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Tony Smith, photograph by Rudolph Burckhardt.

House designed by Tony Smith for the painter Stamos in East Marion, Long Island, 1951.

By Scott Burton

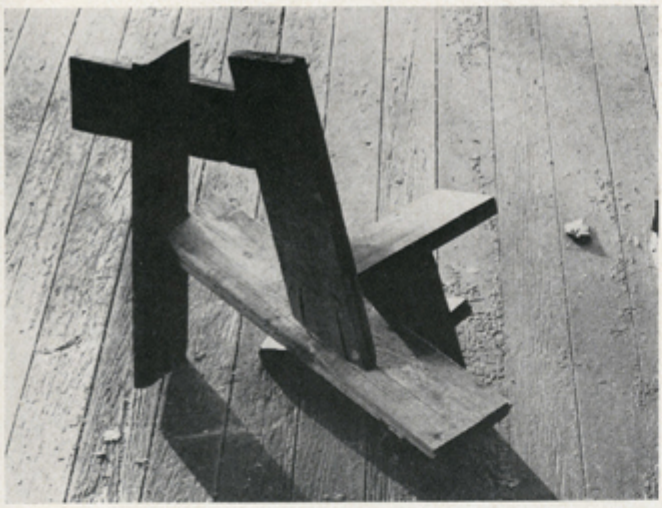
Old Master at the New Frontier

Tony Smith's great underground reputation among artists emerges this month in two exhibitions that place him at the forefront of modern sculpture

When art history is written as quickly as it is these days, it has to be rewritten often. We must now revise our accounts of modern American sculpture to include Tony Smith. Only two of his pieces have ever been seen publicly, one, *The Elevens*, at Samuel J. Wagstaff's 1964 "Black, White and Grey" show at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, and the other, *Free Ride*, at Kynaston McShine's "Primary Structures" at the Jewish Museum last spring. Now there are *two* major exhibitions of Smith's work at the same time, one at the Wadsworth Atheneum [Nov. 8-Dec. 31], another in Philadelphia at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania [Nov. 21-Jan. 6]. (A group of smaller works by Smith is scheduled to be shown next March in New York at the Fischbach Gallery.) So we must adjust our charts and graphs once more.

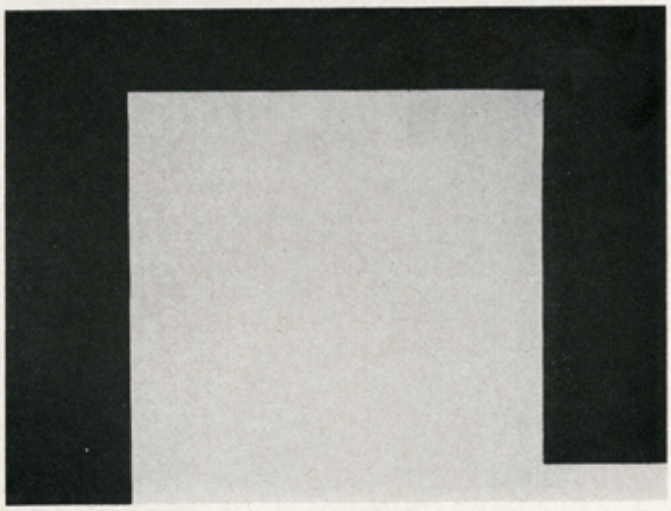
For a while, it looked as if the polarities of American sculpture had been set by our two Old Masters, Nakian and David Smith, with the only organized New Frontier being offered by Judd, Morris, et al., and artists like Hague, Agostini, Sugarman or di Suvero running strong but without benefit of party. It is to be hoped that the public appearance of Tony Smith will not result merely in political realignments, but will instead remind us that any artist's work must, first and last, be comprehended on its own terms. Smith's is perfectly suited to do so, for it matches easily the heroic scale of Nakian, the formal authority of David Smith, the advanced rigorousness of the primary structurists, or the originality of any contemporary sculptor. Yet all this, absolutely independently.

Obviously, it is not the achievement of a *Wunderkind*. Tony Smith has been as long and as closely involved in the inside development of postwar American art as anyone could be, first as an architect and *amicus curiae*, counting such painters as Pollock, Still and Newman as close friends and (one supposes) mutually influencing minds. Also, Smith has been painting—but not showing—for over thirty years. He began by studying nights at the Art Students League with Vytlacil and George Grosz, between 1931 and '35, while working in the daytime in his father's (and his father's before him) New Jersey iron-works, where water supplies were manufactured. Even today, "A. P. Smith" can be read like a signature on fire hydrants around New York. When questioned about his sources, Smith said, "Ah, if you really want to see where I come from, you should go over to the factory." The factory is no longer in the family, but Anthony Peter Smith's grandson and namesake has transformed the memories of the plates and dies and forges of his industrial ancestry into some of today's most radical



Untitled wood sculpture, made in Germany, 1953-55, 21½ inches high.

Untitled black and white painting, 1962, 4 feet high.



sculpture. (One is reminded of David Smith's similar preoccupation with our pre-electronic era, but there the resemblance ends.)

Tony Smith as a sculptor only seems to have sprung full-grown from the brow of Hephaestus. Blake's "botany" was accurate, as usual, when he said that the growth of a flower is the product of centuries of labor. As a young industrial worker; an *hors-concours* painter; an architectural student (of Moholy-Nagy, Archipenko and Kepes at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, 1937-38) and, in reaction, an architectural apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright for two years after that; then, for two decades (1940-60) as a practicing architect, building about 14 houses; as, since 1946, a teacher of crucial importance to a younger generation; as a responsive colleague of major painters—Tony Smith's "centuries of labor" have produced, in less than a decade, a body of work equal to that any single-minded lifetime pursuit could produce.

Between 1953 and '55, while living in Germany, Smith did a few small, tentative sculptures—studies or sketches—which he has barely looked at since then. (He says about them, "It's not so much that I take more time with [sculpture] now . . . it's just that then I was thinking about other things.") And, before that, he had planned one or two pieces of sculpture as components of houses he was designing. Then, in 1957, when he was back and teaching design at Pratt Institute, he made a demonstration model out of acoustical tiles and electrician's tape (because they hap-

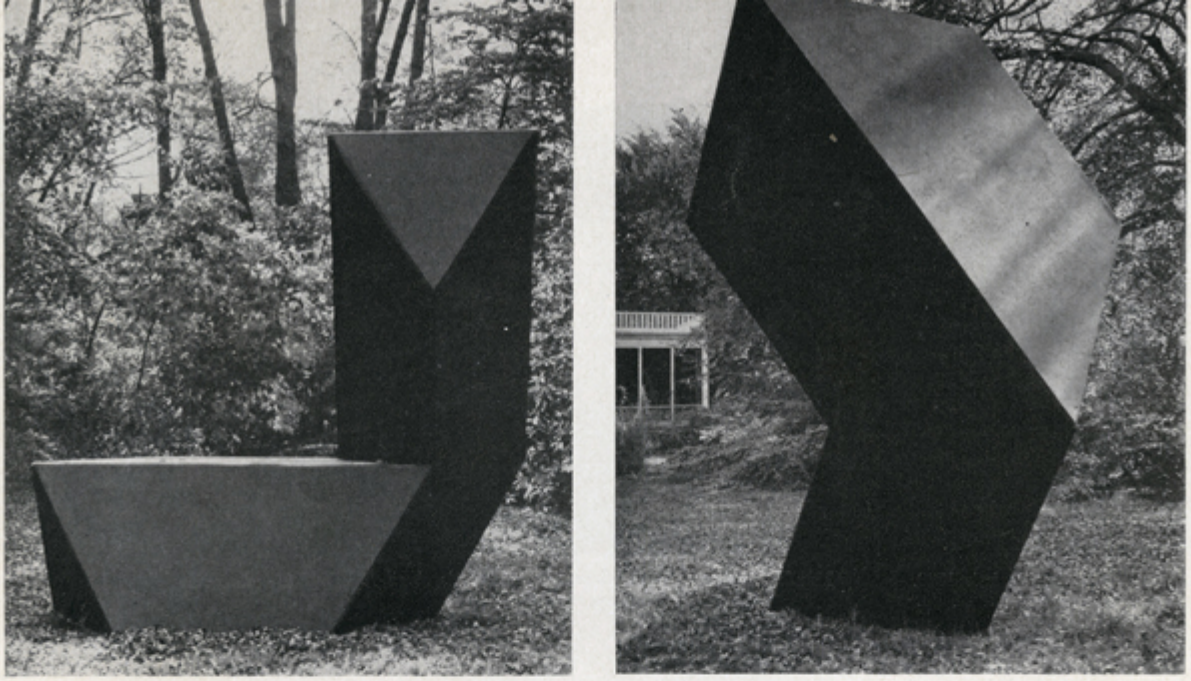
Cigarette, plywood painted a flat black, 15 feet high, in the Plaza across from the Hartford museum.

pened to be handy) of a phenomenon in solid geometry his class was studying. It was a tetrahedral angle, which has, as Smith explains, "in a word, the least number of spokes possible in a three-dimensional configuration." While putting it together, he noticed that it was developing a resemblance (now lost) to African sculpture, to a carved throne. So, the associative imagination taking over, geometry became art. Though *Throne* exists as yet only in the battered original model, the experience was a turning-point for Smith, for constructing this piece first gave him the idea of using steel plate to make sculpture. The decision catapulted him into a multiplying series of works, some of which are still under construction (at this writing, not more than a month away from his exhibitions) though they may have existed for several years as models or in plan. So far, only a few—*Die, Black Box, Free Ride*—are in steel; the rest are in plywood painted with auto-body undercoating. (Practically all his sculptures are black.)

They are made at Smith's Orange, N. J., studio with the help of his permanent assistant, Arthur File. The studio is in a garage behind Smith's enormous old brick house. This house is a recent acquisition; there is also one a few minutes' drive away in South Orange, where he lives with his wife and three young daughters, and where he was born (in 1912). In almost every room of both houses is a work of art or personal memento to provoke a story or revelation from Smith about the early history of the New York artists' world. But as fascinating as his life is, it is his sculpture, the 18 pieces divided between Philadelphia and Hartford, that is of immediate—and ultimate—concern.

The initial impression of his work (and I am talking on that basis; with greater familiarity, it will undoubtedly change for us, only proving its density and vitality) is likely to be one of great emotional power, his radical sculptural means only gradually asserting themselves. Soon, of course, the two draw together, until you cannot think of them separately. Smith's expressive content often seems to deal with absolutes of human experience—and this conveyed strictly in physical terms. (That is why it is no more than a critical convenience to segregate these elements for discussion.) *The Elevens* is two black "walls," each 8 by 8 by 2 feet; they stand parallel to each other, 4 feet apart, thus making the whole an 8-foot cube with an open central shaft. Looking at and walking through it can be terrifying, like Mycenean tomb architecture. It is not necessary to be aware of the title's specific reference, for the scale and ineluctable "passageway" of *The Elevens* speak with finality of human limits and of life's unavoidable direction. *The Marriage*

Four Tony Smith sculptures, on his studio lawn, Orange, N.J.: [left to right] *Amaryllis, Cigarette, Spitball, Playground.*



Two views of *Amaryllis*, 11½ feet high, 11½ feet long; contours change radically as you walk around a Smith sculpture.

has a similar central aperture, but because it is a portal and not a corridor, and because of the work's (relatively) less severe structure, *The Marriage* is not so oppressive, though it is as monumental as anything of Smith's. The piece can only be described as poetic (if hardly lyrical)—the locus of a ritual ceremony. It is tempting to imagine the "bride and groom" of *The Marriage* as the private and the public: intense personal feeling, even obsession, has been realized to be a constant of human life, something we all undergo. Here the two connect in a Pascalian equation.

The Marriage's unsymmetrical component, its arm extending out across the ground, opposes the verticality of the gateway and tempers the possible reference to a classic propylaea or triumphal arch with a surprising, almost playful freedom. Noticeably playful is *Willy*, with its eccentric, splayed volumes, rhyming planes and near-anthropomorphism. The only other piece of Smith's close to *Willy* is the behemoth-like *Grace Hoper* (in Bennington, Vt., and not to be seen in either museum show). Indeed, in both, the punning humor which verges on the monstrous is not unJoycean. (*Willie's* title is from Beckett's *Happy Days*; Smith's self-proclaimed Irishness is a theme running through his work.)

But his comic sense does not seem to me related to Dadaist absurdity. *Cigarette*, a gigantic, twisting rod, is one

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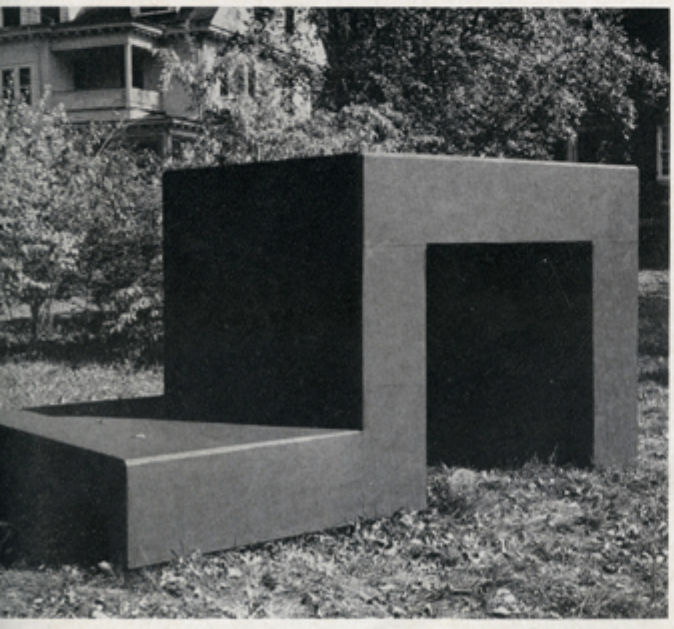

Playground, 6 feet high [left] and *Spitball*, 11½ feet high, installed at Hartford.

Tony Smith

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of his most formalist pieces, gaining little from its proposed resemblance to a crushed-out super-cigarette. And *Wall*, which is simply that: an 18 by 8 by 2 foot wall, derives its interest not from the ploy of turning something "real" and ordinary into art, but rather, at least in part, from the strict, self-evident accuracy of its translation of the metaphoric (wall as barrier, frustration, repression) into the concrete. In other words, Smith works not out of gratuity, but out of inevitability.

He does not parody the inevitable by using a "systemic" method of repetition. Though he thinks of and describes his sculpture in terms of modules, he is not infatuated with conceptual anti-process. The basic unit of *The Marriage*, for example, was a 2 by 4 by 8 foot box, but when the four components were assembled, he felt that the resulting aperture was too narrow. So he removed the lintel and replaced it with one 10 feet long, thus sacrificing methodic consistency to the demands of sensibility or intuition. Repetitive structure in his work is usually not striking, though it is possible to figure out in, say, *Spitball* its combination of tetrahedrons, octahedrons, equilateral triangles, etc. In some works, such as *The Keys to. Given!* (like *Grace Hoper*, a *Finnegans Wake* title), which is three solid L's joined three-dimensionally at their tops, and thus the same when resting on any of its three bases, the principle of repetition is limited and not unfamiliar because not infinitely extensible. One more L, at most, could be added. And even then, the feet of the L's would probably have to be redirected. This is another aspect of working out of, or arriving at, the inevitable—when nothing can be added and nothing taken away.

Positing the inevitable is an attribute of classicism, and formally, as well, Smith is classical (though without Idealism). First of all, his sculpture can be rightly seen only by walking around it. It is volumetric, not planar. (This, and not the exigencies of plywood or steel-plate construction, is why the edges are often bevelled; the contiguity of individual planes is thus emphasized.) Planar sculpture of our century is usually essentially pictorial, relief-like even if free-standing, but none of Smith's work can be seen suffi-

ciently when seen frontally. There is no front, no back to it (except perhaps in *The Marriage*). *Amaryllis*, for example, in both the large and small versions, offers a superb demonstration of space-filling energy, quite in keeping with its erect sexuality; its abstract *contrapposto* leads us around and around to gather the fullness of its two fixed but shifting masses. Its "deep" space, unlike pictorial or quasi-pictorial space, is continuous with our own, despite its internalization of the pedestal. For such continuity or "actuality," large size is essential to Smith's intention. It is obvious in works big enough and open enough to pass under or through, works like *Cigarette*, *Spitball*, or the 10 2/3 foot cubic *We Lost*, which is otherwise remote in its mute, hermetic symmetry. But even in smaller and more compact pieces, like *Free Ride* or *Playground*, there is no slackening of sculptural energy; their space is organized to interlock firmly with our own.

Wall is unique in its formal paradox. When you look directly at either of its long sides, it looks like pictorial sculpture carried to the extreme, because all you see is a single plane. But you have only to walk one-fourth of the way around it, to one of its two narrow sides, for the piece to reassert itself in all its solidity. And its 2-foot width seems exactly the right proportion to establish *Wall's* allusion to two-dimensionality but maintain safely its volume; it is more than just a free-standing plane.

Moreover, though *Free Ride*, *Cigarette* and even the more massive *Spitball* may be looked at as drawing-in-space, their angular arabesques describing linear forces, this means simply that Smith is assured enough about his ability to control volume to allow himself the freedom of incising an indeterminate void with a precise gesture. The authority is breath-taking; I know of no other modern sculptor who can combine volume, monumentality and geometry like Tony Smith.

An unclassical discontinuity in some of his sculptures—notably the large versions of *Amaryllis* or *Snake*—is perhaps in their abrupt dissimilarity from different angles. Sometimes the whole is not clear from any one side. But this discreteness reinforces rather than negates Smith's classical affiliations by reminding us that standing in one place is not enough. Emphasizing our physical relationship to the work avoids both the monolithic and "domestic" varieties of sculpture, neither of which is truly joined with the viewer's own body-space.

(By calling Tony Smith classical, I do not mean to suggest that he is some latter-day Pythagorean playing with ideal form and appealing to rationalism; the eruptive emotional content of his work makes him almost a card-carrying Romantic.)

Such insistence on continuity and totality of space and form has been rare in large-scale modern sculpture until recently. It is being revived by the primary structurists, but I have been at pains to stress Smith's classicism and expressiveness because I feel that he is not to be wholly situated within their ranks. There are, to be sure, affinities: he shares with the younger artists a move away from previous geometric sculpture, up to and including David Smith; he sometimes orders his sculptures from the factory (though he always avoids the machine-made finish); he is equally uninterested in the mystique of technology. But Smith is not only more "impure" formally and emotionally than the primary structurists, and more pro-classical, he is also, when he chooses, openly relational—though his work never generates its tensions from a complex interplay of details, and its relations are usually simple and explicit.

He does not always choose the relational. *Die*, his famous black, 6 foot steel cube, looks close to the "new esthetic." André, Judd, Morris and others have all made works as simple in form. But theirs seem to be, among other things,

reducing the definition of sculpture to simply "that which man makes with the intention of filling real space." Smith's cube is far from such an esthetic of intention or concept, and is as interesting to look at as to think about. It has an ambiguous scale, a referential color and a loaded title (which Smith explains as both the imperative form of the verb and the noun meaning matrix or mold). Visually, the work fully equals the intensity of its title. *Die*, with a minimum of form, indelibly gives form to—shapes—its environment. What is around it, outdoors as well as in, begins to "lead up" to it, as to a climax. *Die* is not the elimination or antithesis of expression, but the culmination of expression—like a scream so high it can no longer be heard.

Donald Judd, in reviewing the Wadsworth Atheneum's "Black, White, and Gray" show, wrote that the new sculpture, in its opposition to "hierarchical values," suggests "the equal existence of things." Perhaps *Die* shares this attitude in its implication that, as in the catatonic state, all communication is equally urgent and equally futile. But the level is psychological, not esthetic or metaphysical. *Die* has such a presence, is so Expressionist in its aggression—in the way it acts on its surroundings, including people—that it seems far from the kind of art that declines to speak. It demands and provokes affective response, like the art called for by Kafka when he dreamed of works that would serve as "an ax for the frozen sea within us.' *Die* is different from Smith's other sculptures only in the degree of apparency of its action; none of them are ever self-enclosed, tautological, object-like.

Too, *Die* lacks the irony of appropriating for its effect a "bland, neutral-looking form" (as Barbara Rose described primary structures or "ABC art").

Like the primary structurists, Smith does not commit what is known in literary criticism as the "fallacy of imitative form," but the simpler and more wholistic his form, the stronger is the emotional tension. An absolute correspondence between form and content is implied.

Perhaps the most exact context for Tony Smith is not in sculpture at all, but in painting. (Except in its general architectonic quality, his sculpture does not look like sublimated architecture—or vice versa; he makes professional distinctions.) The common elements in the styles of Pollock, Newman, Still, Rothko, which need no summary here, seem to me more relevant to Smith's style than anything else in modern sculpture. With Newman especially, a parallel might be drawn: in their spareness of means, their fullness of emotional purpose, their fleeting similarity but fundamental dissimilarity to Neo-Plastic art, their ambivalent paternity of the younger generation, Tony Smith and Barnett Newman seem remarkably alike. To Smith's sheer volume, as to Newman's sheer color, an imagination of radical scale and eloquent simplicity is joined.

We will be sorting out for years the complex esthetic implications of such achievement, but what is immediately clear about Tony Smith's appearance is the addition of a major artist to the ranks of modern sculpture.