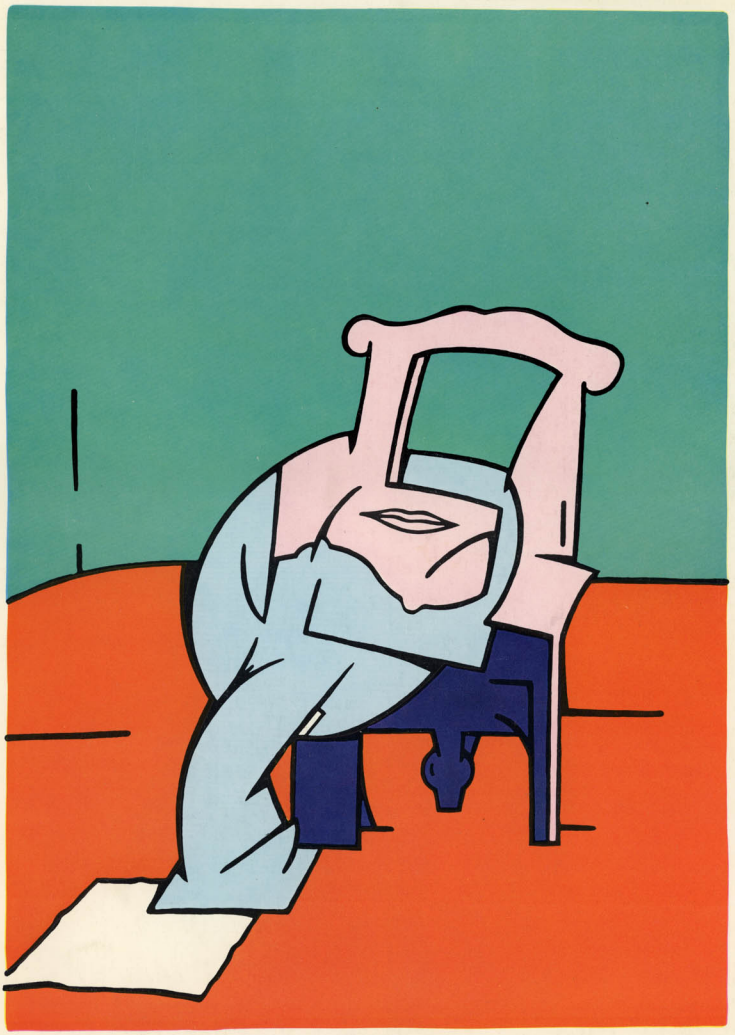
# ART INTERNATIONAL



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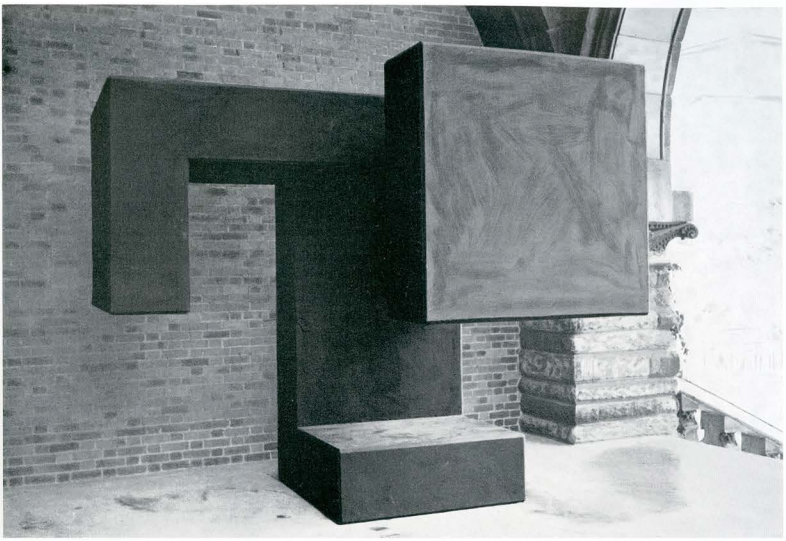


*The Keys To. Given!* 1965–1966. 8′ × 8′ × 8′.

# TONY SMITH: TOWARD SPECULATION IN PURE FORM

GENE BARO

The true artist is always in trouble. First, he will have struggled to make personal sense of his impulses to paint or sculpt, enough sense to impel him forward. Nevertheless, he will question the authenticity of what he does. He will look at art for a sign of himself, but will perhaps only uncover his disquieting admiration for what runs counter to his bent or, worse, for what conforms to it too closely to be useful. He will learn the techniques, conventions, traditions, and standards by which art is defined and discriminated in his own time; but these will only show him his need to take a stand in relation to them.

Here, a great trouble begins, for in order to find his own posture—not simply an acceptable one as the world judges—he will have to discover what he is about as artist and man. His real feelings and thoughts will have to become available to him, and he will have to *be* whoever he is, and not an attractive simulacrum of an artist.

If he unlocks self-knowledge, it will govern his art. His worldly ambitions will become indistinguishable from his private artistic achievements, or will take second place. He will work to test, create, and understand his vision of things, possibly without notable self-consciousness or conspicuous dedication. I am assuming that the vision has arrived, but that, too, may be a long time in coming. At all events, his life will be tuned to the internal demands of his art, as these may manifest themselves, and will to an uncommon degree be shaped by them. He won't be happy necessarily—it will seem an irrelevance—and neither will those close to him be likely to be happy; but he will not be miserable either with self-betrayal, pomposity, and avarice, and, if they are intelligent, those close

1. The title is from Joyce's *Ulysses*. The article is based on the two simultaneous exhibitions of Tony Smith's work held by Samuel Wagstaff at the Hartford Atheneum and by Samuel Green at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. All unsourced quotations are from the artist and were printed either in the catalogue to these exhibitions, or in an expanded version of those statements printed in *Artforum*, December 1966, or are unpublished material collected in conversation with the author.
2. Alan Holden and Phylis Singer, *Crystals and Crystal Growing*, Doubleday, New York, 1960, p. 22.
3. Bertrand Russell, "Philosophy in the Twentieth Century", in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1961, p. 273.
4. Stephen Barr, *Experiments in Topology*, Crowell, New York, 1964, p. 2.
5. Frank Lloyd Wright in Gutheim, Frederick, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright on Architecture*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, n. d., p. 129.
6. There are areas in which Smith's ideas, particularly as regards tetrahedral construction and continuity, seem to have affinities with those of Buckminster Fuller. In fact, the two have little in common, and Fuller's incontestable influence on art has been in an intellectual rather than an esthetic sphere.

to him, while they may feel hard-used, will not feel squandered.

Probably the true artist will be observed to behave oddly, for he lives in the world, after all, and must take account of its pressures if he hopes to survive, if not exactly to triumph. The world reads motives crudely or sentimentally; the truth is somewhere between. Making important art is rather a hit or miss affair; like love, art can be counted on when you least expect it, so that you have always to be ready for the crisis. The true artist has to think a lot if he's to follow his thought and be alert to catch its nuance; he is contemplative. This makes him different from the man whose thinking is ordinarily clear.

These remarks have a practical bearing. I have in mind the case of Tony Smith who was "discovered" last year, aged fifty-four, a profound and mature artist, by the section of the art world that appreciates the unusual, no matter what form it takes. Subsequently, the general public was invited to be astonished. That two major exhibitions of plywood mock-ups of Smith's monumental sculptures could be held simultaneously (Wadsworth Athenæum, Hartford; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia) without, so to speak, anyone knowing that this work of Smith's existed, struck some people as a miracle, others as a confidence trick. Smith's underground reputation was much discussed, but the fact is that his reputation, which dates from the mid-1940's, was not underground at all where it counted, among the artists who were his peers.

In those days, Smith was operating principally as an architectural designer and teacher—public roles; but also he was painting and designing sculpture experimentally, that is to say, privately. His was anything but an isolated sensibility, and certainly not a fragmented one. His multiple activities both derived from and sustained a preoccupation with the interaction of form and space, with the plastic ambiguities of mass and void. I am suggesting these as continuing themes, but Smith's thought, applicable to the visual arts, was not and is not limited by them. In the 1940's, along with such friends as Pollock, Rothko, and Newman, Smith was rephrasing the values and practices of American art. By force of personality and intellect, he was an influential contributor to the dialogue that was giving the new painting and sculpture independence from Europe and an aesthetic rationale suitable to the American experience.

Smith was of the avant-garde in those days; he still is of the avant-garde. It has perhaps been a matter of finding himself more completely. The late Paul Feeley once remarked to me that Smith had begun in earnest to discover the austerity of his own nature. The reference was to the sculpture, *Black Box* (1962) and to the drawing for *Free Ride* (1962) that we had recently seen. Feeley's point was that Smith was not essentially involved with what might be called slice-of-life art, with art that asserts multiplicity and activity and personality. His connection with the Abstract Expressionist artists and their aesthetic was to some degree fortuitous and possibly even a denial of what Smith was really about. Once again, Newman seemed the exception.

I objected that this was to emphasize one set of factors and to ignore another. Abstract Expressionism—let's call it vanguard art of the 1940's—proposed, for instance, a liberated scale and an environmental frame of reference that are only now being exploited, free of any rhetorical or gestural conceits. It might be thought that Smith's sympathies related then to these developments and not to exuberant handling. Anyway, the painters who interested Smith in the 1940's were concerned with pictorial structure more than they were with expression: Pollock yes, Gorky no.

Today, Smith may seem only one of a number of arriving sculptors who design in modules for industrial materials—distinguished, of course, but part of the "cool" scene. In fact, it's the scene that has caught up with Smith, providing at last an atmosphere that has allowed him to be brought to general notice. I am not claiming that twenty years ago he had a warehouse of sculpture waiting to be exposed. What I am saying is that his attitudes and interests that have produced his work of 1960's were in lucid formation at least a couple of decades ago. They were available in his teaching and in his designs, and hindsight can find them in his paintings.

One remarkable aspect of Smith's work is its intellectual and formal consistency; his architecture, painting, and sculpture are closely tied, virtually from the beginning; at every stage, they directly reflect his experience, not in a random way, but thematically. The personal stance, too, is consistent, even unvarying. Smith's "austerity" was as visible in his work of the 1930's as it is now.

Certain elements in Smith's personal history are specially clarifying. He comes of a family of industrialists; tools, machines, factories, processes of manufacture were part of his life from childhood; the world he knew first was projected in terms both of discipline and inventiveness. His education was erratic, however, owing to his poor health. In his late teens and early twenties, he worked as a draftsman and toolmaker. He attended the Art Students League, New York, and the New Bauhaus, Chicago, with the intention of going on to the study of architecture. The New Bauhaus in particular disappointed him. He found its atmosphere stultifying; the school seemed to represent an empty formalism and to deny experience. This was in 1937–1938. In the latter year, Smith went to work for Frank Lloyd Wright; he had had no academic architectural training. He worked on the Ardmore Experiment, designed by Wright, and was clerk of the works on a number of Wright's building projects. In 1940, Smith began to design buildings and projects of his own. Six years later, he began to teach, first at the School of Education, New York University, thereafter at Cooper Union, at Pratt, and at Bennington College. Presently, he is a member of the art faculty at Hunter College.

What is important here is that Smith's sense of order develops from practical experience and is not an abstraction imposed by educational routines. We might say that he is searching for an order that makes experience meaningful, that connects the individual incident to general knowledge. The systems of art provide a perspective on experience itself. Order is only relationship; relationship transforms.

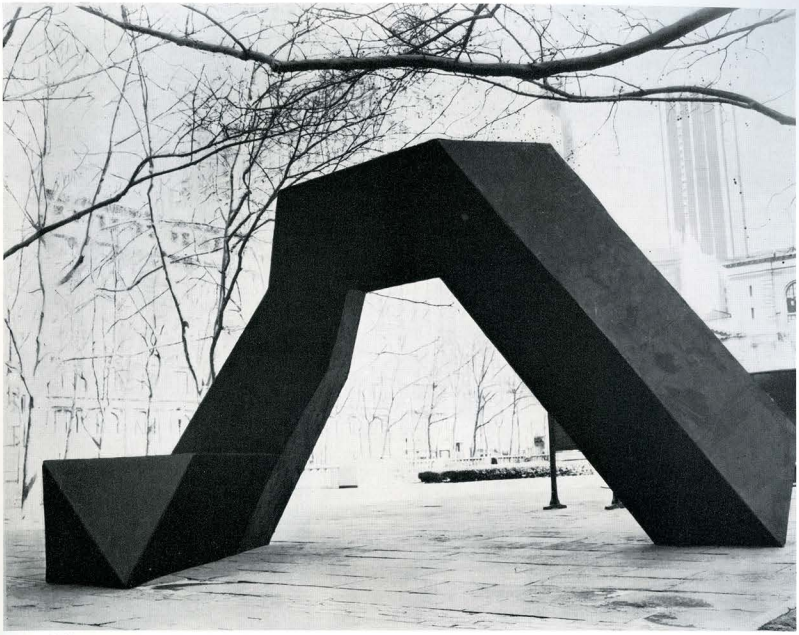
Smith's attitude as teacher conforms to his artistic posture. In an interview published in the catalogue of the Finch College Museum of Art exhibition, "Schemata 7", where he has shown a new piece, Smith says:

*I teach painting and I try to relate my own experience to whatever problems we are dealing with and see in what way the student can verbalize it or give some kind of structure to it, which would be related to other ideas and to knowledge generally. I can't stand exercises. I would rather have a student involved in some emotional way and do something which I would consider, well, perhaps, spontaneous or not fully realized, in order to see some of the unconscious potentials as well as something that has been developed. . . . I am . . . interested in the student's approach and attitude—am much more interested if I feel that the student is learning through the work and relating his experience to his developing knowledge as a general thing. . . . It (the work) is simply an instrument—since every discipline has certain limitations—to make it possible to think about it with some clarity and at the same time relate it to other experience.*

Smith's work shows the disposition to derive, contain, or express the unique case by way of a general system, without making its subordination obvious. Architecture does this. There's no doubt that Smith's thought takes its characteristic shape, its dialectical bearing, from this discipline. I don't mean that the sculpture looks like architecture; it doesn't (think of living in any of it). I don't mean that Smith's work blurs the technical distinction between architecture and sculpture; nobody is going to be seriously diverted from the work itself by this issue. In any event, Smith's painting partakes of this same character. Smith's total oeuvre evolves from this mode of thought, distinguished by a humanistic rather than by a scientific bias.

In short, Smith is not concerned, as many sculptors working with modularity are, to express the principles of a general system. He is not concerned with the alternative compositional placement of standard units, making several sculptures out of the same parts, or with the illusionism consequent upon the exploitation, in extension, of a series of units proportionately sized and placed. Smith's sculpture does not compel, or even invite, an analysis of its underlying order. The pieces are presences to be experienced, and they indulge in reminiscence; they may remind us of this and that, but without insisting. The truth is that while Smith's work conforms to a system it takes its inspiration from outside it more than from within. It's the world that inspires Smith and not the slide rule.

Smith's sculpture is involved with physicality; it is sensuous. Its modular structure does not prevent it from having complex affective qualities uncharacteristic of rectangular prisms and tetrahedra. The continuous space grid doesn't necessarily produce this sort of sculpture any more than the regular measure of the alexandrine produces great poetry. It's not the system itself, but what Smith brings to it that counts.



*Cigarette*, 1966.

What the system itself produces is a vision of the work in isolation. Smith writes in the catalogue of the Hartford and Philadelphia shows, in reference to the continuous space grid, ". . . voids are made up of the same components as the masses. In this light, they [the sculptures] may be seen as interruptions in an otherwise unbroken flow of space. If you think of space as solid, they are voids in that space". The implication is clear, ". . . I don't think of them as objects among other objects; I think of them as being isolated in their own environments". Essentially, the pieces *are* environments, the dominating elements in a full psycho-physical experience of place.

This, anyway, is Smith's intention. It reveals not only his understanding of the space grid as an intellectual tool but his intimate experience of the world. Anything can set him off: a wood box for filing 3 × 5 index cards led to *The Black Box* (1962); *Playground* (1962) took its profile from a painting of the previous year, but the shape reminded Smith "of the plans of ancient buildings made with mud brick walls"; *Night*, which had been suggested by an earlier piece, *Free Ride* (1962), itself the result of a conversation on gyroscopes and some tinkering with Alka-Selzer boxes, was confirmed as valid for him when, ". . . during the summer of 1962, I sat alone for a long time in a quiet place, and I saw night come up just like that". Things, events, sensations, art itself—all feed Smith's art, the result of a long meditation; but that meditation, with its containment and inwardness, is itself a psychological analogue of the work. The presence in the landscape that is a continuous flow of space is like the sculptor's thought in the stream of time.

When Smith improvises, he is likely to take away. The final version of *Cigarette* (1961) was arrived at by "stripping away everything but the spine". Accidents or judgments made in the act of working sometimes yield a similar limiting or simplifying result: of *Spitball* (1961), "in my haste [I] left off a whole layer of units"; of *Amaryllis* (1965), "I thought it looked a little bit like Brancusi, and was so stunned by this that I stopped". More often though, the crucial adjustment requires a deliberate change in proportions; this is true, for instance, of *Marriage* (1962), of *Night* (1962), and of *Generation* (1965). The modular system is used flexibly, accommodating all manner of shifts and dodges when these serve plastic and aesthetic ends. At the same time, the system gives flexibility by freeing the imagination. The sculptor need consider essentials only.

Smith's sculpture is, of course, not minimal; it is not often simple, except in appearance. In short, the effect of simplicity is what Smith is after, as an adjunct, perhaps, to monumentality, but also for psychological reasons, for reasons of his own affinities. In the Finch College Museum of Art catalogue, he remarks:

*I think my pieces look best with very little light. In my studio I like to show them at dusk without any lights on and I have canvas stretchers over the windows so that there is a very subdued light. In my studio they remind me of Stonehenge. I like dawn or dusk light. Since there is nothing else in the room, I think that if light is subdued a little, it has more of the archaic or prehistoric look that I prefer. Actually, my work is best presented when it is outdoors surrounded by trees and shrubs where each piece can be seen separately by itself.*

The search for a quality is in ambiguous relationship with the formal problems presented in the work, but Smith's involvement with effect, romantic as it may seem, enlivens his sense of form within modularity. Other modular work, painting and sculpture, perfectly rational and lacking the aim of physical and psychological impact, tends to look like slabs of cheese. Smith's work achieves forceful presence without dramatizing itself formally. Smith likes them out of doors and alone because they seem "inert or dormant in nature". They are implicit with energy, but the quality of their energy is likely to alter with their setting; ". . . they may appear aggressive, or in hostile territory, when seen among other artifacts". Smith goes on in the Hartford-Philadelphia catalogue: "They are

black and probably malignant. The social organism can assimilate them only in areas which it has abandoned, its waste areas, against its unfinished backs and sides, places oriented away from the focus of its well-being, unrecognized danger spots, excavations and unguarded roofs." This fine bit of prose is to assert the independence of the forms chiefly, but also to suggest how the pieces may strike us as cultural entities.

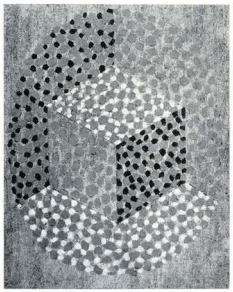
Smith's interest in modularity comes out of his experience with architecture, with its theoretical and practical development in our time that has made it probably the most flexible of the arts. His own buildings involve a flow of surface, an ambiguity of mass, and a paced exposition of form that he has translated through sculpture into pure plasticity. Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., who organized the Smith exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, sees Smith's shift of attention to sculpture as "despair at the impermanence of the houses he had built and the changes wreaked on them". Certainly, Smith has resisted more than most artists the compromises the world demands—hence, the delay in his public recognition. As Wagstaff says, sculpture ". . . might provide a more permanent stake in the ground and something for him to refer to as constant". Yet Smith is essentially an artist—a man of embracing view; sculpture would inevitably have been one of his activities, for it offers him the "qualities" that architecture does not, the sheer presence of the work, its broad allusiveness, and its utter independence. The sculpture offers Smith the opportunity toward speculation in pure form—a pursuit that exquisitely combines intellect and sensibility. Freedom from function is freedom indeed.

A parallel course to his architecture and sculpture has been run by Smith's painting. His approach in this medium has been aesthetically consistent and related to the kinds of problems that have occupied him elsewhere. The painting, too, proposes affectiveness through a formal limitation of means. Colors are few; many works are in two colors only or in black and white. Paint is handled with a minimum of fuss, but without any attempt to homogenize the surface. Shapes are regular and in easy proportions: three to two, six to five, seven to five, five to four are frequent. Paintings tend to be on the small side; there are a great many $10'' \times 8''$ panels, many paintings $36'' \times 24''$ or thereabouts; but Smith has also from time to time painted very large. The point is that the scale of all the paintings is generous; whatever the actual size, the effect is of a large statement.

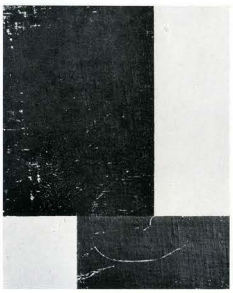
The relationship of shape to mass, of mass to void, of both to surface; the establishment of the picture plane through color and shape, the defining of it by a tension of proportions and edges—these are some of Smith's apparent preoccupations. Some of the early work has sculptural austerity (see, for instance, *Untitled B* 1933 and *Untitled* 1934, both $10'' \times 8''$). Modularity is implied in *Untitled A* (1933) $9'' \times 7''$; doesn't the box exist in a space grid?

There are other evidences of modularity in the 1950's (see *Untitled A* 1954—$28'' \times 20''$) when Smith paints an organization of units that forms the basis for subsequent pictures, each of which deals with a part of the original whole.

Themes were sometimes carried over for years. The paintings concerned with soft shapes are a case in point (see *Untitled B* 1954—$39\frac{1}{2}'' \times 31\frac{1}{2}''$ and *Untitled* 1958—$36'' \times 24''$). Smith has regarded the paintings as experimental, and sometimes they have seemed so, as, for example, the spray paintings of 1955 (see *Untitled B* $30'' \times 24''$ and *Untitled C* $30'' \times 24''$); but the incidence of success is gratifying. Perhaps Smith can be "discovered" in this category too.



*Untitled (A)*, 1933. Oil on canvasboard.

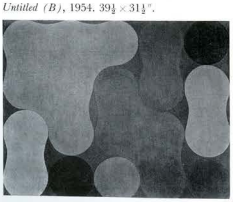


*Untitled (B)*, 1933. Oil on canvasboard.

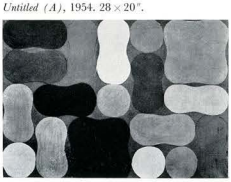
More recently, the paintings have related to the sculpture, first, it seems to me, in the quality of the pictorial experience (see *Untitled A* 1955—$31'' \times 24''$ and *Untitled A* 1957—$60'' \times 50\frac{1}{2}''$), then, more directly (see *Untitled A*, *Untitled B*, and *Untitled C*, all of 1962, respectively $36'' \times 24''$, $30'' \times 24''$, and $31'' \times 24''$).

The latest painting (at this writing), *Untitled* 1966—$30'' \times 24''$, comprehends both freedom and substantiality, is pure form in its own way. It's not the end of the line in any department.

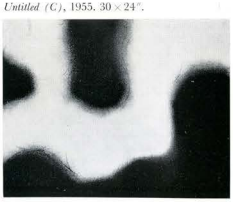
*Untitled (B)*, 1954. $39\frac{1}{2} \times 31\frac{1}{2}''$.

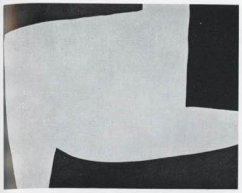


*Untitled (A)*, 1954. $28 \times 20''$.



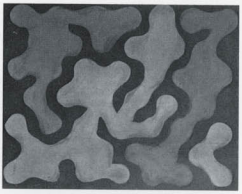
*Untitled (C)*, 1955. $30 \times 24''$.



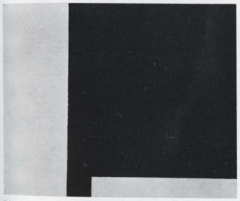


*Untitled (A)*, 1957. 60 × 50½".

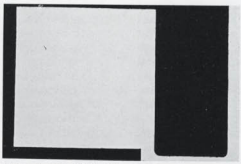
*Untitled*, 1958. 36 × 24".



*Untitled*, 1966. 30 × 24".



*Untitled (B)*, 1962. 30 × 24".



*Untitled (A)*, 1962. 36 × 24".

*Untitled (C)*, 1962. 31 × 24".