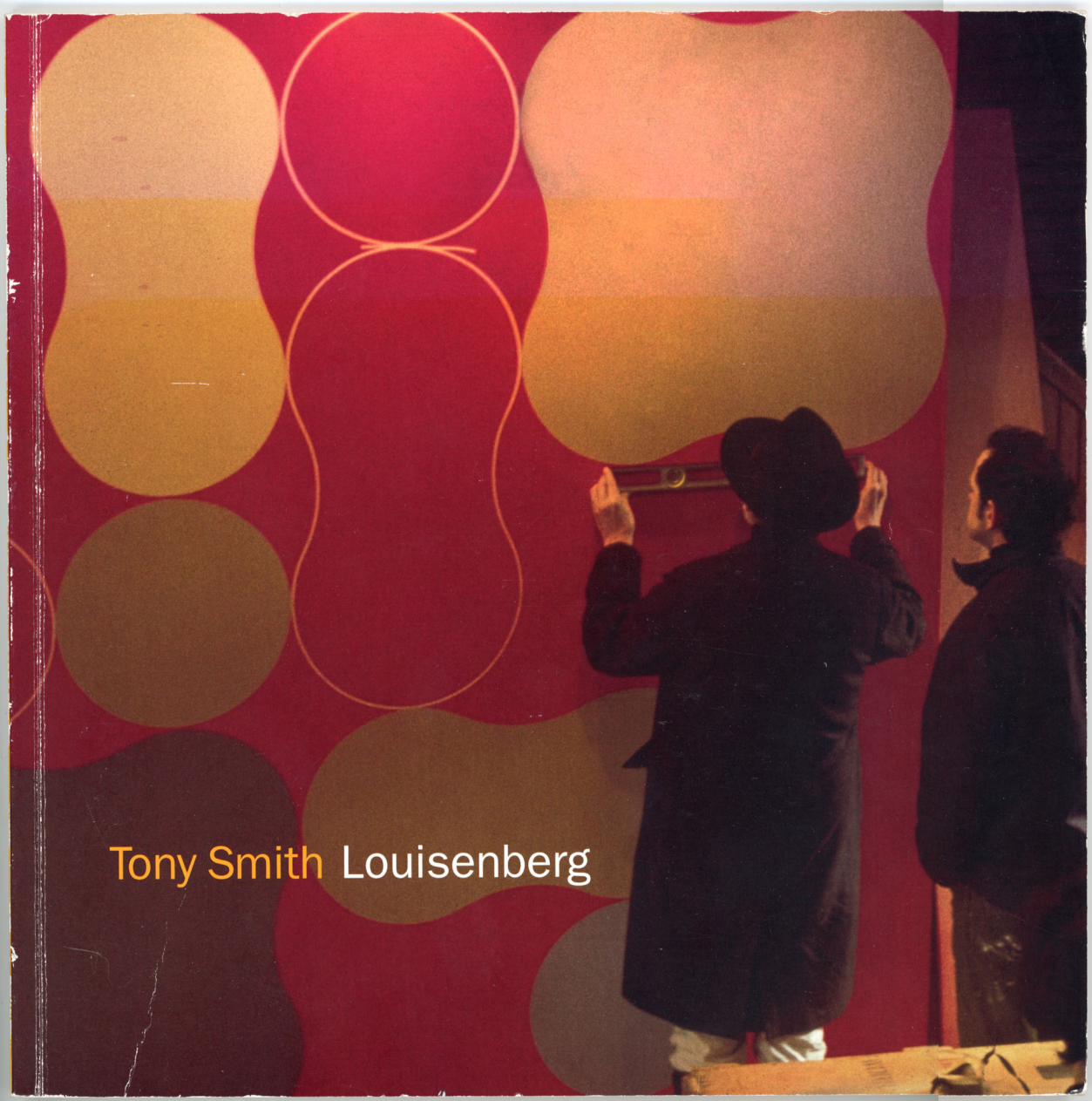
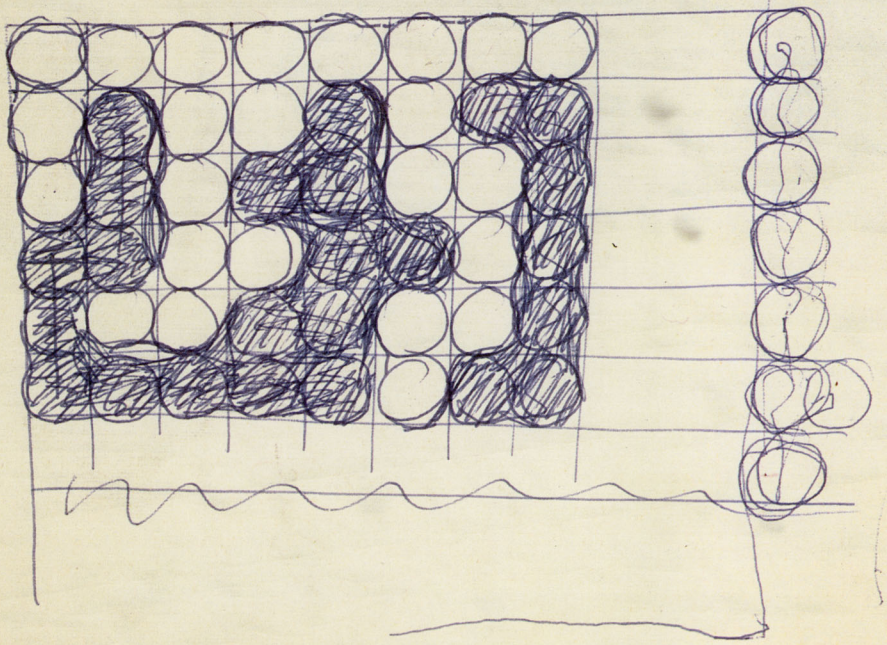

Tony Smith Louisenberg

Tony Smith

the concept

eternity enough

each generation has its own vision
eternity is tantamount to the limits
of vision

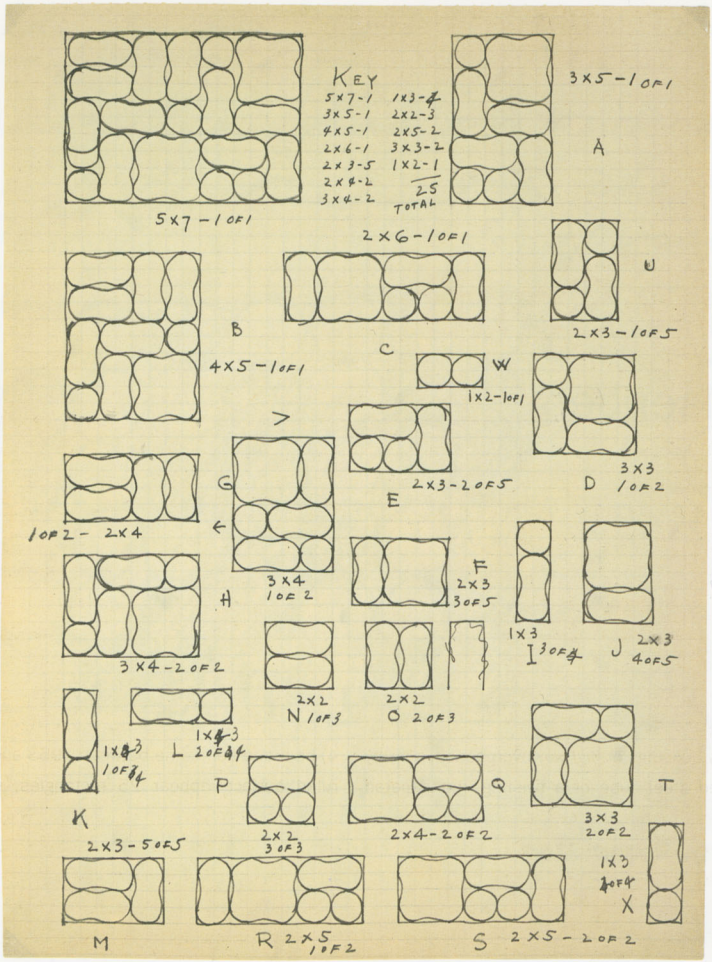


Tony Smith

Louisenberg

Essay by Robert Storr

Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York in association with Matthew Marks Gallery, New York



Untitled (study for Louisenberg paintings), 1953-55, Ink on paper, 11¼ x 8¼ in. (28.6 x 21 cm)

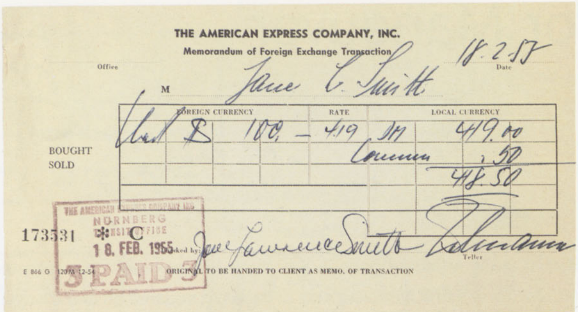
Room for Maneuver

Robert Storr

For many people—including many artists—space is a void waiting to be filled. For Tony Smith this was only half true. Whether empty or occupied by form, space as Smith conceived it was always structured. The matrices that criss-crossed and bound it together could assume many patterns, but in one guise or another, geometric grids divided space in regular increments in all directions and could likewise be endlessly subdivided by smaller increments of the same type or by other congruent increments. This logically simple principle of boundless extension and ceaseless reduction are the two mathematical infinities which give us an intimation of the universe's otherwise all but unimaginable vastness.

Under such circumstances the hollows in space through which we look toward the horizon are made up of the same units as the masses that occlude our vision, be they buildings or highway overpasses, a six by six foot rusted steel cube or a twisting, multifaceted metal arch. The first two examples refer to Smith's activity and enthusiasms as an architect; the second pair roughly describe specific sculptures he made, *Cigarette* (1961) and *Die* (1962). Indeed, one could diagram Smith's entire architectural and sculptural output three-dimensionally on a computer screen by establishing a flat squared off and triangulated ground plane with a tracery fretwork rising from it, and then fill in from all angles the silhouettes of the buildings he built and the sculptures he created. The result, a varichromed but mostly black suite of closely related, often radically reductive but sometimes highly complex polygons, would rise from the ground plane and anchor the tesselations of unoccupied space delineated by the fretwork in such a manner that in the mind's eye one could envision certain of the existing polygons growing into adjacent voids, and others segmenting and separately developing new configurations within the framing confines of the spreading spatial armature.

That this fantasy is in keeping with Smith's thinking is demonstrated by a small graph paper drawing (page 4) he made sometime between 1953 and 1955. On its ruled surface appear 25 rectangles, some vertical, some horizontal. Four are squares. Following the faint grid printed on the sheet these rectangles are internally broken down into various arrangements of circles and rounded-off shapes—the fusion of two or more circles resembling peanuts or architectural quatrefoils—that


THE AMERICAN EXPRESS COMPANY, INC.
Memorandum of Foreign Exchange Transaction
Office
Date 18.2.55
M Jane C. Smith
	FOREIGN CURRENCY	RATE	LOCAL CURRENCY
BOUGHT / SOLD	100.–	4.19	419.00
			.50
			418.50

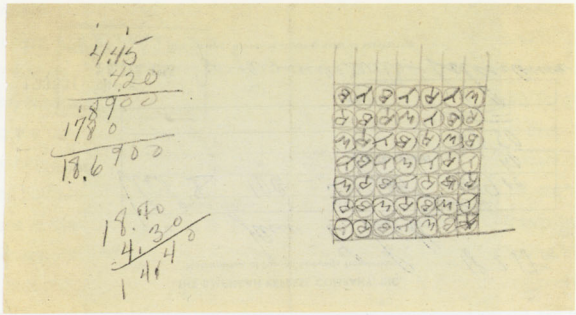
173531
THE AMERICAN EXPRESS COMPANY INC. NÜRNBERG TRANSIT OFFICE 18. FEB. 1955 PAID
Teller
E 866 G
ORIGINAL TO BE HANDED TO CLIENT AS MEMO. OF TRANSACTION

American Express currency exchange receipt

swell against the contours of the printed coordinates. The drawing is plain, decisive and luminous. It is the clear and economic statement of a clear and consistent formal proposition.

The ensemble described on this page maps all the variations for the Louisenberg paintings—they were titled after a geological site near the Wagnerian city of Bayreuth—a series of canvases which preoccupied Smith in the early to mid-1950s (and occasionally thereafter) during which time he left the hothouse atmosphere of New York and his Abstract Expressionist friends Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, and joined his wife, Jane, in Germany where she had made her name as an opera singer.[1] As such, the series represents a hiatus in Smith's development, coming after he had completed most of the architectural commissions that were the focus of the first phase of his career—although intermittently practiced, painting was the thread that connected all his work—but before he embarked on the last phase in which he secured his reputation as the creator of severe but emotionally resonant monoliths and modular constructions.

In two dimensional terms the Louisenberg paintings, the studies related to them and a handful of canvases that anticipated or followed the group operate in two dimensions according to exactly the same systems hypothesized above for three-dimensional space-frames. In effect the grid laid out in pen and ink in the inventory drawing and in pencil on primed white of each canvas is a compartmentalized vacuum through which amoeba-like shapes flow or in which they are bottled up. This seemingly elementary play of singular or elided circles jostling for position in a maze result in compositional solutions of astonishing ingenuity and variety. Use of the word play—and it is the best term for

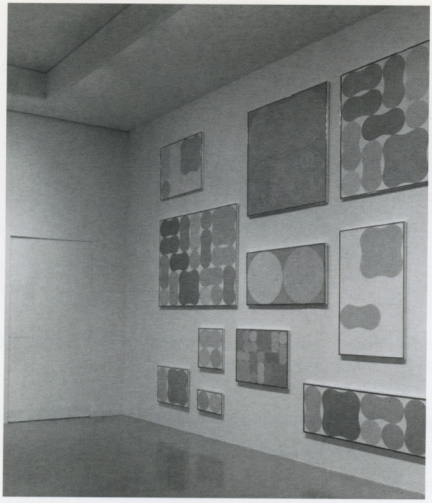


Untitled, 1955, Pencil on paper (reverse of American Express currency exchange receipt), 3 15/16 x 7 1/4 in. (10 x 18.4 cm)

Smith's brand of geometrical speculations though the subtexts of his musings can be haunting or harrowing—opens the way to a change of metaphors. For in effect, Smith had devised a game of checkers for himself in which the pieces could move every which way, glide when he saw fit and annex territory that is identified by the multiplication of sections of a single color, which in quantity and location would compete with other units or blocks of color for dominance.

At issue are many of the problems common to the Bauhaus and Constructivist exercises at which Smith tried his hand as a young man. One thinks for example of the curvaceous biomorphs of Jean Arp—who seemed to bridge all the "isms" in the 1920s and 1930s, adding Dada and Surrealism to the roster—and even more particularly of the subtly assymetrical gouaches and oils of Sophie Taueber-Arp. In the wings there is also the New York school painter/pedagogue Hans Hofmann with his doctrine of chromatic "push-pull" which described not only the dynamics of his pigment-loaded planar abstractions but the optical advance and retreat of the cloud-like lozenges of Rothko's work, and the flat color-bar intervals of Newman's "zip" inflected field pictures, among other examples. But in spite of their schematic premise, Smith's Louisenberg paintings are intuitively worked out rather than programmed, whimsical rather than studied. And in spite of the ways in which they may seem to bear out Hofmann's theory they are understated and disembodied by comparison to the German-born artist's dramatic brush and knife work and his high-keyed palette.

Similar distinctions come to the fore when one looks at the work of Smith's aesthetic comrades, Pollock and Rothko and at the Abstract Expressionists generally. Although Smith's writings about art were rich in mythological and literary allusions and his rhetoric



Installation view of the exhibition, *Art of the Real*,
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968

muscular in the manner of his contemporaries, the truth is that he was the opposite of Pollock and the others in his physical relationship to his work. With the exception of the sparkling *Untitled* (1954) [page 27] Smith paid little attention to the textural range of the oil medium—its potential viscosity or pastiness. And with the exception of the animated pastel with oil wash on board, *Untitled* (1954) [page 45], there is very little "wrist" in his handling of tools and materials. To be sure there are heavily built-up paintings which came both before and after the Louisenberg series that show Smith's struggle with these aspects of mid-century "Action Painting," and, while palpably inspired by the exertions of those around him, they have a vigor and compactness all their own. However, an ocean away from the center of that aesthetic maelstrom, Smith appears to have relaxed his grip in the Louisenberg works and allowed the channeled elements and amalgams of lightly applied and finely grained tone and hue to make their own gestures as they shiver within their contours, and plug gaps and turn corners of the grid. Consequently what we see in their chain-linked pairings

and clusterings and in their pulsating dots, punctuation marks and dashes is less the artist's movement than that of the forms themselves.

In this context, only Newman shared Smith's fundamental indifference to the overt sensuality of paint. For his part Willem de Kooning had once declared that skin was the reason that oil paint had been invented, and by extrapolation the space in his paintings was inherently anthropomorphic throughout. For theirs, Smith and Newman understood that the scale of a painting might be keyed to human proportion—as sculpture always was— but its surface was not flesh. Rather a painting should be thought of as an essentially disembodied spatial absence or presence in relation to which real people could orient themselves but in which they had no prepared place or surrogate incarnation.

But Smith's diffidence in this regard goes farther even than Newman's. This was a product of an attitude toward facture rooted in Smith's background as an *architect* and his experience making machine tools in his family's business. In a shop situation or on a construction site, the actual making of things is often delegated to specialists in various trades. The task of the man who designs a project is largely done once its parameters are fully articulated and a model has been made. That, more or less, is the way Smith proceeded as a sculptor as well, fashioning tiny prototypes from tetrahedrons and other primary modules made of folded paper—the folding was sometimes done with the help of students or his daughters—and, when the means were available to him, arranging to have these prototypes enlarged in wood or steel by workmen or assistants. Like Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd and other emerging "minimalists" of the 1960s and 1970s who also saw limited necessity for the artist's hands-on participation in the technical execution of their work, Smith was a pioneer in the fabrication of sculpture who cared little about the allure of craft and everything about art's formal rigor and integrity.

His approach to painting was much the same. The small graph paper drawing previously cited is a description of the problem Smith set himself and the methodology used to arrive at the selected permutations. The paintings—some realized in every detail, others left in what appear to be various stages of incompletion—resemble test panels, and thus presage the prototypes and maquettes from which Smith would routinely make his sculptures a decade later. Moreover, in 1968, Smith contracted two painters, Robert Swain and Robert Duran, to make a mural sized version of the most complex composition in the group of twenty-five thumbnail sketches, the one which encompasses in a single format all the remaining twenty four combinations, *Untitled (Louisenberg)* (1953-54/68) [page 21], of which *Louisenberg #4* (1953-54) [page 19], minus the red background, was the precursor.

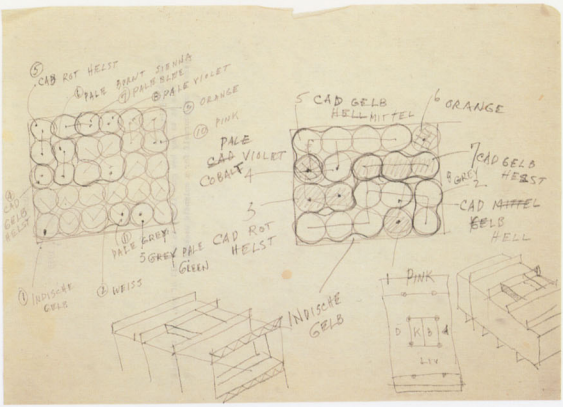
In the period 1953-54, however, Smith himself painted not only *Louisenberg #4* but all the others in the Louisenberg series, and while their relative finish or apparent lack of finish says a good deal about Smith's unapologetic disregard for painterly "haute cuisine" of the sort that obsessed so many of his contemporaries,

it also gives the individual canvases their unique character and authority. Indeed, within the slender range of options he allowed himself, there are striking differences among these works. For instance, although the primary horizontal "peanut" shapes are loosely, almost transparently filled in, *Louisenberg #2* [page 13], with its square format, relative largeness and red ground, is among the most emblematic of the suite, as well as among the most imposing. (Looking backward in time from this painting think of Rothko's tiered masses of unbounded color and consider the exquisite concision of Smith's response to that work. Then looking forward, ponder the impact Smith's paintings had on those of his other contemporary, Paul Feeley.)

Less than half the measurements of the previous painting, *Louisenberg #7* [page 15] has a contrasting buoyancy enhanced by its white margins, but set off against the ochre, gray and yellow images, that white functions like a color rather than like color's absence. *Untitled* (1953-55) [page 33] has a similar lightness of touch and atmosphere, but here the blue and yellow shapes are entwined or mutually invasive, reminding one of the sardonic title and angular torsion of a much later serpentine sculpture, *The Snake Is Out* (1962). Meanwhile, Smith's extraordinary gift as a colorist is on display in works such as a group of untitled paintings from 1953-55 [pages 23, 35, 38 and 39] in which turmeric and daffodil yellows, saffron oranges, slate or porcelain blues and sometimes limpid, sometimes pewter grays augmented by violets, pinks, pumpkins and browns redistribute the weights of the strictly geometric layout—a layout often threaded by delicate graphite lines that flicker and trail out at the edge of bulbous entities—by assigning special emphasis to one form here and another there where both are chromatically magnetized across an intervening block of a third tone.

The tensile strength these subtle configurations achieve, and the sense of scale that the visually expansive hues convey despite the generally modest format of the paintings is an intimation of qualities that Smith subsequently capitalized on in his sculpture, his gift, that is, for making something of intermediate size suggests realities both macrocosmic and microcosmic. In that connection a corollary of the mind-expanding paradigm of the two infinities mentioned at the beginning can be found in the concept advanced by the sixteenth century philosopher, religious thinker and inventor of the computer, Blaise Pascal who reasoned that nature—by which he meant divine creation—could best be described as "a sphere, the center of which is everywhere and the circumference nowhere."

It is not difficult to mesh Pascal's orb with the rectilinear templates of modern art and design which Smith seized upon and fundamentally restructured. Nowhere is this synthesis more clearly adumbrated than in the Louisenberg paintings, where, rather than squaring the circle, Smith effectively circles the square. Yet the purpose of introducing Pascal is less to establish the continuity of Smith's mathematical concerns and Pascal's, than to argue that in dealing with the work of this kind the essential questions raised by geometry



Untitled, 1955, Pencil on paper, 8¼ x 11⅝ in. (21 x 29.5 cm)

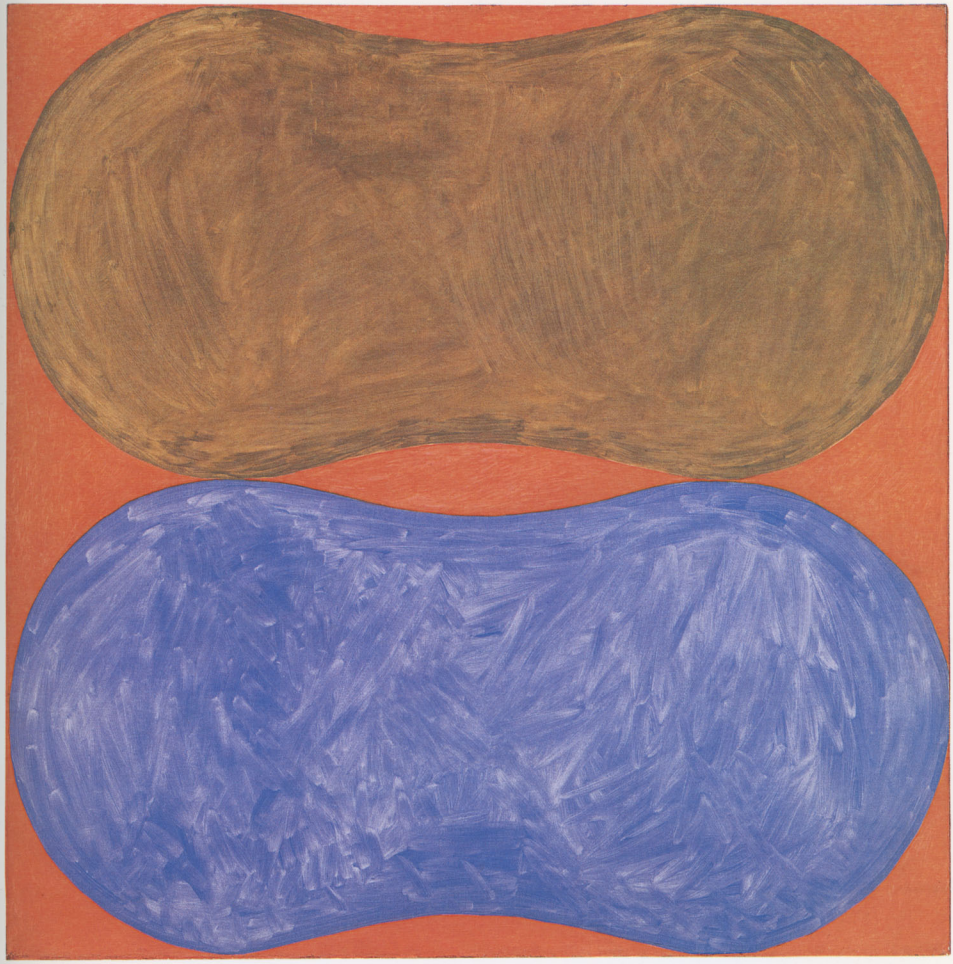
are never just a matter of technical calculation and manipulation but are also always ones of aesthetic and metaphysical intuition, of the beauty of visible order and the awe inspired by the sublime but largely intangible order to which each working-out of basic mathematical principles alludes. For Smith art was a means of concretizing or filling in that sublime vista. In an artistic milieu first dominated by improvisatory and heavily symbolist Abstract Expressionism and later by a positivistic high Formalism, his reticent, systems-oriented transcendentalism was an anomaly. However, with the distance of almost half a century, Smith's work of the 1950s onward assumes a new status, to a large extent determined by changes in attitudes which have softened or eliminated the dichotomies that once pitted science against poetry. LeWitt is among those to whom we owe this shift in understanding. The first of his seminal "Sentences on Conceptual Art," reads: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach." Those are sentiments with which Smith would have been in profound agreement, and his paintings, like his sculptures, bear out those convictions.

[1] In a letter from Heidelberg, 1953 to Barnett and Annalee Newman, Smith writes of his cultural isolation in Europe: "...I suppose Jackson has been working a lot since he has fixed up his studio. I shall write to him in a couple of days. Did Cliff come back from the coast? Did Ad get married? Is Betty going to Greece?... Please give my best to Mark and Mel, and also Herbert if you see him..."

Louisenberg #2, 1953-54, Oil on canvas, 39¼ x 39¼ in. (99.7 x 99.7 cm)

Exhibited

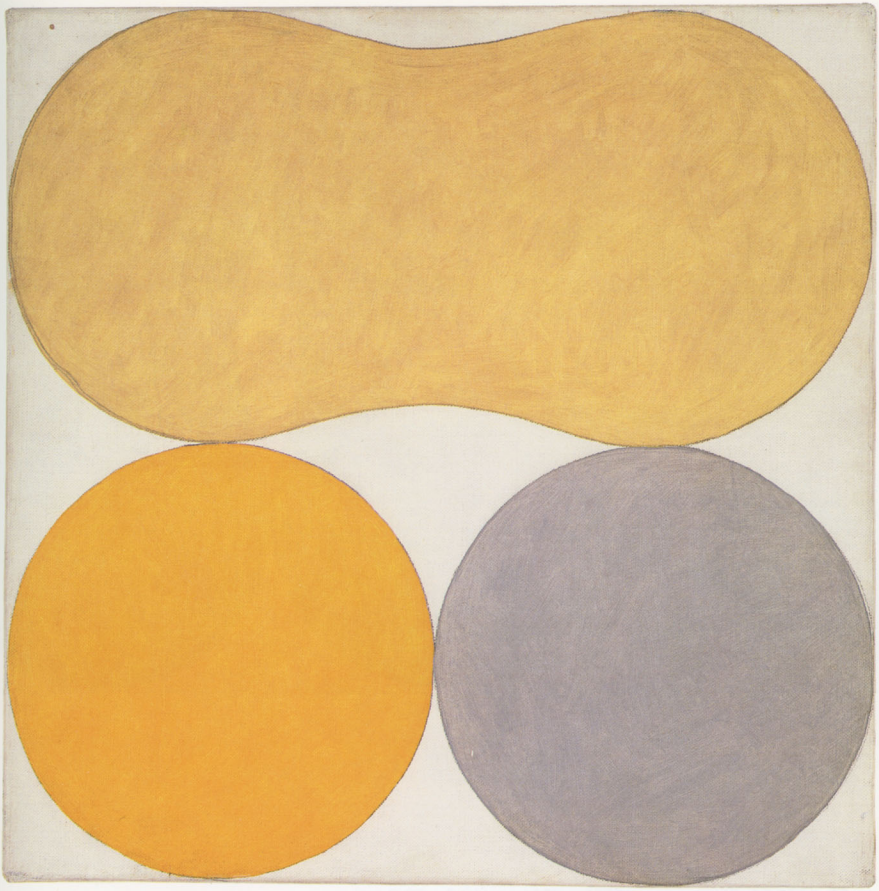
New York, Museum of Modern Art; Paris, Centre National d'Art Contemporain;
London, The Tate Gallery; Zurich, Kunsthaus, *The Art of the Real USA 1948-1968*, 1968-69
New York, Hunter College Art Gallery, *Artists at Hunter: 1950-1965*, 1984
New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, 1998



Louisenberg #7, 1953-54, Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 15 3/4 in. (40 x 40 cm)

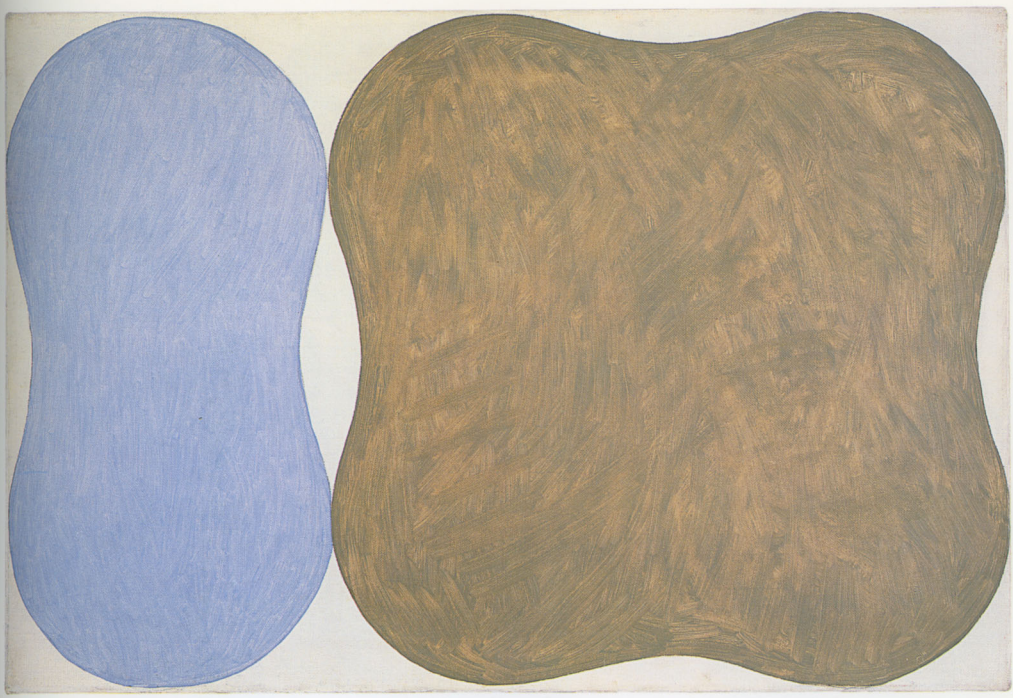
Exhibited

New York, Museum of Modern Art; Paris, Centre National d'Art Contemporain;
London, The Tate Gallery; Zurich, Kunsthaus, *The Art of the Real USA 1948-1968*, 1968-1969
New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, 1998



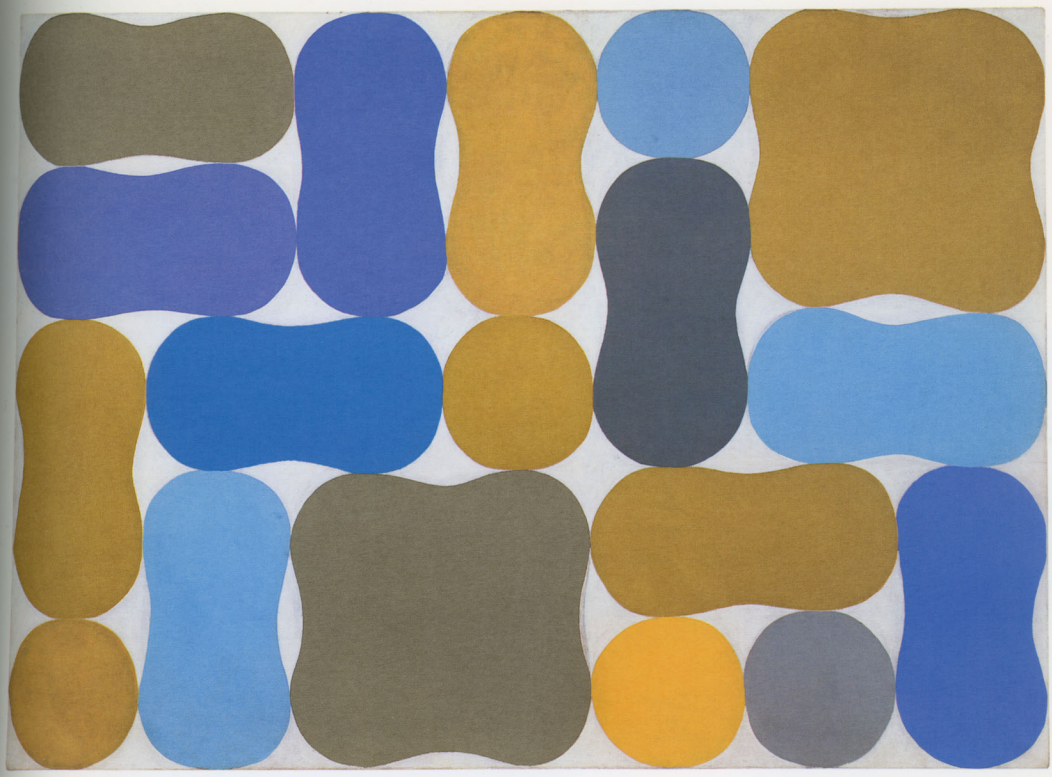
Louisenberg #9, 1953-54, Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 23 3/4 in. (40.3 x 60.3 cm)

Exhibited
New York, Museum of Modern Art; Paris, Centre National d'Art Contemporain;
London, The Tate Gallery; Zurich, Kunsthaus, *The Art of the Real USA 1948-1968*, 1968-1969
New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, 1998



Louisenberg #4, 1953-54, Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 55 1/4 in. (100.3 x 140.3 cm)

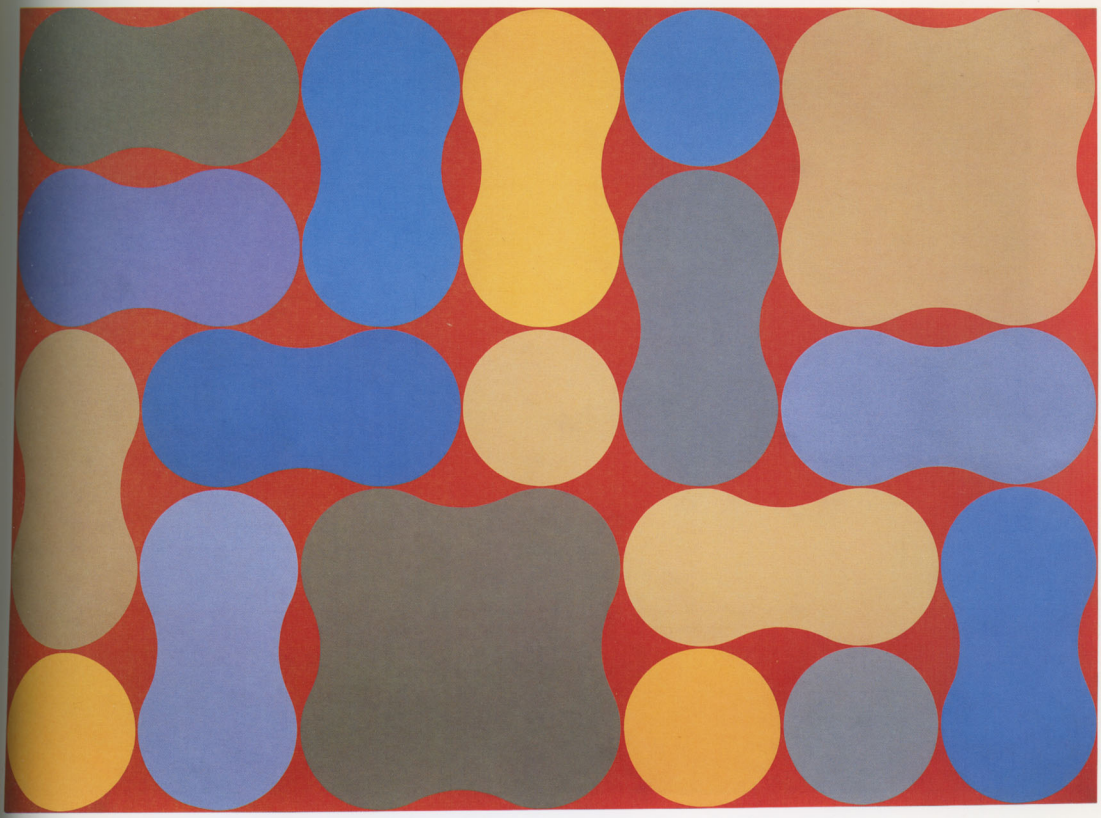
Exhibited
New York, Museum of Modern Art; Paris, Centre National d'Art Contemporain;
London, The Tate Gallery; Zurich Kunsthaus, *The Art of the Real USA 1948-1968,* 1968-1969



Installation view of the exhibition, *Art of the Real*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968

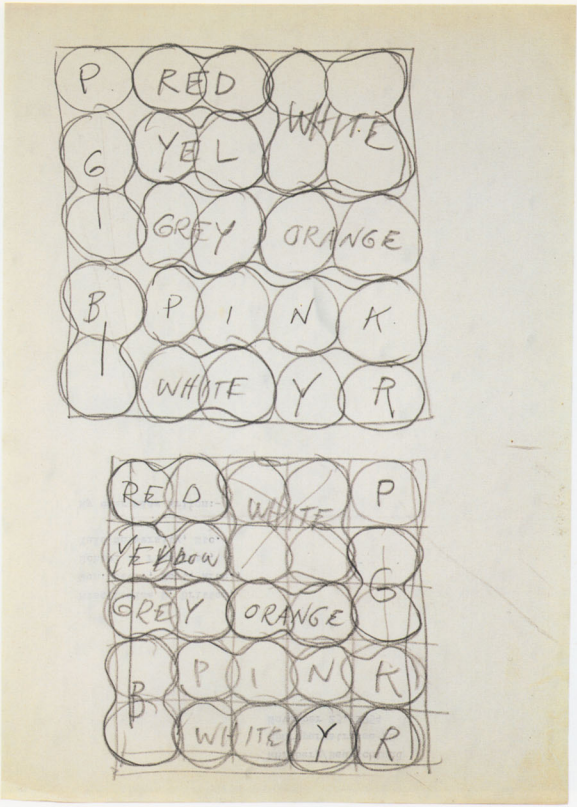
Untitled (Louisenberg), 1953-54/68, Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft. 3¾ in. x 11 ft. 7¾ in. (253.4 x 355 cm)

Exhibited
New York, Museum of Modern Art; Paris, Centre National d'Art Contemporain;
London, The Tate Gallery; Zurich Kunsthaus, *The Art of the Real USA, 1948-1968*, 1968-69
Cincinnati, Contemporary Arts Center, *Monumental American Art*, 1970
New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, 1998
Velencia, IVAM (Institut Valencia D'Art Modern), *Tony Smith*, 2002

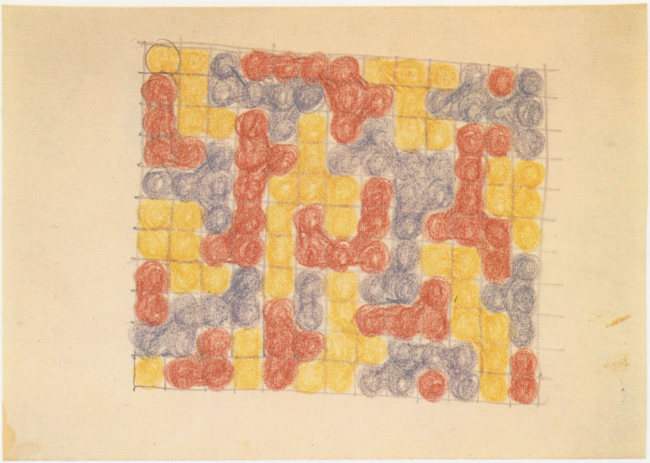


Untitled, 1953, Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 19 1/2 in. (40 x 49.5 cm)

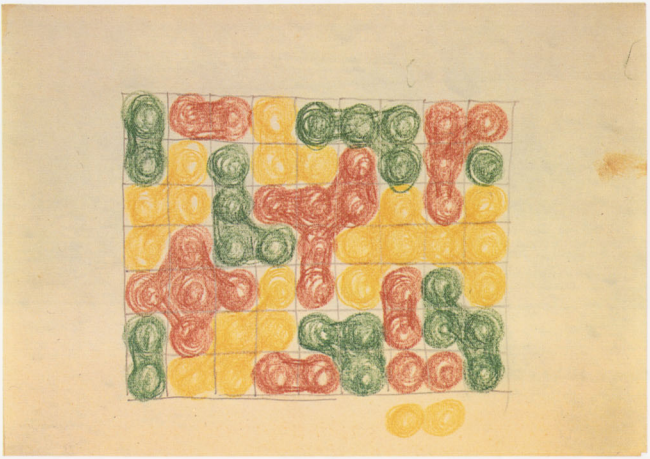
Exhibited
New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, 1998



Untitled, 1953-55, Pencil on paper, 11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in. (29.5 x 21 cm)



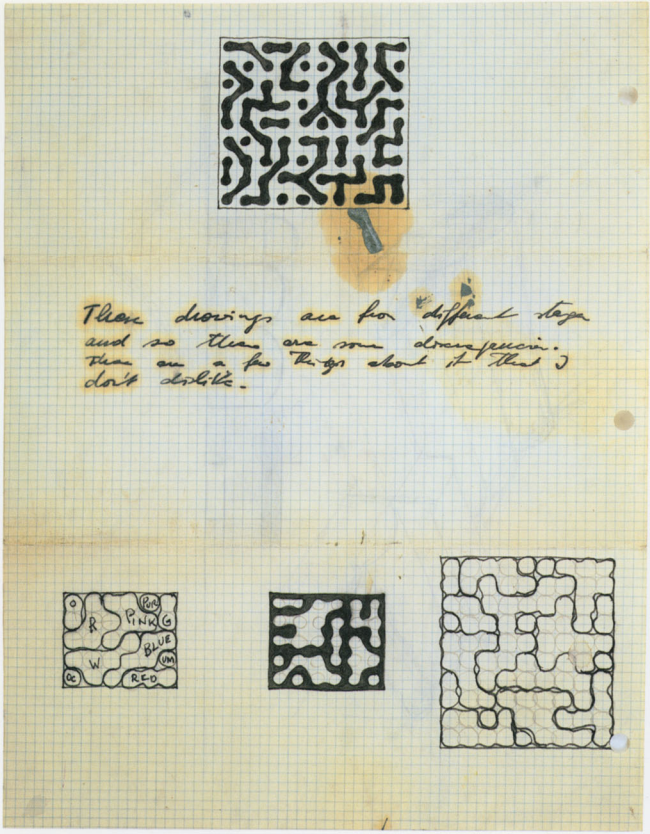
Untitled (recto), 1953-55, Colored pencils on paper, 5 7/8 x 8 1/4 in. (14.9 x 21 cm)



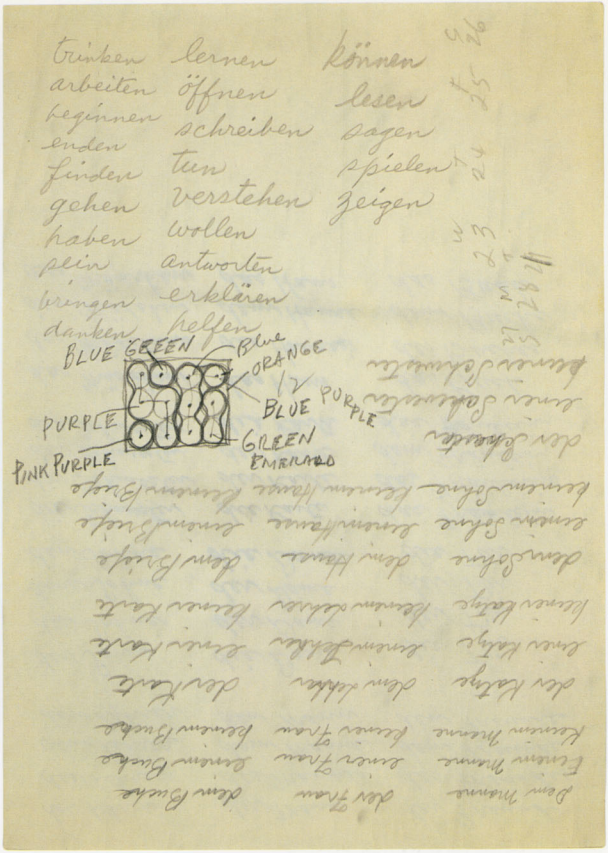
Untitled (verso), 1953-55, Colored pencils on paper, 5 7/8 x 8 1/4 in. (14.9 x 21 cm)

Untitled, 1954, Oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 19 3/4 in. (50.2 x 50.2 cm)

Exhibited
New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, 1998



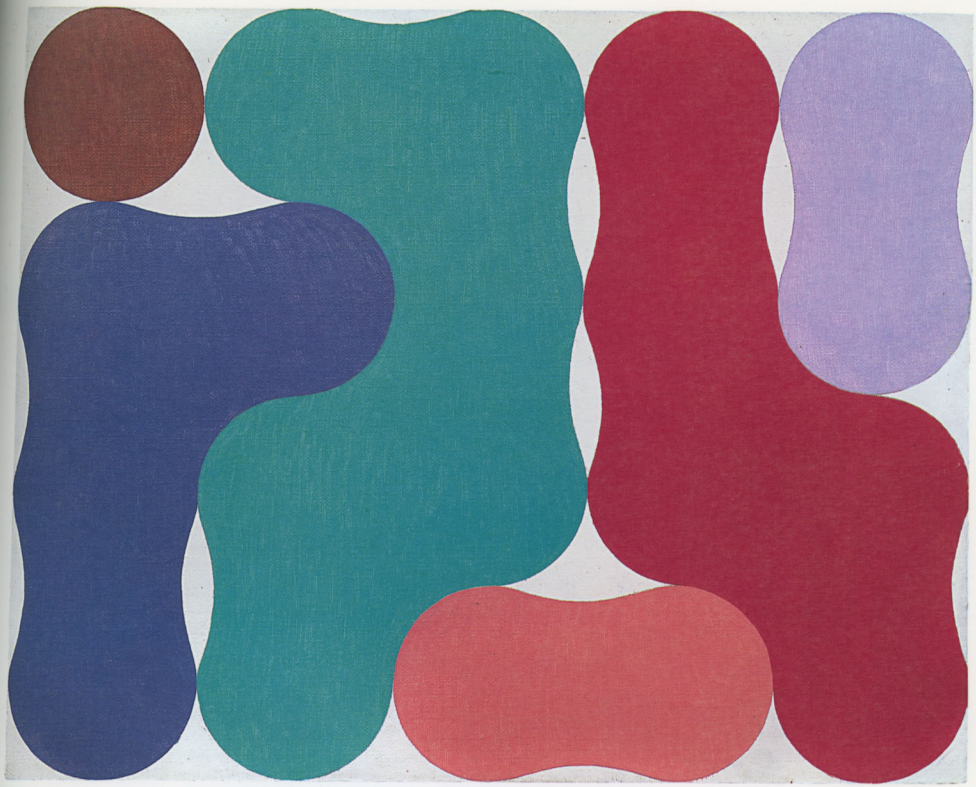
Untitled, 1953-55, Ink and pencil on paper
$10^{15}/_{16}$ x $8^{7}/_{16}$ in. (27.8 x 21.4 cm)

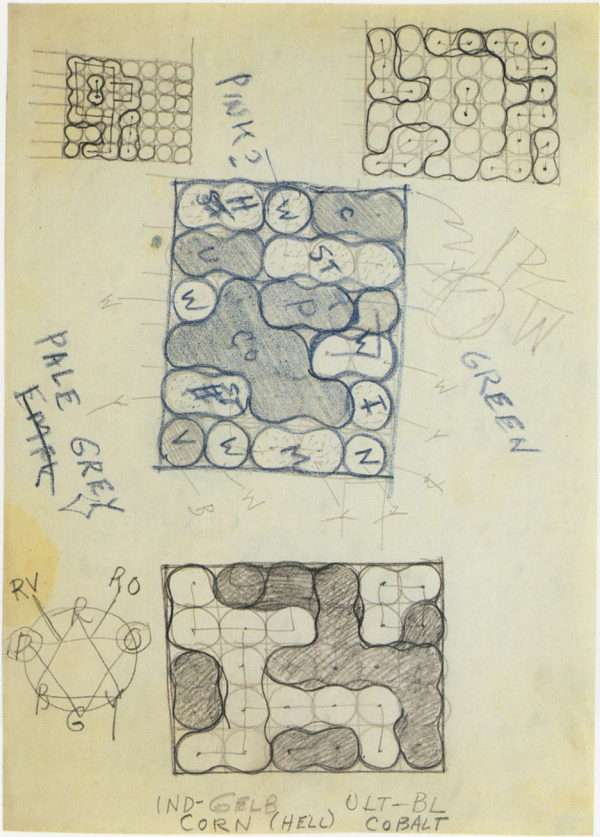


Untitled, 1953-55, Pencil on paper, 11⅝ x 8¼ in. (29.5 x 21 cm)

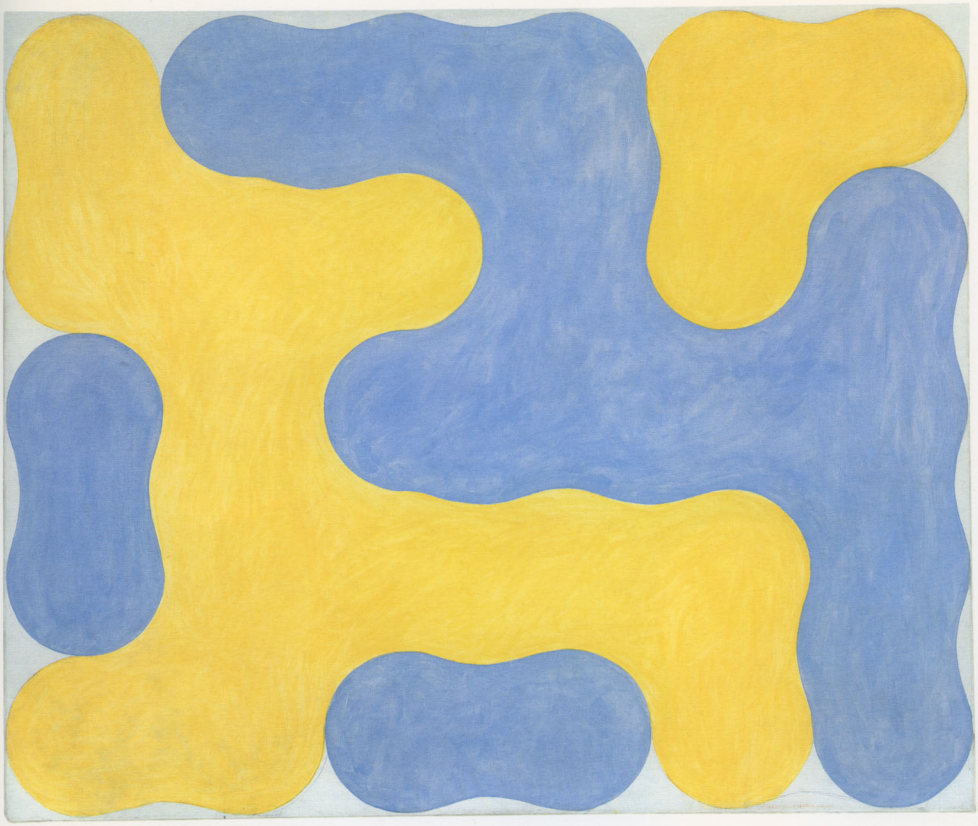
Untitled, 1953, Oil on board, 15 3/4 x 19 1/2 in. (40 x 49.5 cm)

Exhibited
New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, 1998

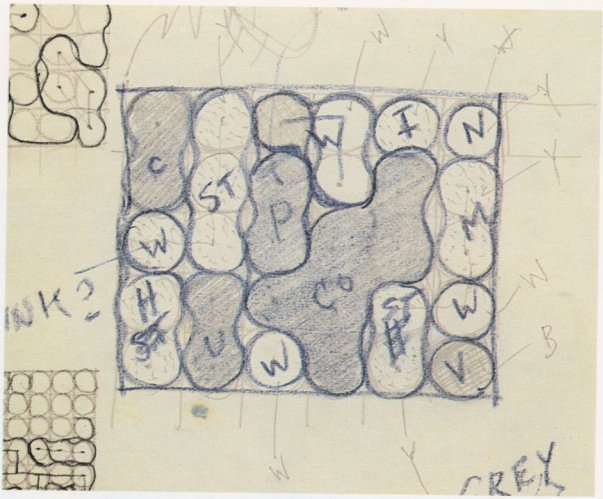




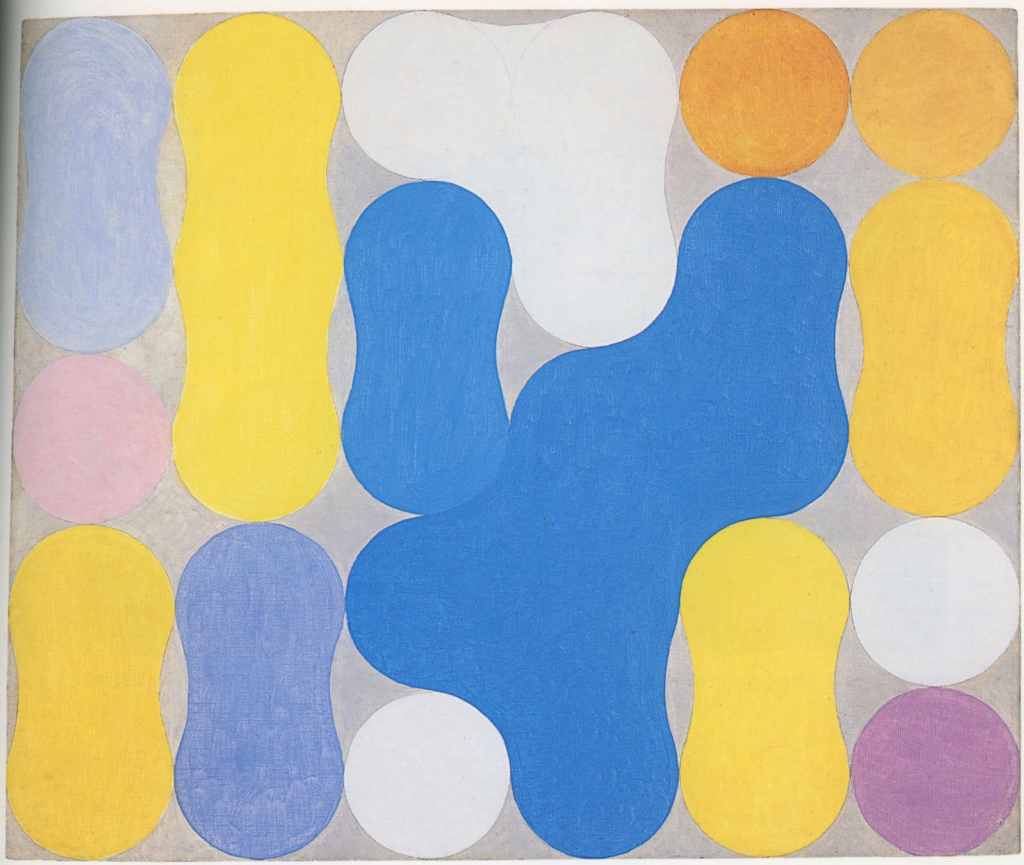
Untitled, 1953-55, Crayon and pencil on paper
11⅝ x 8¼ in. (29.5 x 21 cm)



Untitled, 1953-55, Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 47 1/4 in. (100.3 x 120 cm)

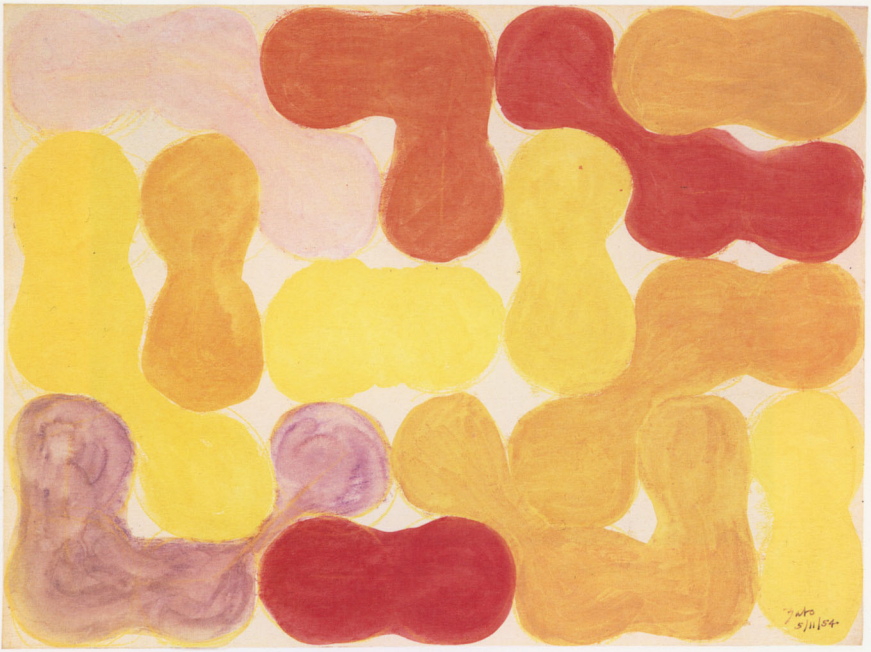


detail of **Untitled** drawing on page 32

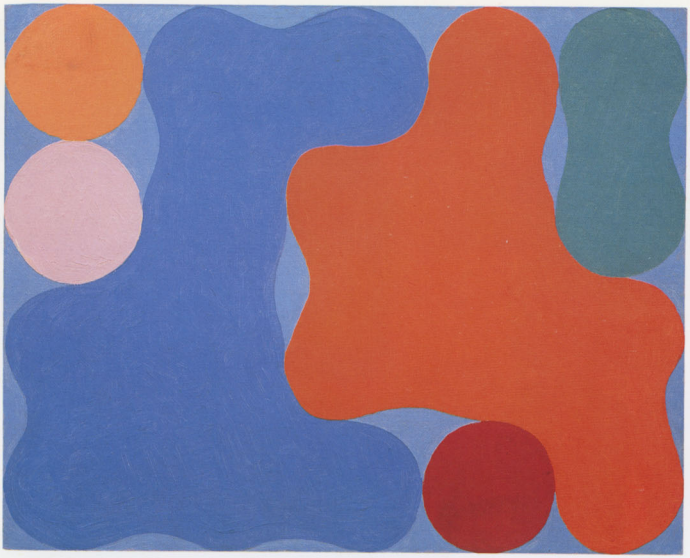


Untitled, 1953, Oil on board, 19 1/2 x 23 3/8 in. (49.5 x 59.4 cm)

Untitled, 1954, Watercolor on paper, 14 x 18 7/8 in. (35.6 x 47.9 cm)



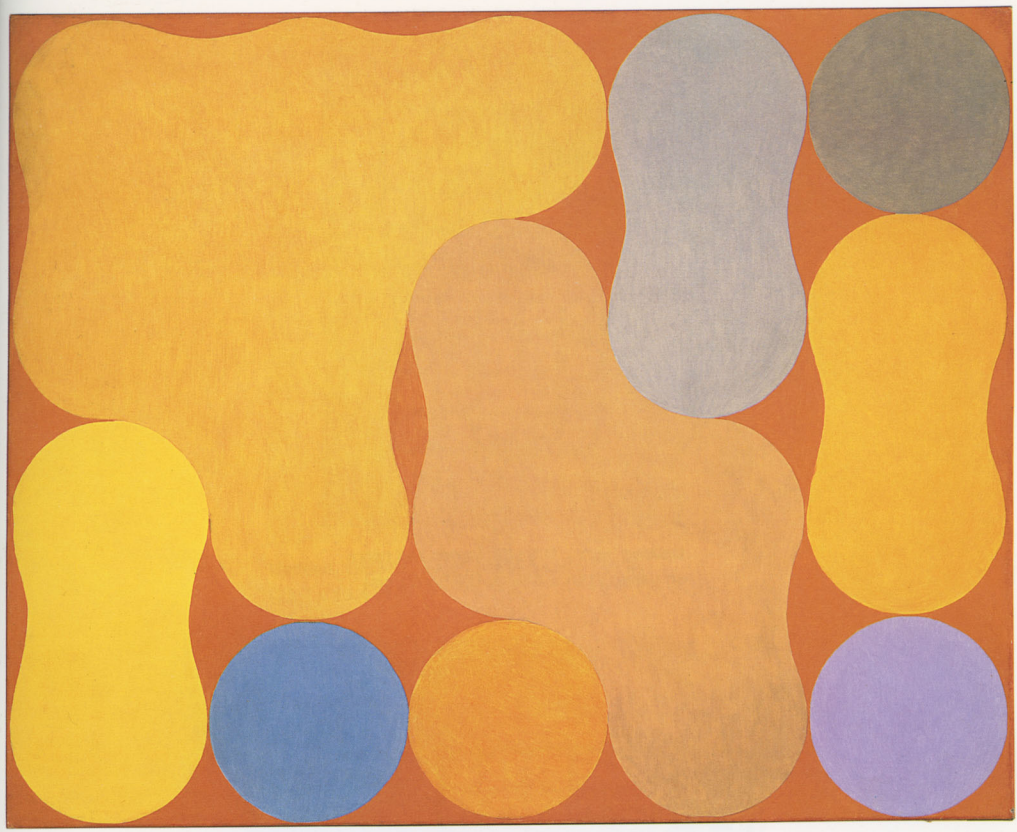
Untitled, 1954, Watercolor on paper, 14 x 18 7/8 in. (35.6 x 47.9 cm)



Untitled, 1953, Oil on board, 15 3/4 x 19 1/2 in. (40 x 49.5 cm)

Exhibited

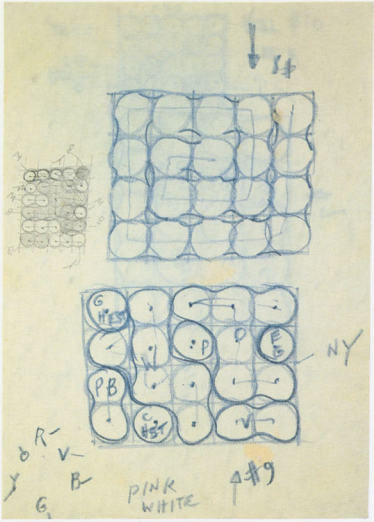
New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, 1998



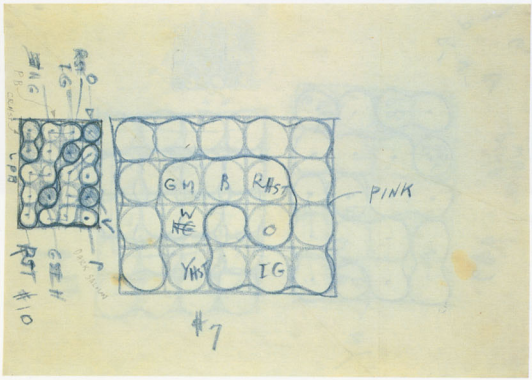
Untitled, 1953-54, Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 39 1/4 in. (80 x 99.7 cm)

Exhibited

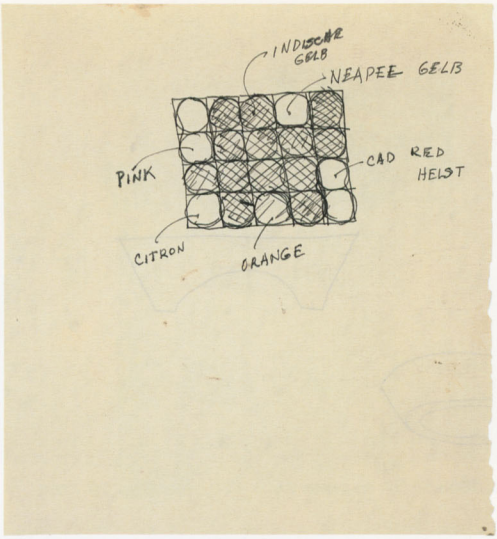
New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, 1998



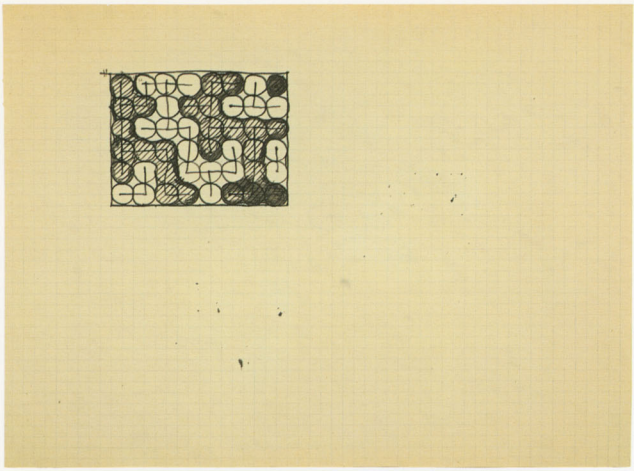
Untitled (recto), 1953-55, Crayon and pencil on paper, 11⅝ x 8¼ in. (29.5 x 21 cm)



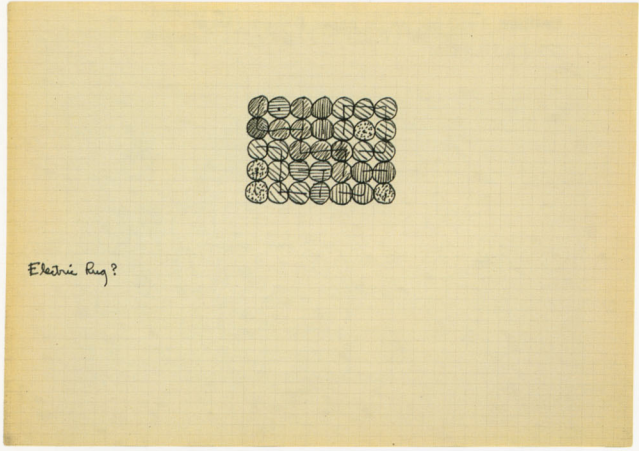
Untitled (verso), 1953-55, Crayon and pencil on paper 8¼ x 11⅝ in. (21 x 29.5 cm)



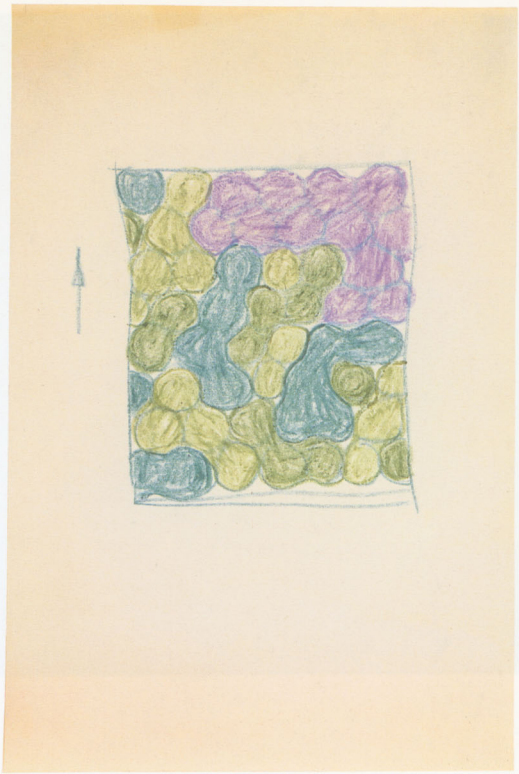
Untitled, 1953-55, Ink on paper, 8 9/16 x 7 5/8 in. (21.7 x 19.4 cm)



Untitled, 1953-55, Ink on paper, 8 1/4 x 11 11/16 in. (21 x 29.7 cm)



Untitled, 1953-55, Ink on paper, 8 1/4 x 11 3/16 in. (21 x 28.4 cm)



Untitled, 1953-55, Crayon on paper, $10^{11}/_{16}$ x $7^{1}/_{16}$ in. (27.1 x 17.9 cm)

Untitled, 1954, Pastel with oil wash on board, 14 1/8 x 19 in. (35.9 x 48.3 cm)

Exhibited

New York, Xavier Fourcade, Inc., *Paintings 1953-63, Small Sculpture 1961-69*, 1986


Zabo
29/10/54

This catalogue was published on the occasion of the exhibition
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Front cover
Tony Smith and Robert Swain with *Louisenberg*, 1968

Page 2
Untitled, 1953-55, Ink on paper, 7 x 7 in. (17.8 x 17.8 cm)

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