution put forward by "Cubes and Anarchy" is, in effect, a microcosm of Smith's career; it tracks how a constant sense of geometry underscored every aspect of his work. By displaying an amazing range of objects, the show dismantled any monolithic

construction of his poetics. Early works in which geometry is subliminal—for example, *Saw Head* (1933), which was clearly influenced by the assemblages of Julio González, and *Growing Forms* (1939), which echoes Constantin Brancusi or Theodore Roszak—accompanied directly geometrical works such as *Primo Piano III* (1962). Moving gracefully along a path defined by translucent scrim walls, the viewer's trajectory alternated between different time frames—there was less interest in chronology than in dialogue among the works. Individual works and groupings highlighted how geometry recedes or comes to the foreground of perception. One particularly satisfying juxtaposition connected small works from the 1930s (*Blue Construction*, *Vertical Structure—Vertical Construction*, and *Suspended Cube*) with painted works from the 1960s (*Bec-Dida Day*, *Circle III*, and *Tanktotem VII*), visible through the scrim. Another effective dialogue joined both three-dimensional and two-dimensional versions of *Fifteen Planes*. This arrangement suggested a wondrously loose connective tissue and restored a sense of malleability to Smith's thinking through of forms, techniques, and color.

Untangling the links between an artist's notebooks, drawings, and sculpture is both fascinating and vexing for the historian. Smith left an amazingly complex field of crisscrossing endeavors for us to excavate, and the results can be extremely satisfying for what they add to our understanding of this prolific artist and the philosophical implications of how Modernism, in the making, wandered around what we now perceive as a monolithic structure. The photographs that Smith took of his sculptures tell a revealing tale, showing how his perception of his work differs

from textbook accounts. Clustered works overlap each other, and the negative space surrounding them is as important as a single work isolated in the foreground. Smith used the surrounding environment as an interactive framing element to work with his sculpture. Whether exploiting dollops of blanketing white snow at Bolton Landing or built-in frames created by the doorways and exterior walls of his studio, Smith collapsed figure and ground. In most of these photographs, we can easily discern an overt contextualization in the groupings that is completely absent from the presentation of Smith's work in museums and galleries. In this sense, we discover how Smith was thinking of these forms as painted in space.

Color is not usually considered essential to Smith's work. Although he painted throughout his lifetime, most of his two-dimensional work has been presented as preparatory in relation to the sculptures. These two exhibitions, however, brought color and, to a certain degree, painting to the fore, contextualizing them within Smith's artistic evolution. Spanning brightly colored forms from the '50s (*Big Diamond*, 1952) through primary color applied to steel surfaces in sculptures from the '60s (*Bec-Dida Day*, 1963) and ultimately coming to rest in the more embedded and gestural color of the Zigs and *Bouquet of Concaves*, Smith's works experimented with interactions of physical form and colored surface, flattening or accentuating the shapes in space. He applied colors and worked out forms with abandon, without over-determination by a causal nexus to the sculpture. In his paintings, he worked his way through mediation of color unhampered by an object in the round. Clearly he was looking at Malevich, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Picasso (along with work by his peers), and he developed his visual philosophy by tracking and deviating from their example. Before his untimely death, he left a last experiment, grinding scored curves into raw metal in order to loosen light into a froth of reflected, abrasive gestures. Both exhibitions hinted at what might have become a synthesis had Smith lived longer. The accumulated works reveal a complicated, alternating, and palpable relationship to color.

Smith's photography may be the greatest treasure to be unearthed by these shows. By taking control over a supposedly ancillary or secondary technique for documenting finished works, he turned it into a device for making sketches of the world around him and construed a method for perusing how photographic reproduction modifies and facilitates perception of sculpture at a distance. That he often portrayed himself with camera in hand indicates its importance for him.

Both "David Smith Invents" and "Cubes and Anarchy" were accompanied by significant catalogues, important in terms of scholarship and pleasurable for the general reader. They include many images of Smith's work and studio, providing entry into the life of this pioneering artist and constructively dismantling the monolith erected by Modernist art history and criticism. Humanizing and diversifying Smith's practice by bringing us into those moments when changes were being worked out makes him a more interesting, important, and germane artist than ever before.

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Above: *Untitled (Zig IV in workshop doorway, Bolton Landing)*, c. 1961. Gelatin silver print, 24.3 x 19.7 cm. Below: *Zig IV*, 1961. Painted steel, 242.3 x 214 x 193 cm.

