

# THE MORPHOLOGY OF TONY SMITH'S WORK



Tony Smith, *Crashopper*, 1961, steel, 22' 8" x 24' x 40'

## ELEANOR GREEN

It has been just over a decade since those things Smith described as "black and probably malignant" began to appear on his lawn in South Orange.

The longer one sees and experiences Tony Smith's sculpture and painting, the more cryptic and ambiguous they become. Even in the cool esthetic climate of the mid-'60s the first rectilinear pieces asserted more than mere abstract principles of volume and mass. Whether they were deceptively comprehensible (the parallelepiped *Black Box*) or visually paradoxical (*Smoke* with its negative spaces in the form of "rhombohedral dodecahedra topologically stretched beyond recognition"), all of them demanded more than physical and intellectual perception. These configurations of stereometric forms reveal a Euclidean anatomy, yet take on the guise of primeval creatures in retreat from too much analysis, back into the world they have brought into being.

The crudely made plywood structures, provocatively incongruous among the shingle-style houses of the genteel New Jersey suburb, were known only to a handful of friends and neighbors in the fall of 1963. In the fall of 1967, Tony Smith, as "Master of the Monumentalists," and his newly completed *Smoke* shared the cover of *Time* magazine. In 1970, critic Gene Goossen flatly stated that Smith "is the most important sculptor to have appeared so far in the second half of this century . . . he reunited structure, form, scale and meaning in a wholeness unrealized before in abstract sculpture."<sup>1</sup>

The pieces seemed to spring forth like Pallas Athena, "armed and undefiled," but they had been gestating for 40 years. Their genesis can be seen in milk carton constructions done during the '50s, in experimental architectural projects over the years following his stint "as clerk of the works on several Frank Lloyd Wright houses," in a small Mondrian-like painting from about 1930, and perhaps even in the structures he made out of pill boxes during his childhood bout with tuberculosis.<sup>2</sup>

From his earliest memory, Smith has been building up modular units to make things which are greater than the sum of their parts, and always endowed with a life of their own.

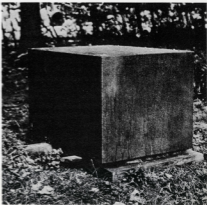
In recent years, Smith's building blocks have resembled solid models built to describe atomic lattices. He likes these forms for their proclivity toward growth, as in nature, into a literally infinite variety of species without losing their underlying sense of order. In the process of generation and mutation, the line between inanimate and animate blurs — just as some viruses are "living crystals," so Smith thought of his early pieces as "germs capable of spreading growth or disease."

Because they are elemental and enigmatic of his sculptures. The large ones, in their sheer size, defy even physical perception, and are especially cryptic and menacing.

*Black Box* (221/5x33"x25") offers three faces simultaneously. The mind instantly and correctly reads the

right angles, imagines the corresponding faces, notes the color of the steel plate, and in a single Gestalt understands it as a "black box." After that, speculation about content (both literal and figurative) arises. Whatever fantasies follow from *Black Box*, at least the form is known, whereas the cube *Die* (which is six feet on a side) never reveals more to a person of normal height than two faces at once. Given this scant data, it is not immediately clear that it is indeed a cube. *Die* remains formally contradictory although, true to its name, it eventually reveals itself as one of a pair of giant unmarked dice. By scale as well as title, *Die* carries the ominous implications of its title. As Smith remarked, "six feet has a suggestion of being cooked. Six foot box. Six foot under."

The title of *New Piece*, on the other hand, gives no more clue to its essence than a photograph of it or the

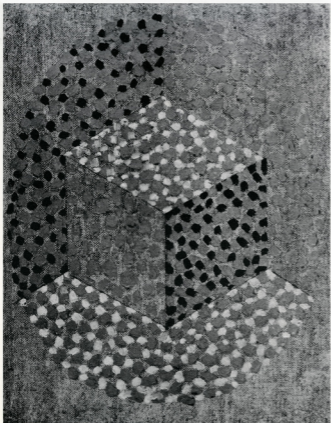


Tony Smith, *Black Box*, 1962, steel, 227" x 37" x 27"

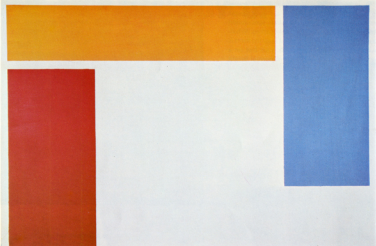
geometer's description that it is a rhomboidal hexahedron. Approached straight on, it resembles a slightly tipped stele, inscrutable, leaning away to avoid confrontation. Then, contradicting the axiom that one view of a sculpture leads logically to the next, what looked like a sharply receding second plane flattens and appears as a chevron form. *New Piece* becomes muscular, monolithic, implacably planted, and too large for the enclosing space. It fleetingly contracts to a perspectival cube, then flattens forward as if poised for flight, forcing the spectator back in hopes that retreat will present a solution to the conundrum. It does not; distance only intensifies the disquieting sensation that this presence, not content to simply be, is in the process of becoming. Movement around the piece seems to release its potential energy and to effect further transmutation.

If Smith can vivify relatively simple forms, he can evoke well-defined personalities in his more obviously anthropomorphic sculpture. As every beast in the field and every fowl of the air was brought to Adam for naming, so the artist waits until he has completed a piece, and then by a Freudian telescopic process of free association assigns a title. Straightforward names, *Black Box* and *New Piece*, are the exception. Sometimes, they refer to the configuration as in *Smoke* with its endless, confusing interplay of voids and solids like the trail from a cigarette. Frequently, as in *Moses*, there are multiple references: the upthrusting members simultaneously recall the horned patriarchs from early translations of Exodus and the upraised arms of Rembrandt's *Moses* preparing to break the commandments; the slanting planes could imply the tablets themselves or, on a sunny day, they can induce a visual reading — "Moses' face shone."

Only once, however, has the artist done a piece that, when finished, so closely resembled a literary character that it might have been conceived as a book illustration. Not surprisingly, for James Joyce and Tony Smith have much in common, *Gracehopper*, "... always jigg-



Tony Smith, *Created A*, 1933, w/c



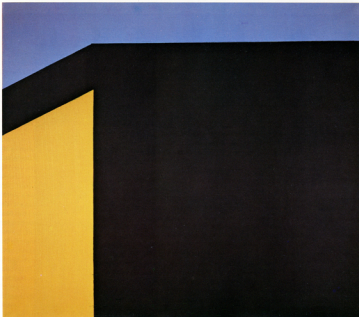
Tony Smith, *Untitled*, 1962, oil, 64" x 80 1/2"

jog, hoppy on akkant of his joyicity, (he had a partner pair of findfestils to supplant him). . . " first appeared in *Finnegan's Wake*.

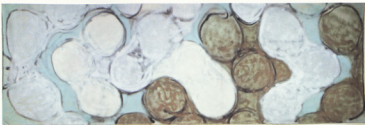
The analogy between Smith and Joyce is accurate, irresistible and, in the end, ineffable. Aside from the fact that they are both Irish, a few characteristics in common can be enumerated: they both play free and easy with the rules of syntax, depend on verisimilitude of invented vocabulary to prod the subconscious, and bring to life extravagant beings that never were. Beyond that, their parallel sensibilities can only be felt and illustrated by comparing Joyce's description of Gracehope with the sculpture.

Now whim the sillybilly of a Gracehope had jingled through a jungle of love and debts and jangled through a jumble of life in doubts afterwise, wetting with the bimblebeaks, drikking with nautonects, bilking with durydunglecks and horing after ladybirds . . . when Chrysalmas was on the bare branches, off he went from Tingpomsingming. He took a round stroll and he took a stroll round and he took a round strollagain till the grillies in his head and the leivents in his hair made him thought he had the Tossmania.

The anthropomorphic connotations of the sculpture are sometimes reinforced by sensuous, curvilinear forms of organic growth that appear in Smith's paintings. Still, the relationship of Smith's paintings to his sculpture is seldom obvious. There is an enormous jumble of work in his studio which until a full-scale retrospective is mounted, remains confusing and, at first sight, incoherent as an oeuvre. The usual chronological line of development from figuration to abstraction to be expected from artists of Smith's generation is absent. The earliest extant works are small paintings done about



Tony Smith, *Untitled*, 1962, oil, 42" x 48"



Tony Smith, *Untitled*, 1954, oil, 20" x 7 1/2".

1930 before Smith had had any formal art training, and they indicate that despite his Jesuit education, the young man was already aware of De Stijl and Cubist collage. Beyond these first efforts, however, the trail peters out for the historian tramping after parallels and influences. Evidences of hero worship disappear among bewildering variety of abstract paintings made over 40 years. There are no internal clues to dating; while sorting through the canvases, Smith himself was astonished at "some of the crazy things" he did, and can only date them approximately by association with other events in his life. Actually, dating doesn't seem very important to this body of work.<sup>4</sup> Smith executed groups of paintings exploring one idea or another, and broke off, when his work was interrupted sometimes for months or years, and when he returned to painting, explored another avenue. Some of the "crazy things" are frankly experimental, others are highly resolved; few of his ideas have been pushed to the limit.

There are tiny paintings from the early '30s that might be miniature renderings of '60s sculpture, lushly painted canvases of free-flowing forms, and tightly structured paintings with interlocked hard-edge color areas holding the forms on the matte surface. There are floating paintings, paintings with hollow rectangles or dumbbell forms. There are canvases with solid color directional bands that have been likened to Jersey Turnpike signs, and diffuse, soft-focus spray paintings. The variety of modes covers a good many of the substyles of the last few years. But for the relatively small size of the canvases, this body of work might have come from a young artist who made his entrance when the conventions of modernist art were well established. It is only after examining groups of paintings that it becomes apparent why the artist contends, "The thinking isn't foreign [to the sculpture]. Even though it isn't immediately similar to the viewer, it is the result of the same process."

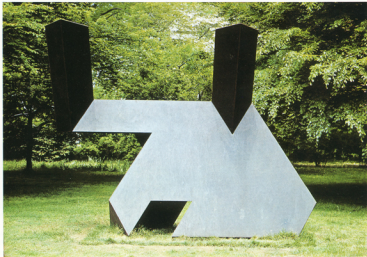
Not surprisingly, the paintings with black rectangles, and one with red, yellow, and blue on a white ground were made about the same time as *Black Box*. They also relate to a single small painting of 1933, as if the genius of a long dormant idea came to fruition only after the artist had telephoned a steel fabricator in 1962 to order *Black Box* made five times the size of a card file. Afterward, Smith the painter disassembled the work of Smith the sculptor, taking apart the compact three-dimensional configuration of rectangles and proposing alternative

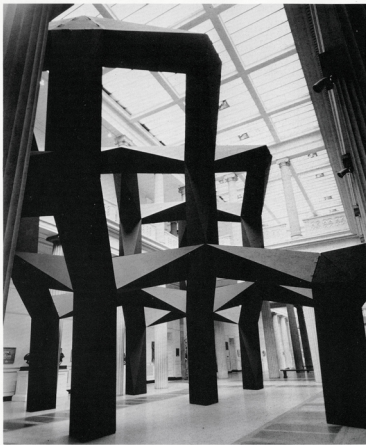
reorderings on a single plane. Although painting is usually considered a medium more conducive to illusionism than sculpture, Smith's canvases are more concrete and less open to subjective interpretation than his three-dimensional pieces. It may well be a matter of where one places the burden of apprehension. The sculptures are elusive; they present a time-space problem for which there is no single, right answer. The large pieces, especially, simply cannot be figured out, whereas in the paintings, the artist himself postulates some discrete irrational solutions. If related groups of Smith's paintings are considered as serial, they tend to be closed series done in short periods of time. Smith is not patient enough to make a career of exploring all the possible combinations and permutations inherent in a given set of conditions. He will note enough of the possibilities to suggest the change and growth of an idea — only enough building blocks to hint at the skeleton; then he may do a more explicitly organic series in which free forms grow in from the edges of the canvas, or he may add color as another variable to the equation.

Smith's color tends to be close to the primaries, unmixed and readily available commercially. Smith has never been preoccupied with subtleties of hue and tone; rather, he is "mainly involved with trying to make an equilibrium over the surface based on fairly close values."<sup>5</sup> Other remarks he made in the same interview, however, imply that Smith has distinct, if not contradictory, feelings about the proper relationship of color to form in sculpture and painting, ideas which he also applies to different modes of painting. For Smith, it is a moot point whether color is generated from shape or shape from color.<sup>6</sup>

In discussing colored sculpture he also shed light on his geometrically structured painting when he said,

Tony Smith, *Moore*, 1968, steel, 130" x 180" x 80".





Tony Smith, *Smoke*, 1967, steel, 19' x 34' x 48'

"the essential premise is primitive, giving clarity to certain kinds of forms, but very often using the colors symbolically...." In one black, blue, and yellow painting, for example, the two flat "primitive colors" clarify but do not determine shapes, reinforcing at the same time surface equilibrium as they lock the black form in place.

Speaking of his paintings with amorphous forms, Smith said, "The reason I use those convex shapes is that I feel an area of color has its own center, and I resist shapes that radiate or suggest style or structure." Smith was probably referring to the Louisenberg series, modular canvases with floating "peanut" forms made in

Germany in 1953, which were intended to be hung as a unit. During his stay in Europe, Smith thought in terms of building from very simple units. In addition to the Louisenberg painting, he executed architectural projects for workmen's quarters in which houses and courtyards were interspersed as in Akhenaten's new city of Amarna. He also made sculptures from milk cartons, and daily drawings in charcoal on 80 cm x 100 cm wrapping paper (now destroyed) that anticipate his organic black-and-white paintings of the early '60s.

Upon his return to America, Smith was momentarily fascinated by aerosol paint cans marketed since his departure. Both his black-and-white spray paintings

and a big blue, silver, and other canvases have a structure related to the Louisenberg series. The diameters of the circles are the same as in the earlier paintings, but vastly increased in number. Instead of loosely connecting pairs of circles to make dumbbell, peanut, or (as Lucy Lippard calls them) "testicular" floating forms, the entire surface is overlaid with tangent circles in a grid pattern. As always, Smith's beginning is modular and repetitive, and in this case the grid is then largely obliterated in the painting process. Several circles are treated as units of color, their edges softened by spraying, and cease to seem geometric. The soft-focus forms that emanate from the canvases become a function of their color as they couple and become confluent. It is this painting, which is unlike any of his sculptures in its outward form, that most closely approximates them. Pulsing movement and the implication of life are given by modification of primary geometric forms. The blue, silver, and other (labeled as gold in the can) that effect this transformation of the form are what happened to be in the store, yet they serve their purpose as well or better than any artfully mixed tints. They do not suggest style or structure — they suggest germination.

Now in the making are marble sculptures based on diagrams of Fermi surfaces.<sup>7</sup> Ordered according to concepts of solid-state physics and carved by Italian craftsmen, they will echo the erotic forms and mood of the spray paintings from the mid-'50s. The large silver and blue canvases were quickly executed with commercial spray cans the summer before Smith's twin daughters were born; the sculpture is being meticulously carved in Carrara nearly a generation later. Yet they are all of a piece. Placing Smith's art in a framework of time, media, form, and method is largely beside the point except to illustrate that his private vocabulary has not always been the public one of crisp angular geometry articulated in steel. Nor does it matter how direct or indirect the process of creation may be. Seeing the paintings — by definition more intimate and intuitive than monumental sculpture — merely reinforces the observation that, for all his work in modules and series and his constant severe limitation of means, Smith's esthetic has never been reductive. To the contrary, his sensibility is compound; his method a kind of alchemy which turns both geometric and curvilinear art into metaphors of organic growth. ■

The above is slightly revised from the catalogue, Tony Smith: *Painting and Sculpture*, that accompanied an exhibition at the University of Maryland Art Gallery from February 8-March 8, 1974.

1. Eugene Coones, *Nine Sculptures by Tony Smith*, catalogue of exhibition at Newark and three other New Jersey museums, 1971-72.

2. The modular and Smith's work on a highly experimental architect is advised on Sam Wagstaff's article, "Talking with Tony Smith," *Artforum*, December, 1966.

3. Tony Smith, catalogue of exhibition at the Widener Athenaeum, Haverford and the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1964-67.

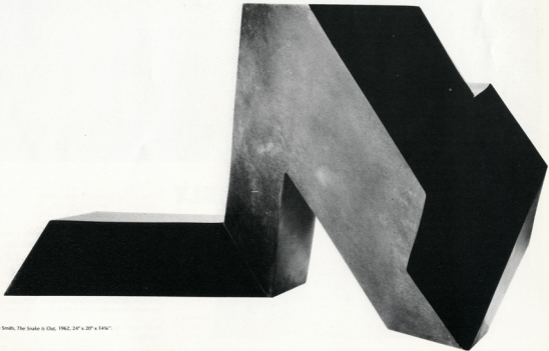
4. Smith has always remained aloof from later controversies over painting that engaged his good friends of the early '50s. The only "first" he claims is recognition of Newman, Pollock, Rothko, and Still as giants. "The Four Horsemen," as he called them, "Tony Smith: Talk about Sculpture," *Art News*, April, 1971, p. 60.

5. Although all the sculptures have hitherto been black, he has no innate aversion to colored sculpture. The model for a piece to have been built in Memphis is painted red and silver, mounted about an important sculpture in the museum. Pittsburgh will be yellow so that it will not disappear between two large dark buildings.

7. According to the *Encyclopedia of Physics*, the Fermi surface of a metal, semiconductor, or semiconductor is that surface in momentum space which separates the energy states which are filled with free or quasi-free electrons from those which are unfilled. . . . It is a surface of constant energy. . . .



Tony Smith, *Chief (Wandering Rocks)*, 1967, stainless steel, 22 1/2" x 37" x 8 1/2".



Tony Smith, *The Snake is Chief*, 1962, 24" x 20" x 14 1/4".