

Art in America



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Chinese
Contemporaries

Tony Smith
Retrospective

New Orleans
Triennial

French Art
in New York

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Building Form

Architect, painter, sculptor, teacher—Tony Smith tackled a range of theoretical and material problems later overshadowed by the fame of his sculpture. Nearly two decades after his death, a full-dress retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art confronted the breadth and coherence of his legacy.

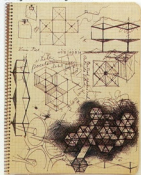
BY RICHARD KALINA

Getting a firm handle on Tony Smith is no easy task, although the Museum of Modern Art certainly tried. This year's big retrospective (comparable in scope to the Rodchenko exhibition running downstairs at the same time) included drawings, paintings and architectural work—an extensive selection of drawings, plans, models and photographs—plus, of course, the sculptures for which Smith is best known. Those sculptures received the bulk of the exhibition's attention. A large number of them were displayed upstairs; ranging in size from funky, take-up, palm-sized cardboard models in vitrines to the two hulking, parallel 8-foot slabs of *The Elevens are Up*. Outside in the sculpture garden, black geometric presences were everywhere (surprisingly, it was the first time that the museum had given over that highly desirable space to the work of one artist). You could walk under and around the 17-foot-high painted aluminum *Moondog* and, by changing your position a bit, watch it shift from stable, architectural symmetry to tilting, anthropomorphic



Louisenberg #3, 1968-69, oil on canvas, 29 1/2 by 31 1/2 inches. Collection Donald Windham, New York.

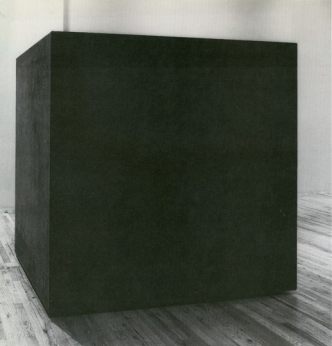
Sketchbook page showing drawings for an unbuilt church project, ca. 1951, ink on paper, 10 1/2 by 7 1/2 inches. Tony Smith Estate.



Tony Smith: Gracehope, 1962, painted steel, 22 1/2 by 16 by 24 feet. Detroit Institute of Arts. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York. All works © Tony Smith Estate; Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

precariousness; you could sit on a bench and contemplate the Brancusi-like *Untitled (Atlanta)*, an elegant 4-foot vertical whose faceted twists seem like an updated version of the classical contrapposto pose; or spend time with any of the other 11 steel and bronze works arrayed over Philip Johnson's gray-marbled outdoor room.

And the exhibition was not limited to the museum proper. In another first, the Modern collaborated with the Public Art Fund to present five of Smith's sculptures—three loans and two permanently installed pieces—sited in various midtown locations, all more or less within walking distance of each other. (As if to underscore the fraught nature of public work, MOMA's fully abstract 1961 *Cigarette*, placed for the duration of the exhibition in Doris C. Freedman Plaza at the southern end of Central Park, was labeled with a suitably dire anti-smoking warning.)



Die, 1962, painted steel, 6 by 6 by 6 feet.
Private collection, New York.
Photo Geoffrey Clements.

Smith was never happy with the Minimalist connection: his heart was with the Abstract-Expressionist generation. Yet if there was ever an iconic Minimalist sculpture, it was *Die*.

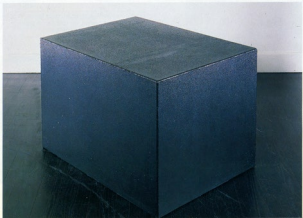
younger group's cooler esthetic. And yet if there was ever an iconic Minimalist sculpture, one that you could point to and say, "that's it," it was Smith's 1962 *Die*. A black 6-foot steel cube, raised slightly off the ground so that all the edges are visible, it seems to be a study in self-evidence, a factory-ordered object stripped of sentiment and any traces of the personal. And in some ways it is. It's logical, symmetrical, noncompositional and obdurately objectlike, a graph-paper sort of idea turned into steel. We can, if we wish, process it perceptually and intellectually in very much the same way that we would a similar Judd, Morris or LeWitt.

But *Die* is not quite so straightforward, and, what's more, despite its central place in art-historical accounts of the '60s, it is something of an anomaly in Smith's oeuvre—he never did another full-sized cube, and rarely made anything so formally unarticulated.¹ *Die* is a work that seems to attract extra-formal reference. In her 1990 *Arts Magazine* essay "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," Anna Chave takes pains to point out the referential qualities of ostensibly neutral Minimalist works, paying particular attention to the significance of titles, most notably those of some of Frank Stella's black paintings, with their Nazi-era swagger, and Smith's *Die*. With Smith, though, the multileveled title was not conceived, as was "*Die Fahne hoch!*" or *Arbeit Macht Frei*, as a sort of downbeat, badboy fillip—its complexity is consciously part of the work. As a title it contains biographical elements: a die is a manu-

Artist's artist and well-kept secret that he was, he was scarcely foolish enough to turn away the attention when, in his 50s, it finally came. But he was never particularly happy with the Minimalist connection: his heart was with the earlier generation's improvisation and mythopoeticizing, and not the

There was, to be sure, a great deal of Tony Smith to be seen, but what were we to make of it? Smith has never been presented in such a thorough manner, and I think that the body of work and the artistic sensibility underlying it proved to be more complex and harder to grasp than most people had realized. Smith (1912-1980) was an architect, a painter and a sculptor, a nuts-and-bolts man with strong spiritual leanings, and an influential teacher from the mid-'40s until the end of his life. All careers of any length are replete with moves and feints, possibilities partially explored, influences assimilated or rejected, and esthetic opportunities seized or abandoned. Smith's was especially so.

A member of the generation of Abstract Expressionism—and a close friend of Pollock, Newman, Rothko and the movement's other leading lights—he nevertheless achieved his greatest success, even appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1967, as a sculptor associated with Minimalism.



Black Box, 1962, painted steel, 22½ by 23 by 25 inches. Collection Ellen Phelan and Joel Shapiro, New York. Photo Thomas Powell.

Untitled, 1962/80, oil and alkylid on canvas, 8 by 13 feet. Museum of Modern Art.

facturing, reproducing device and Smith had hands-on familiarity with his family's toolworks. There is also the reference to chance—a die, one of a pair of dice, is an agent of randomness. And then, of course, there is the allusion to death. As Smith said in reference to this piece, "Six feet has a suggestion of being cooked. Six foot box. Six foot under."²

Generation and replication, chance and death—the big things. These were the sort of issues that appealed to the Abstract Expressionists, and Smith, an impressively self-educated man, was not one to shrink from a grand theory or a higher, humanistic aim. Had Donald Judd made a similar piece, I doubt that he would have ascribed its size, as Smith did, to Leonardo's drawing of Vitruvian Man; nor, in describing it, would he have invoked Herodotus's account of a cubelike chapel carved out of single stone.³ Smith was fully aware of its referential qualities, saying, "This is a complicated piece. It has too many references to be coped with coherently."⁴ As many artists are wont to do, Smith was happy to take the purely intuitive stand on occasion. He said, "Morris and Judd and all these guys really thought about what they were doing. I never thought about what I did. I just did it."⁵ There are elements of truth in that: the forms of Smith's sculptures were often arrived at by tinkering around with groups of folded cardboard tetrahedrons; but Smith was scarcely at a loss for conceptual frameworks—literary, historical, psy-

chological, anthropological or spiritual—in which to place his work. As Fritz Bultman recalled, "Smith was a walking encyclopedia of Jung, shamanism, magic in general, ritual, the unconscious."⁶

The spiritual formed a vital element in Smith's worldview and ambitions, balancing his immersion in the logical and technical. Catholicism and his Jesuit schooling (leavened by an interest in Gardjeff and Krishnamurti), a Whitmanesque largeness of feeling inspired in part by an on-site apprenticeship with Frank Lloyd Wright, in addition to a belief in the inherent connectedness of things and of art's ennobling mission, all functioned as essential markers in his life and work. As Smith said early on in his unpublished tract *The Pattern of Organic Life in America*, "I believe that all art is autobiographical. . . . All experience nature, men, their total experience is the autobiography of God."⁷ And as an untitled drawing—a mix of text and diagram—from the '40s states, "I got the principle from God. I got the form from Christ. I got the function from the Spirit. Form follows function, Function follows principle. Form and function are one. Form, function and principle are one."⁸

Although this attitude seems distinctly out of step with our ironic and unfocused times, Smith's spiritual impulses were scarcely doctrinaire, if the inclusion in the exhibition of a drawing of a nude

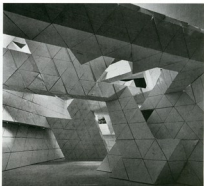
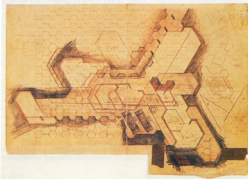
and well-endowed Christ with a set of large, floral-rippled breasts is any indication. But for a person like Smith spirituality can be an aid to searching, something to measure oneself by, a means of projecting one's image onto the wider screen of abiding relations and harmonies. It is not surprising then that Smith, as an architect, was particularly concerned with deeper notions of measurement—with modules and fundamental modular proportion, first using a variant of Wright's organizing hexagon, and later trying to devise his own version of Le Corbusier's system of human-based architectural proportionality. In one of his most interesting architectural works, an unbuilt 1951 project for a Catholic church (with stained-glass windows to have been designed by Jackson Pollock), the module is given a distinct spiritual function. Smith locks together 12 hexagons and raises them upon Le Corbusier-like pylons, with a 13th hexagon which forms the baptistry set on the ground off to the side. This close packing of crystal-like units reflected an early interest in ideas of natural structure. His readings of D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form* and Jay Hambidge's *Dynamic Symmetry*, texts that he was to speak passionately about over his entire career, convinced him that there were universal measuring and ordering principles that transcended scale.

In retrospect the church project seems to point the way to the mature sculptures of linked tetrahe-



Smag, 1973, painted pigwood mock-up, 11 by 78 by 64 feet; installed at St. John's Rotary, New York, October 1982–October 1993, subsequently destroyed. Photo courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo © James Dee.

Below left, plan for the Brutherton House, ca. 1944, pencil and colored pencil on paper, 12 by 19 1/2 inches. Tony Smith Estate; right, model for Bat Cave (with Smith in background), 1969, exhibited at Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan, and in "Experiments in Art and Technology," 1971, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photo Hans Namuth.





rons and octahedrons, but Smith's architectural loyalties were divided. Bridging Wright, Mies and Le Corbusier might have seemed possible to architects at the time, but it took someone of Louis Kahn's stature to bring it off. In an age of "form-givers," Smith's architectural efforts were largely solid and workmanlike, and even though his forays into the International Style—particularly the 1953 Olsen House in Connecticut and the 1960 Betty Parsons Studio on Long Island's North Fork—might have been more polished than his overtly Wrightian work (the clunky but cozy Brotherton House of 1944, for example), essentially they broke no new ground. In fact, it wasn't until just before he was to abandon his architectural practice in frustration in the early 1960s that he seemed able to transform his architectural thinking into fully realized and original sculpture.

Painting and drawing, although an uneven enterprise for Smith, were another story. In the '50s he worked out ideas that made their way into the sculptures—albeit circuitously—and were able to function two-dimensionally on their own. Most successful among the paintings are the

"Louisenberg" series of 1963-64, a group of about two dozen canvases and related oil-on-board studies done in Germany while Smith accompanied his wife, an opera singer, on her professional travels. This series, influenced no doubt by his architectural interests, was structured in a modular manner. The basic format consisted of a rectangle, or less frequently a square, divided into a grid of circles whose edges just touched. These circles were either left as circles, or else groups of two or four were fused to create a curved, symmetrical, peanutlike shape. When two shapes were coupled, the link was only vertical or horizontal, never diagonal, while the grouping of four shapes created a square rather than a linear configuration. (This contrasted with another untitled group of paintings done in roughly the same period where up to eight circles were joined to form more random configurations; it is possible to make out the structure underneath, but the effect is rather like a colored sock stuffed with oranges.) The "Louisenberg" series were painted thinly, one color per circle or "peanut" unit, sometimes in a flat and uninflected manner, and sometimes with a light, frecklelike brushiness. The colors tended to be laid out in closely valued groups of contrasting hues, set against a flat background. In *Louisenberg #8*, for example, three shades of yellowish brown butt up against four different gray blues, all on an orange-red field; *Louisenberg #3* unites three ochers and four blues on a white ground.

Several things are of particular interest in this series. One is Smith's penchant—seen in his painting, sculpture and architecture—for joining simple modular units into formally complex configurations. Another is his ability, as evidenced in his sculptures, to take crisp, geometric, hard-edged forms and imbue them with an almost organic sensuality. And, finally, there is the persistence of this group of works. Their logic, seriality and optical presence look forward to the post-painterly abstraction of the '60s, to the work of Paul Feeley, Frank Stella and particularly to the early dot and breeze paintings of Larry Poons. Smith was able, virtually before anyone else, to take the Abstract Expressionist problem of the overall field and subject it to a systematic rigor.

It should be kept in mind that the "Louisenberg" series and other similar works were painted outside of the orbit of the New York art world; they might never have been done at all if Smith had been under the pervasive influence of the New York School's gestural imperative. Indeed, after Smith returned in 1955 he produced a number of paintings in which he attempted, without much success, to adapt the structure of his European paintings to the thick oil paint and agitated surface so common at the time. He also came up with a group of compositionally similar works in which he used the new medium of canned spray paint, but the paintings that resulted were awkward, burdened with an inelegant line and a deadened, diffuse surface.

Smith also began a quite different group of paintings in the early '60s, at the same time that he was at work on his early sculptures. Painted in black and white or in various combinations of primary colors along with black and/or white, they are medium-scaled, hard-edged and

Smith's compositions are uncentered, crystalline and expansive. They share Minimalism's reliance on the systematic, but seem to take natural structures as their model.

straight-lined. The work bears distinct similarities to the contemporaneous paintings of Ellsworth Kelly, Myron Stout and Leon Polk Smith. In most of them the painted elements hug the edges of the canvas, leaving a blank space in the center and an edge or part of an edge open. While appearing straightforward, they are oddly balanced and spatially ambiguous. In the 40-by-50-inch *Exit* of 1962-63, for example, a thick cadmium-red bar starts on the bottom edge, runs up the left side, continues along the top and descends about three quarters of the way down on the right side. The bottom of the bar on the right side angles downward at about 30 degrees, creating a sense of perspectival depth as well as an engaging interaction between positive and negative space. The figure/ground interplay (is it a red figure on a white ground or vice-versa?) would have been more compelling, however, had both areas been given the same sort of paint handling. As in most of this series, Smith seems to have taped off his painted areas and laid down the color on the primed white canvas, leaving the dry undercoating to function as the white, and allowing the thinned-out paint to seep under the tape at points.

Smith's approach to craft was inconsistent. Some of the work is made with care and attention to detail, and some of it seems unfortunately slapdash. I'm not sure what to make of the two biggest paintings in the exhibition, the roughly 8-by-11-foot *Louisenberg*, a 1968 blow-up of the 1953-54 *Louisenberg #8*, and the larger, horizontal untitled work (from MOMA's collection), a 1980 reworking, in greater scale and somewhat different proportions, of a painting from 1962. Both of these paintings were executed by assistants under Smith's supervision, and they are considerably neater and more polished than the earlier versions. There is, to my mind, a certain poignancy in the latter work, done in the last year of Smith's life. Based on number progressions in the Fibonacci sequence, it consists of a cobalt-blue rectangle on the left and a smaller black one on the right. A narrow band extends from the bottom of the blue rectangle, runs under the black rectangle, then turns the corner and frames it on the right side. A similar band extends from the top of the black and runs along the top and down the left edge of the canvas. The interlocked blue and black areas subtly reciprocate each other, setting up an almost courtly interchange, a slow dance of advance and recession. A quiet, meditative presence surrounds the painting, and it is not surprising that it was chosen, not just to be in the exhibition, but to serve as one of the two frontispieces for the catalogue of

Given Smith's interest in modularity, his religious beliefs and scientific concerns, sculptural changes of scale were of more than mere practical or formal concern.

the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's important exhibition "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985."

The painting works, in part, because of the nicely conceived design. But of equal importance is its deep and glowing paint surface, built up of 10 carefully applied layers of color, a process that consumed, according to Jim Shepperd, the assistant who painted the picture, some 300 tubes of paint.¹⁰ The two large paintings look so good, and stand so apart from the similar ones that Smith did with his own hands, that the entire ensemble looks a little forlorn. Why, one wonders, did Smith wait so long to make paintings this way, and why were there so many paintings with such an unresolved sense of finish? To hazard a guess, I'd say that Smith's involvement with painting was a psychologically complex one—he greatly admired Pollock, Rothko, Newman and Still, but he never considered himself in their league. I also think that Smith wanted to get his ideas down quickly—that the paintings were essentially private works, not made with imminent public exhibition (and criticism) in mind.¹¹ In fact, he didn't show his paintings until 1968, when 11 works of the "Louisenberg" series were included by Eugene C. Goossens in the exhibition "The Art of the Real USA 1948-1968" at the Museum of Modern Art. He was 56 at the time and had had his first solo show just two years earlier. I also think that there was the feeling among the Abstract Expressionists that a preoccupation with refined surface and touch was too European, that you should say what you had to say in as direct and forthright a manner as possible.

In a subtler way the question of finish arises in the sculptures as well. Smith's sculpture appears in various formats: the models in cardboard, wood or, less frequently, plaster; then the large-scale painted plywood mock-ups, to be disassembled when an exhibition was over; and finally the completed works (in a set number of scales) in their final translation into metal. The models' scale was pointed out, however, how different those metal works were from each other. Differences in size and configuration were to be expected, but the variation in surface, material and color proved distracting. The work was for the most part black, or rather, blackish; but a patinated bronze, a painted aluminum and an oiled, darkly rusted steel really do say different things. It's true that the range of materials and colors was dictated by changes in Smith's ideas over two decades and also by the pragmatic concerns that asserted themselves over the years—the unforeseen degree of rusting of Cor-Ten steel, for example, or the appeal of bronze

to collectors. But a museum show that brings together works that were not intended to be seen with each other highlights just these sorts of questions.

Different scales speak differently, too, but here I think Smith was on surer ground. Of course scale variety has a practical side. The larger things are, the more they cost to fabricate; and you don't make a 21-4y-17-by-29-foot steel version of a sculpture like *Light Up!* just to see how it looks. A Smith sculpture can exist in a number of sizes. There are models, mockups, small scales, half-scales and large scales. *Gracekeeper* (1961), for example, is included in the MOMA show as both an approximately 23-by-21 1/4-by-44-inch painted cardboard model and a 34-by-34-by-60-inch bronze. A half-scale wooden mockup was built and subsequently destroyed, and full-scale examples (approximately 23 by 24 by 46 feet) are owned by the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Kentucky Center for the Arts.

Certainly the viewer experiences a work differently looking down at a small object, coming up against a sculpture at roughly human scale, or walking under and around something the size of a two-story house. The sculpture's visceral impact varies, the play of light and shadow changes, and at large scale the gate-like quality of *Gracekeeper* is emphasized (as it is with a number of other of Smith's works, particularly *Cigarette*, *The Snake is Out*, *Marriage* and *We Lost*, all from 1961 or 1962.). But the sense of *Gracekeeper*'s complexity, of its crushing, animal-like presence, is evident at any scale. I think that for Smith changes of scale were more than merely practical or formal. With his interest in modularity, his religious beliefs and scientific concerns—especially his fascination with the morphology of crystals—might not the free movement from one sculptural scale to another be analogous to the connections of micro and macro levels found in both the natural and the spiritual world? Smith may have displayed a matter-of-fact attitude about some aspects of the making of his work, but there is no doubt that he was sensitively attuned to questions of meaning.

It is important to note that Smith's scale was not always variable. Some sculptures—usually the simplest ones—exist in just one size. The over-6-foot *Prer Ride* (1962) is scaled to the proportions of an ordinary residential door (and by implication the human body using it). As for *Die*, it has to be a 6-foot cube, and only a 6-foot one. Responding to Robert Morris's question about why he didn't make it bigger, Smith said, "I was not making a monument." And as for making it smaller, he stated, "I was not making an object."¹² Smith said this of the 22 1/2-by-33-by-25-inch *Black Box* of 1962: "Gene [Goossens] was typing an introduction for a catalogue. When he added a paragraph or made a revision, he read it to me. I was sitting in a very low chair, so that when I looked up I saw on the desk in front of him a wood box for filing 3-by-5 index cards—it had been painted black. . . . I got back to New Jersey at about three or four in the morning but I couldn't sleep. I kept seeing that black box."¹³ Smith called Goossens in the morning and asked him to measure the box. Then he multi-

plied the dimensions by five (he had been using that multiple in class assignments at Hunter College) and had it fabricated. Both *Black Box* and *Die* were envisioned with a specific size in mind and were made straight off. There was no need for a model or a mockup. The measurements were clearly right and nothing was to be gained by operating at a larger or smaller scale.

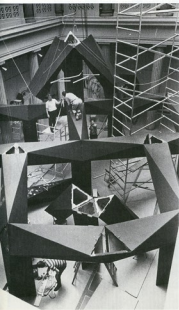
The more complicated Smith's designs grew, however, the more the use of a model became necessary. Smith noted, "We think in two dimensions—horizontally and vertically. Any angle off that is very hard to remember. For that reason I make models—drawing would be impossible."¹⁴ The cognitive difficulty that he alludes to is very much part of the viewer's experience. Smith's pieces are maddeningly elusive, often seeming to radically change their form depending on the viewing angle, a property of which Smith, as evidenced in a 1971 interview with Lucy Lippard, was well aware.¹⁵ Looking at the roughly 7-by-12-by-14-foot *New Piece* (1966), for example, you know that it is a sharply canted rhombhedron—that is, a rectangular solid that has been pushed decisively off plumb—but as you circle the piece your perception of its shape and size continually alters. One moment it appears solid and bulky, the next moment resolutely planar; take a few steps and the jutting and angular easily slides into the contained, symmetrical and retreating. Still harder to grasp are the sculptures made up of sliced and oddly angled groupings of tetrahedrons and octahedrons, like *Amoryllis*, *Spitball* or *Duck*. They are emphatically there, but their complex articulation prevents us from getting a firm hold on their overall shape. Getting lost can be pleasurable, however, and the mutability of Smith's sculptures, their appeal to visual uncertainty, is one of their strongest suits.

This perceptual shifting is among the things that distinguishes much of Smith's sculpture from that of the Minimalists. So does his approach to the grid. While a sculpture like *Free Ride* might bear a resemblance to a piece by LeWitt—its three rectangular solids connected at right angles describe the edge axes of a cube—it does not lead to a further exploration of the orthogonal grid, nor is there in it, as there is with LeWitt, an implicit subset of instructions, both for the piece in question and for future variations. Smith's grids, as seen in the thematically related works *Smog*, *Smoke* and *Smug*, investigate complex, proliferating space lattices, hexagonal voids formed by the joining of prismatic tetrahedral faces. The compositions are uncentered, crystalline and expansive in an almost organic way. Logically inductive, these weeks move outward, going from the generating module to the final structure. They share with Minimalism a reliance on the systematic, but seem to take natural structures as their model rather than being a product of material-based decisions and pure ideation.

Over the years Smith has been associated with Minimal art in a number of critical and curatorial contexts. A particularly noteworthy one was the attack by Michael Fried in his 1967 *Artforum* article "Art and Objecthood." Fried takes Smith to task for his Minimalist objects, but reserves a spe-

cial animosity for Smith's statement describing a nighttime ride in the early '60s with a group of students along the unfinished, unlighted and unmarked New Jersey Turnpike.¹⁴ Given the artist's evocation of the power and mystery of artificial landscapes and his realization that they embodied an experience that art had not previously expressed, Fried's accusations of theatricality (for him the bane of modernism) actually were on the mark. However, that statement was hardly emblematic, as Fried implied, of Minimalism's literalist attitudes. Instead it looked forward to the expanded field of earth and site works, particularly to the work of Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer. In the late '60s, Smith himself proposed a number of interesting large-scale earthworks, including a project for a giant wedge to be cut into a mountain bordering the Golden State Freeway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Unfortunately none of these plans was ever realized.

For the most part, though, questions of siting were not germane for Smith, although romantic conceits, worthy of a Clifford Still, sometimes surfaced in statements on the order of, "They [the sculptures] 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."¹⁵ A very successful site-conceived work, however, was *Light Up!* (1971). Originally made to be placed



Above, Smoke, 1967, painted plywood mock-up (subsequently destroyed), 21 by 21 by 18 feet; in the October 1967-January 1968 "Scale as Content" exhibition, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Left, the mock-up during installation. Photo © The Washington Post. Photos this page courtesy Corcoran Gallery of Art.

between two office buildings in Pittsburgh, and to hold its own in a complicated urban setting, it is painted a bright, egg-yolk yellow. During the MOMA show it was installed on the plaza in front of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building on Park Avenue. Its emphatic, striding shape, its cut, angular forms, and its brash color offered an exciting counterpoint to the dark, gridded elegance of the skyscraper behind it. Especially nice was the way that *Light Up!* seemed to reflect the yellow river of New York City cars flowing past it in a steady stream. Smith only did a handful of colored sculptures (and he rejected, except for the 2 1/2-foot-high *Memphis* of 1962-63, the Cubist option of painting the facets in separate colors). The colored works were made, for the most part, toward the end of his life, a time when increased recognition allowed for the possibility of larger commissions. Smith possessed a

finely tuned color sense, and the pleasure of seeing *Light Up!* was bittersweet. It made me wish that there were more works like it.

Retrospectives are complex affairs. A full-scale presentation, as opposed to a taking-stock midcareer survey, often shows us unfamiliar aspects of an artist's production, and in doing so either reinforces generally held impressions or changes them. With Smith the notion that he was a Minimalist or even a proto-Minimalist can no longer be supported, even though his early identification with that movement put him decisively in the public eye. Our ideas of Smith have been broadened by the Modern's exhibition, but in the process a certain focus has been lost. There's no doubt that if Smith had not turned to sculpture later in life, his

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Tony Smith

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achievements in architecture and painting would not have earned him the place that he holds now. But despite the unevenness of those bodies of work, they cannot be dismissed as peripheral, for the themes that Smith developed in his architecture and his painting make up the sculpture's emotional and formal armature. Ideas of modularity and connectedness, of close parking and branching, of shifting scales and the interlockings of positive and negative space, are integral to all of Smith's production.

Smith created sculptural space by architectural means, forging a new amalgam of the modeled and constructed form. His sculptures are elusive and allusive, yet basically simple, uncluttered and purposeful. Architecture provided him with a structural methodology, a vocabulary of technique and vision. Smith was after a humanist geometry, but one that was tough-minded and practical. In this he was very much a man of his time, a mid-century American artist, balancing know-how and the habits of realistic appraisal conditioned by the Depression with utopianism and the liberating, rootless ethos of bohemia. The model of the passionate generalist, the engaged dreamer appealed deeply. Tony Smith fit that ideal. His construction of an artistic life, with its twists and turns, its complications, excesses and ultimate resolution, speaks both of and from a different time. And yet Smith's art does not sit itself clearly into an historical niche. The Modern's show may not have given us a sure grip on Smith, but the lack of answers, rather than creating barriers to understanding, may be the very thing that keeps Smith, 20 years after his death, from settling too comfortably into the past. □

1. The cube appears only four times in Smith's sculptures: in *Die*, in a small model quite possibly made at a later date; and as one element in a row of seven geometric solids in *Row 1* and *Row 2*, both unrealized small-scale models from 1980.

2. Quoted in Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., *Tony Smith: Two Exhibitions of Sculpture*, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum, and Philadelphia, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1966, n.p.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

Pettibon

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and their taboo desires. The Joan Crawford drawings address what Pettibon views as the grotesquerie of the actress's desire to conform to Hollywood ideals. An outrageous series of drawings depicting Ronald Reagan's vortex-like anus and another series chronicling alleged trysts between Nancy Reagan and unnamed CIA operatives equate private and public deceptions, providing down-and-dirty catharsis of grim late-'80s political dramas.

In the substantial body of writing about Pettibon's work, a number of art critics seem to have come unhinged when confronted with the artist's hundreds of fictive characters. In their efforts to pigeonhole the work into the category of postmodern fragmentation, these critics tend to deny the artist creative control of his own voice. Pettibon's uncertain or equivocal personae, however, echo such modernist antitheses as T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, Samuel Beckett's Malone and Molloy, and the book-obsessed narrators of stories by Jorge Luis Borges. And Pettibon's cullings of literary sources from the past are very much in the tradition of such 20th-century chestnuts as Pound's cantos, Eliot's "The Waste Land," Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave* and Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body*.

Pettibon's work makes evident the lack of nuance and sophistication in much of today's art criticism. With their complex resonances and cadences, his drawings seem most unlikely subject matter, for example, for the tortured prose of Benjamin Buchloh, whose catalogue essay is characterized by a host of writerly sins, including clogged syntax, elliptical logic and coded terminology. Furthermore, Buchloh wrongheadedly identifies the flatly phrased "Truism" of Jerry Holzer as a "major precursor" for Pettibon's work.¹ It seems clear, however, that Pettibon's enterprise owes less to the political, text-driven work of artists such as Holzer, Barbara Kruger or Hans Haacke than it does to the language-oriented work of a more poetic group of artists from Los Angeles, namely Ed Ruscha, Alexis Smith and Allen Ruppersberg.

A passionate generalist, Smith was after a humanist geometry, one that was engaged and tough-minded. In this, he was very much a man of his time.

5. Quoted in Phyllis Tuchman, "Tony Smith: A Modern Master," *New Jersey Monthly*, January 1981, p. 126.

6. Fritz Bultman, quoted in Jackson Rushing, "Ritual and Myth: Native American Culture and Abstract Expressionism," in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986, p. 283.

7. Cited among the "Writings, Interviews, and Letters" compiled by Joan Pachner in Robert Storr, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1988, p. 196.

8. Interview with the author, Nov. 13, 1998.

9. As Eleanor Green remarked in her foreword to a 1974 exhibition catalogue, "There is an enormous variety (a jumble) of work in his studio which should be assembled into a full scale retrospective; meanwhile it is confusing and, on first exposure, does not seem to be coherent as a body. . . . There are no internal clues to dating; sorting through the carousels the artist himself is astonished at 'some of the crazy things' he did and can only approximately place them in time by association with other events in his life." See Eleanor Green, *Tony Smith: Painting and Sculpture*, College Park, University of Maryland Art Gallery, 1974, pp. 10 and 15.

10. Quoted in Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," *Artforum*, October 1966, p. 20.

11. Quoted in Wagstaff, *Tony Smith: Two Exhibitions of Sculpture*, n.p.

12. Quoted in Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., "Talking with Tony Smith," *Artforum*, December 1966, p. 15.

13. See Lucy Lippard, "The New Work: More Points on the Lattice: An Interview with Tony Smith," in *Tony Smith: Recent Sculpture*, New York, M. Knoedler & Co., 1971, p. 19.

14. See Wagstaff, "Talking with Tony Smith," p. 19.

15. Quoted in Wagstaff, *Tony Smith: Two Exhibitions of Sculpture*, n.p.

"Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor" was on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, July 2-Sept. 22, 1998. The exhibition did not travel. A show of Smith's work is scheduled to open at New York's Paula Cooper Gallery on May 1.

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Exploiting the full complexity of the written word, Pettibon's drawings bring a full-fledged literary sensibility to the art world. His installations infect the individual drawings' formal properties, so that their content is diffused to become part of an aggregate map of experience. These installations provide a setting that can encompass such topics as the Reagan, Houdini, baseball lore and Gothic architecture—and introduce a new style of anomie, one of infinite dissociations and polymorphous dissatisfactions.

In an unexpected way, the loose formal structure of Pettibon's work softens its hardest edges; his sprawling displays create an upbeat mood that subsumes even the gristliest drawings. A large wall drawing in his 1995 show at David Zwirner Gallery in New York depicted a cluster of pencils; the text read, "One spends one's life in the happy condition of never being without a subject." With the buoyant confidence of a lifetime reader, Pettibon will forever be stoked on books and ready to draw. □

1. Pettibon sometimes does not add text until years after making the drawing. The dating of such works is particularly difficult to pinpoint.

2. Pettibon's two-hour video *Sir Drone* (1989) features a burst hopefully trying to be "punk." One of his videos from the same period, such as *Children Taxis: As Told to Raymond Pettibon*, *The Whole World is Watching: Weathermen '68* and *Judgement Day Theater: The Book of Moses*, chronicle the antics of similarly misguided '60s radicals, hippies and cultists.

3. "Pettibon, like Holzer, adheres strictly to a nonjoking and nonderivative arrangement of quotations of the language performers and ideological subject positions inhabited in everyday speech, thus making it impossible for the viewer/readers to detect a centralized speaking and judging subject and necessitating a continuous sense of the reader's own responses to the positions performed in the text." Benjamin Buchloh, "Raymond Pettibon: Returns to Disorder and Disfiguration," in *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader*, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998, p. 227.

"Raymond Pettibon" was organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Breininger Society at the University of Chicago. The exhibition appeared at the Breininger Society (Sept. 12-Nov. 8, 1998) and is now at the Drawing Center, New York (Feb. 21-Apr. 4). It will travel to the Philadelphia Museum of Art (May 2-July) and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (Sept. 26, 1999-Jan. 2, 2000). The exhibition is accompanied by a 252-page publication, *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader*, featuring literary selections made by the artist as well as essays by Bernard Wit, Heman Walker, Benjamin Buchloh, Peter Schjeldahl and Ann Trevis.

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