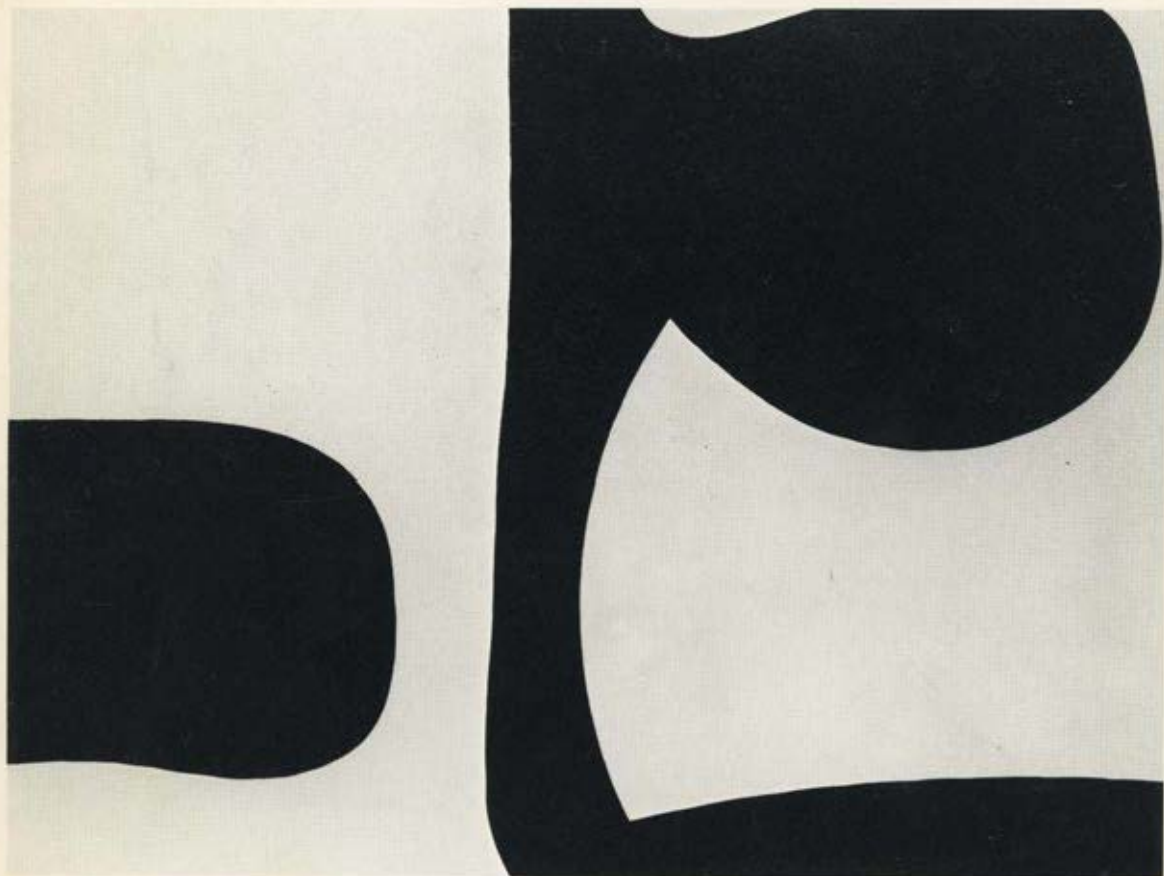


**TONY SMITH**



**PAINTING AND SCULPTURE**

**University of Maryland Art Gallery**

TONY SMITH  
Painting and Sculpture

Foreword by Eleanor Green

University of Maryland Art Gallery  
*February 8 to March 8, 1974*

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*Cover:* UNTITLED, 1962  
48 x 60 inches  
Lent by the artist

The great talent of Tony Smith, as a sculptor, has of course been acknowledged by a great number of national and international exhibitions. However, our show at Maryland is the first show devoted to Mr. Smith as a painter as well. The great example of Rodin, Carpeaux, Maillol, and naturally Michelangelo underscore the existing questions which can be described as "sculptors' painting." We are very happy indeed to have been granted the opportunity to raise such questions in the case of Tony Smith. His art—transcending minimal art, with organic overtones—is not easy to describe with an art historical cliché. One thing is certain. This art contains that aura of mystery that surrounds every truly creative sculptural work.

I should like to express my thanks to the University administration which as usual gave us warm encouragement and to Dr. Eleanor Green, Director of the Gallery. Dr. Green must be given full credit for the organization of the exhibition, which she did with her customary skill and scholarship.

George Levitine

*Chairman, Department of Art*

It is often true that the greatest artists are the easiest to work with. Tony Smith is a giant.

This is my second opportunity to collaborate with him on an exhibition; both have involved the mocking up of a piece of sculpture, both have incurred continual demands on his time and have put a strain on his health. Nevertheless, he has continued to extend himself to meet all requests. Most recently, he has gone through years of work in his studio to select the show, has interrupted other work to come to Maryland whenever he was needed and, has not only released whatever was wanted from his own holdings but has arranged loans from others. We are grateful.

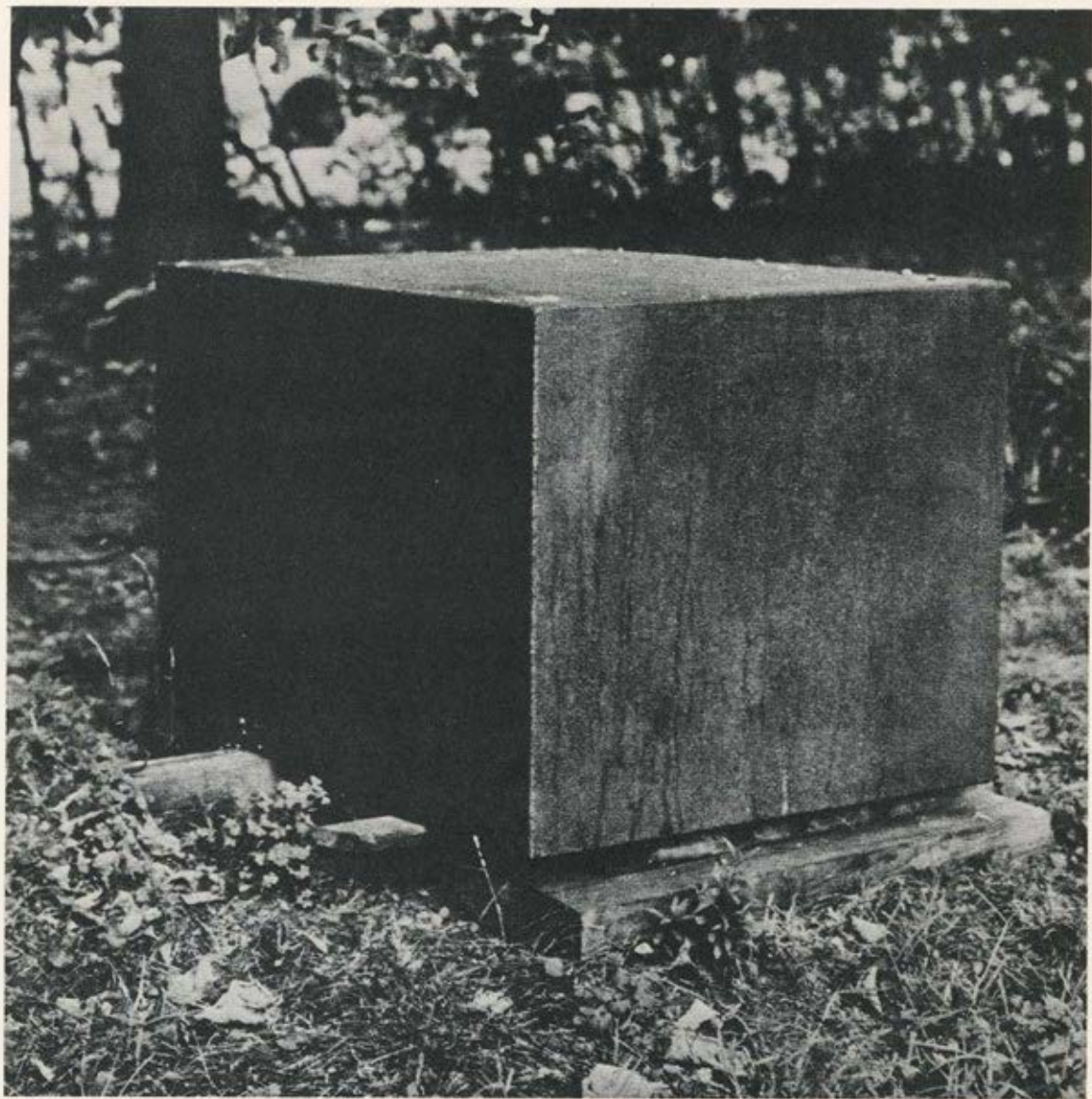
I would also like to thank Jane Smith and Donald Droll for their continuous support during preparation of the exhibition, and Ursula Erhardt for her help with the catalogue.

The lenders to the exhibition, Dr. and Mrs. Joseph V. Crecca, Professor and Mrs. James Zito, Scott Burton, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Weinstein, and Jane Rosenthal, have been gracious in acquiescing to requests from the artist.

Finally the show only became a reality at the University through the fine cooperation of staff and students. Jean Federico has been, as always, indispensable; Joseph Shannon, Edward Schiesser, John Melius and others worked on *New Piece* under the direction of Morris Shuman, Richard Klank and Linda Simon designed the catalogue; to all of them, to Fred Johnson, Assistant Director of Physical Plant, and to Imre Meszaros, Fine Arts Librarian, THANKS!

Eleanor Green

*Director, Art Gallery*



BLACK BOX, 1962  
22½ x 33 x 25 inches  
Lent by Fourcade, Droll, Inc.

## TONY SMITH: PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

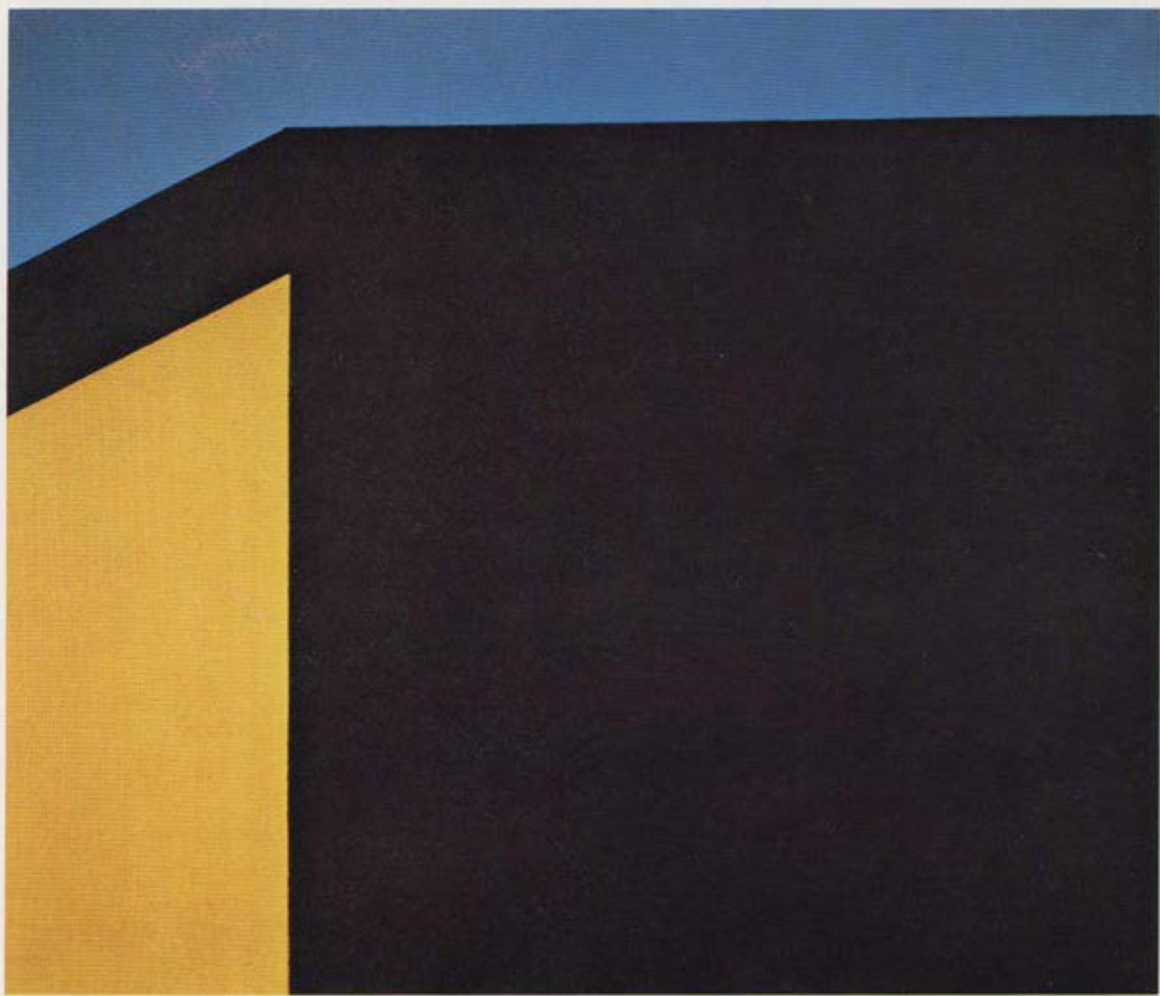
The more Tony Smith's sculpture and painting is seen and the longer it is experienced, the more cryptic and ambiguous it becomes. Even in the cool aesthetic climate of the mid-sixties the first rectilinear pieces shown asserted more than abstract principles of volume and mass. Deceptively comprehensible at first glance as the rectilinear parallelepiped *Black Box* or visually paradoxical as *Smoke* with negative spaces in the form of "rhombahedral dodecahedra topologically stretched beyond recognition," all of them demanded more than physical and intellectual perception. Even as these configurations of stereometric forms reveal their anatomy as Euclidean they take on the guise of primeval creatures retreating from too much analysis into the world they have brought into being.

It has been just over a decade now since these things Smith described as "black and probably malignant" began to appear on his lawn in South Orange. Provocatively incongruous among the Shingle Style houses of the genteel New Jersey suburb, the crudely made plywood structures were known only to a handful of friends and neighbors in the fall of 1963. In the fall of 1967, Tony Smith, "Master of the Monumentalists," and his newly completed *Smoke* shared the cover of *Time* magazine. In 1970 the critic, Gene Gossen, flatly stated he "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>

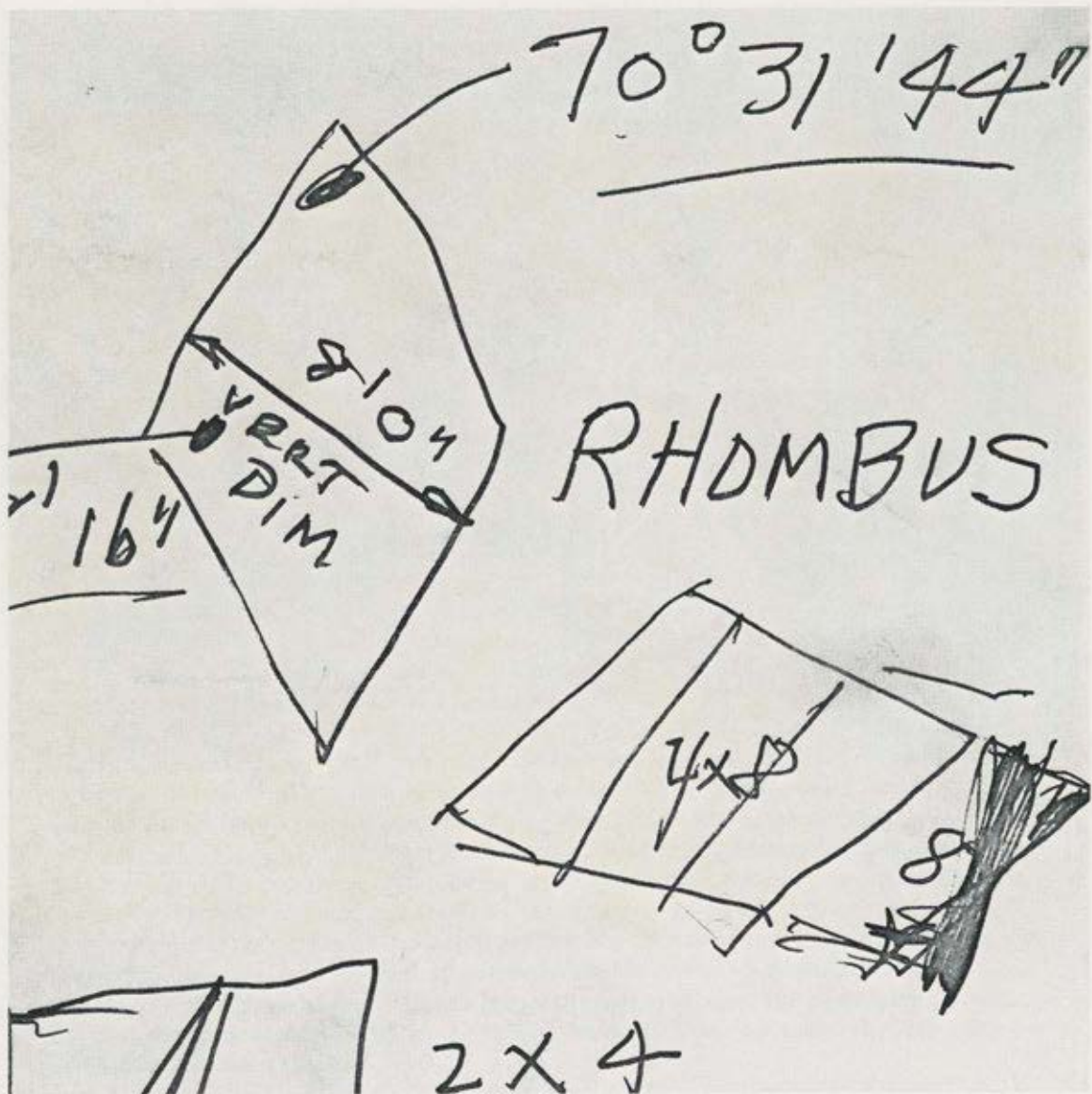
It seemed the pieces sprang forth like Pallas, "armed and undefiled," but they had been gestating for forty years. Their genesis can be seen in constructions done with milk cartons during the fifties, in a small Mondrian-like painting from about 1930, perhaps even in the structures made out of pill boxes during his childhood illness with tuberculosis. In other words, Smith has been building up modular units to make things greater than the sum of their parts ever since he can remember and always endowing his constructions with a life of their own.

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

These "germs" because they are elemental in form are perhaps the most difficult and enigmatic of all the sculptures, and the large ones, by sheer size, are especially cryptic and menacing, defying even physical perception.

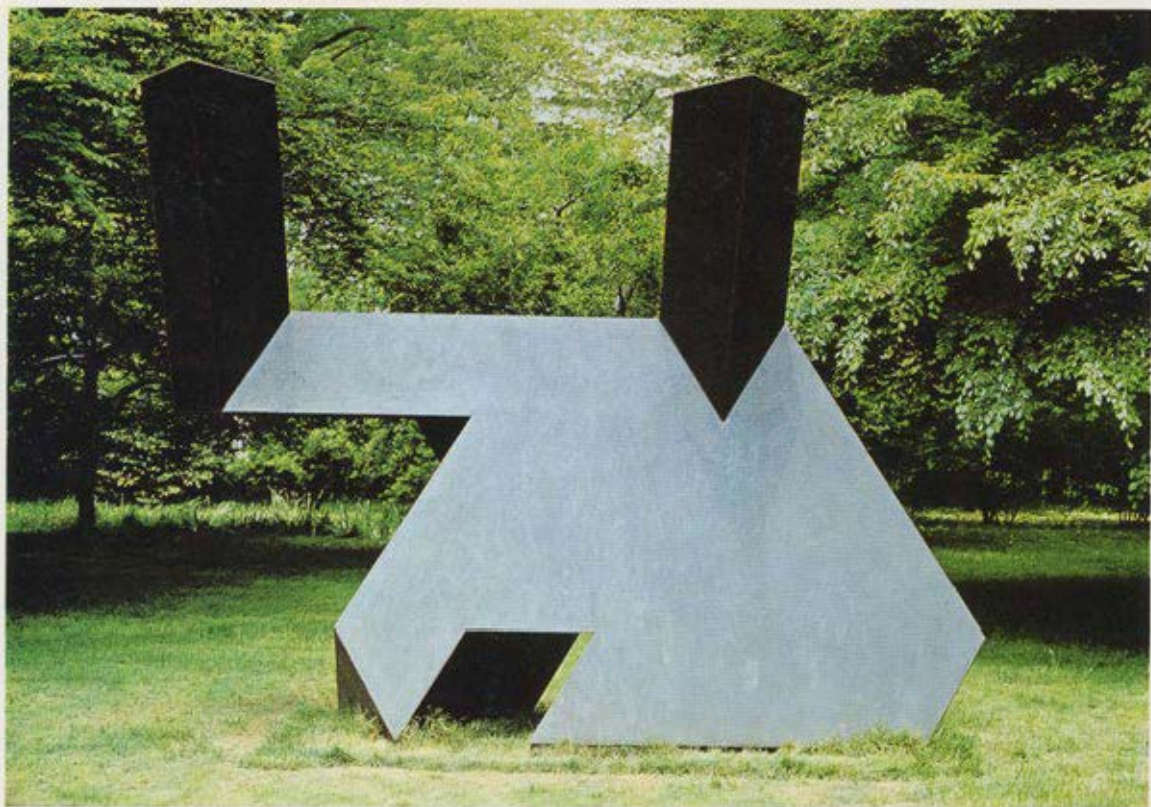


UNTITLED, 1962  
42 x 48 inches  
Lent by the artist



NEW PIECE, 1966  
96 x 96 x 204 inches  
Working sketch





MOSES, 1968  
138 x 180 x 88 inches  
Lt. John B. Putnam Jr Memorial Collection;  
Princeton University

*Black Box*, being only twenty-two and a half inches by thirty-three by twenty-five inches offers three faces to the viewer simultaneously. The mind instantly and correctly reads the ninety degree 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 literally and figuratively) arises. Whatever fantasies follow, at least the form is known, whereas the cube *Die* being six feet on a side never reveals to a man shorter than a basketball player more than two faces at once. Given this scant data it is not immediately clear that it is indeed a cube. It remains formally contradictory even though true to its name it eventually shows itself as one of a pair of giant unmarked dice; it also, by scale as well as title, carries the ominous implications of the other meaning of the word. As the artist remarked, "six feet has a suggestion of being cooked. Six foot box. Six foot under."<sup>2</sup>

The title of *New Piece*, on the other hand, gives no more clue to its essence than a photograph or the geometer's explanation that it is a rhomboidal hexahedron. Approached straight on, it appears a slightly tipsy stele, inscrutable, leaning away to avoid confrontation. Then, contradicting the old axiom that one view of sculpture leads logically to the next, what has been seen as a sharply receding second plane flattens out, a chevron appears (wings spread). It becomes muscular, monolithic, implacably planted, too large for the enclosing space. It fleetingly contracts to a cube drawn in perspective then looms forward (poised for flight) forcing the intruder back a step or two in hopes that retreat will offer a solution to the connundrum. It does not, it only intensifies the disquieting sensation that this presence, not content to simply *be* is in the process of *becoming*. It is as if movement around the piece releases its potential energy effecting further transmutation.

If Smith can vivify relatively simple forms, he can evoke and identify well defined personalities in the more obviously anthropomorphic sculpture. As every beast in the field and every fowl of the air was brought to Adam to see what he would name them, the artist waits until a piece is complete and then by a Freudian, telescopic process of free association assigns a title. *Black Box* and *New Piece*, straightforward names without allusions, are the exception. Sometimes, as in *Smoke* where there was an endless, confusing interplay of voids and solids like the trail from a cigarette, they refer to the configuration. Frequently, as in *Moses* there are multiple references: the upthrusting members simultaneously recalled the horned Moses from early translations of Exodus and the upraised arms of Rembrandt's Moses preparing to break the commandments; the slanting planes could stand for the tablets themselves or, on a sunny day, it might be that "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, *Gracehoper*, "... always jiggling ajog, hoppy on akkant of his joyicity, (he had a partner pair of findlestilts 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 *Gracehoper* with the sculpture.

Now whim the sillybilly of a *Gracehoper* had jingled through a jungle of love and debts and jangled through a jumble of life in doubts afterworse, wetting with the bimblebeaks, drikking with nautonects, bilking with durrydunglecks and horing after ladybirdies

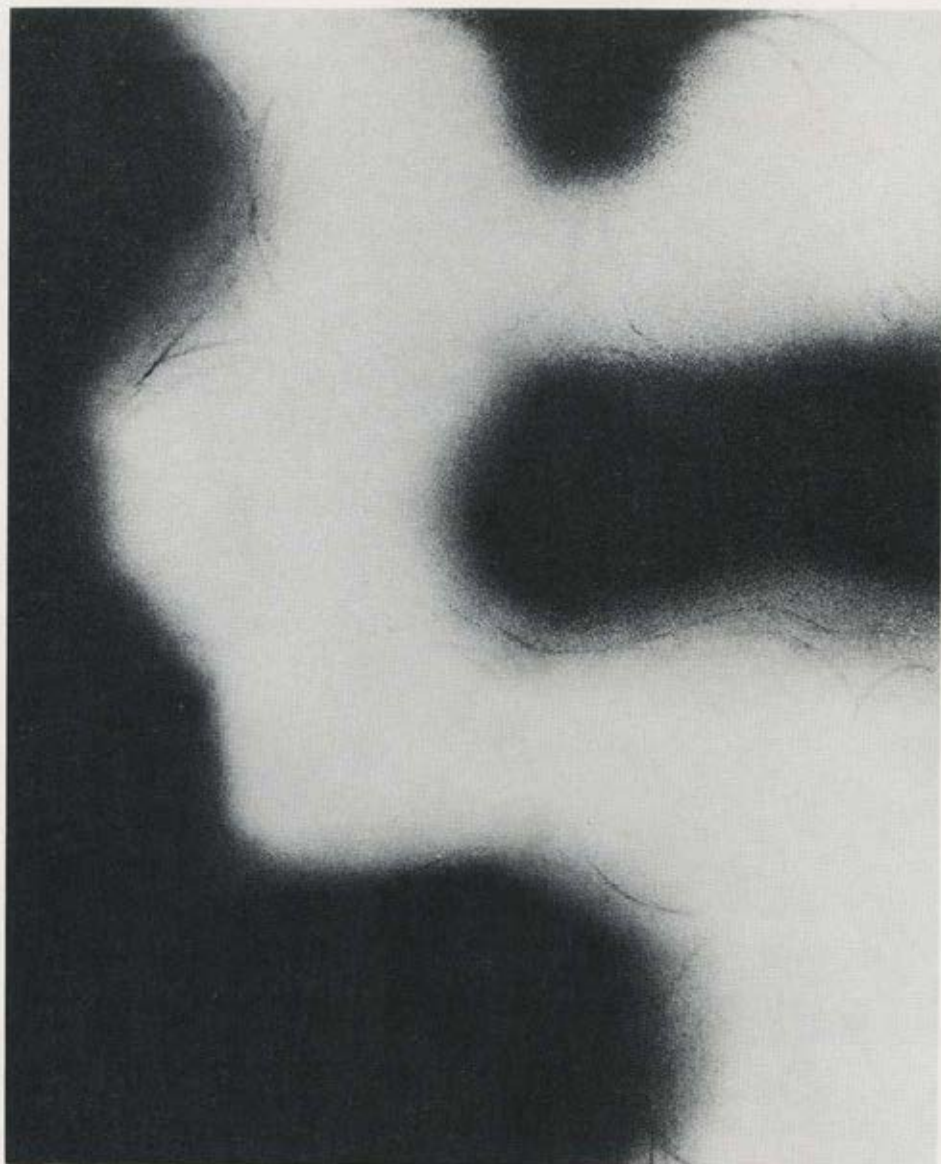
He had eaten all the whilepaper, swallowed the lustres, devoured forty flights of styearcases, chewed up all the mensas and secclles, ronged the records, made mundballs of the ephemerids and vorasioused most glutinously with the very timeplace in the ternitary—not too dusty a cicada of neutrimment for a chittinous chip so mitey. But when *Chrysalmas* was on the bare branches, off he went from *Tingsomingenting*. 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 leivnits in his hair made him thought he had the *Tossmania*.

The anthropomorphic connotations of the sculpture are sometimes reinforced by seeing sensuous, curvilinear forms more traditionally associated with biology, anatomy, and organic growth that appear in the paintings. Sometimes, but not always. The relationship of the paintings to the sculpture is seldom obvious. 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.

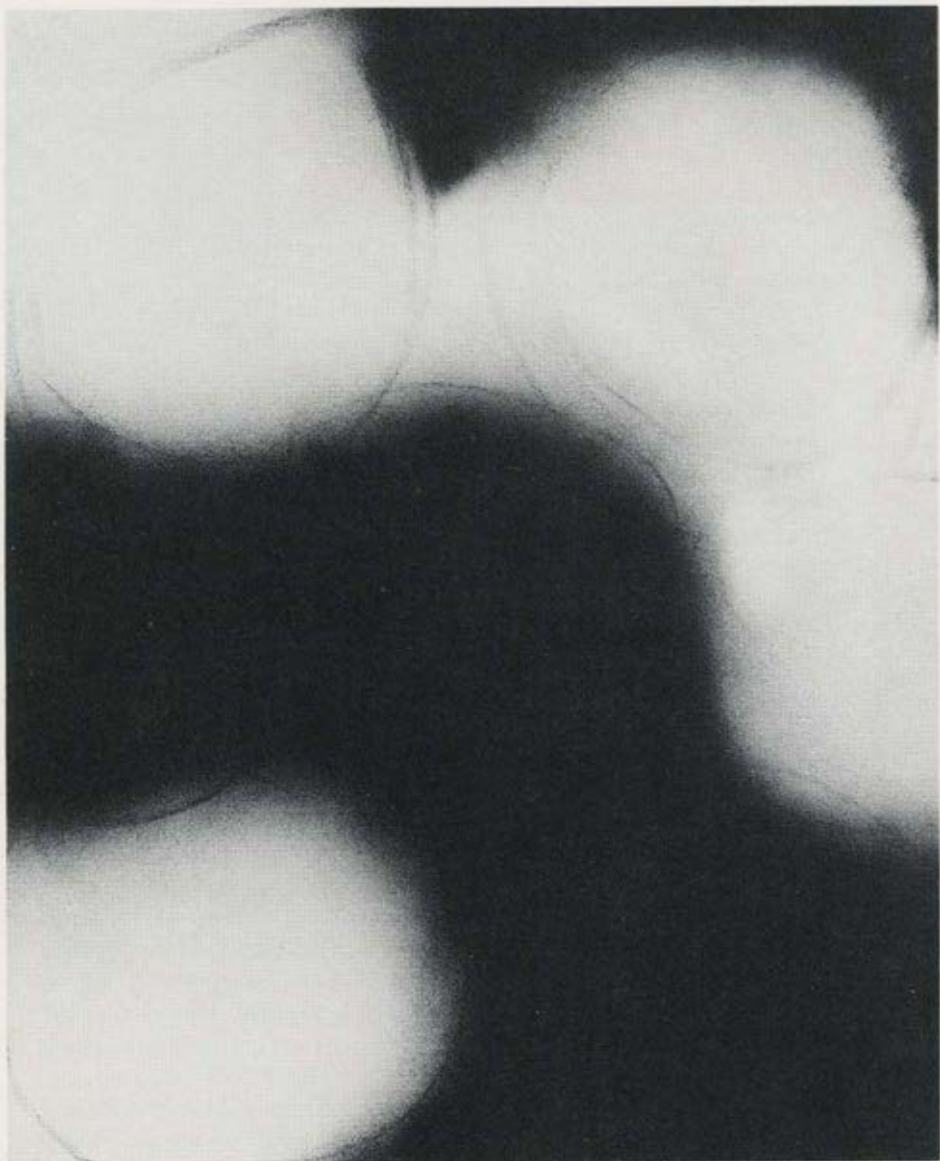
The usual chronological line of development from figurative to progressively abstract which is to be expected from artists of Smith's generation is completely lacking in his oeuvre. The earliest extant works are small paintings done about 1930 before he had any formal art training. They are small, and indicative that, in spite of the classical education he had been reluctantly receiving at Jesuit schools, 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.



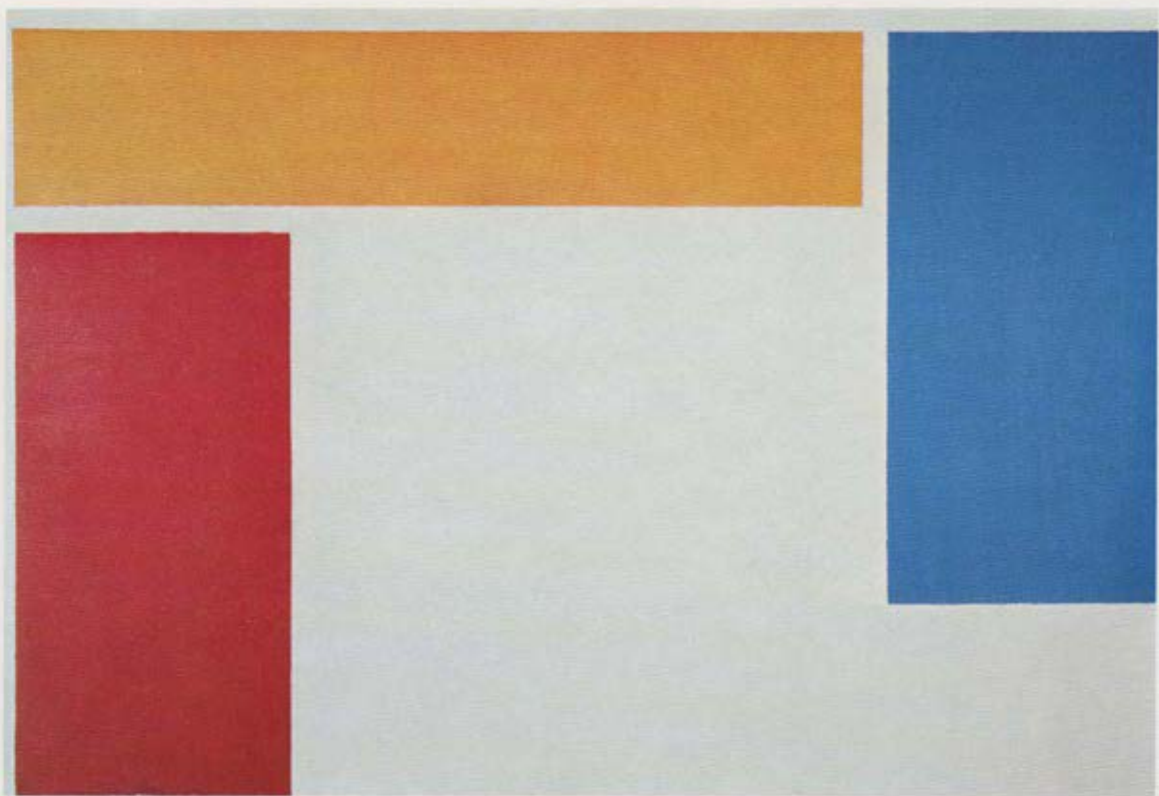
GRACEHOPER, 1961  
23'H x 22'D x 46'L  
Detroit Institute of Arts



UNTITLED  
30 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist



UNTITLED, 1956  
30 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist



UNTITLED, 1962  
64 x 46½ inches  
Lent by the artist

The evidences of hero worship disappear almost immediately among an almost bewildering variety of abstract paintings done over a period of four decades. There are no internal clues to dating; sorting through the canvases 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. Actually, dating doesn't seem very important to this body of work.<sup>3</sup> Groups of paintings were done when Smith was exploring one idea or another, broken off when his work was interrupted for months or years and another avenue explored when he returned to painting. 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 thirties that might be miniature renderings of sixties sculpture; there are also lushly painted canvases with free flowing forms, there are tightly structured paintings with interlocked hard edge color areas holding the forms on the matte surface. There are overall paintings, paintings where rectangles or dumbbell forms float on the ground. There are canvases directionally banded in solid colors that have been likened to Jersey Turnpike signs and there are diffuse, soft-focus spray paintings. The variety of mode covers a good many of the sub-styles of the last few years; initially it would seem, but for the relatively small size of the canvases, that 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 the artist is correct when he 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 the one with red, yellow, and blue, on white ground were done about the same time as *Black Box*. They also bear a relationship to a single small painting of 1933 as if the genus of a long dormant idea came to fruition only after the artist telephoned a steel fabricator in 1962 to order *Black Box* made five times the size of a card file. Afterwards, Smith, the painter, disassembled the work of Smith, the sculptor, taking apart the compact three dimensional configuration of rectangles and proposed alternative reorderings on a single plane. It is odd, painting usually being considered a medium more conducive to illusionism than sculpture, that these canvases are more concrete and less open to subjective interpretation than the three dimensional pieces. It may well be a matter of where the burden of apprehension is placed. 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

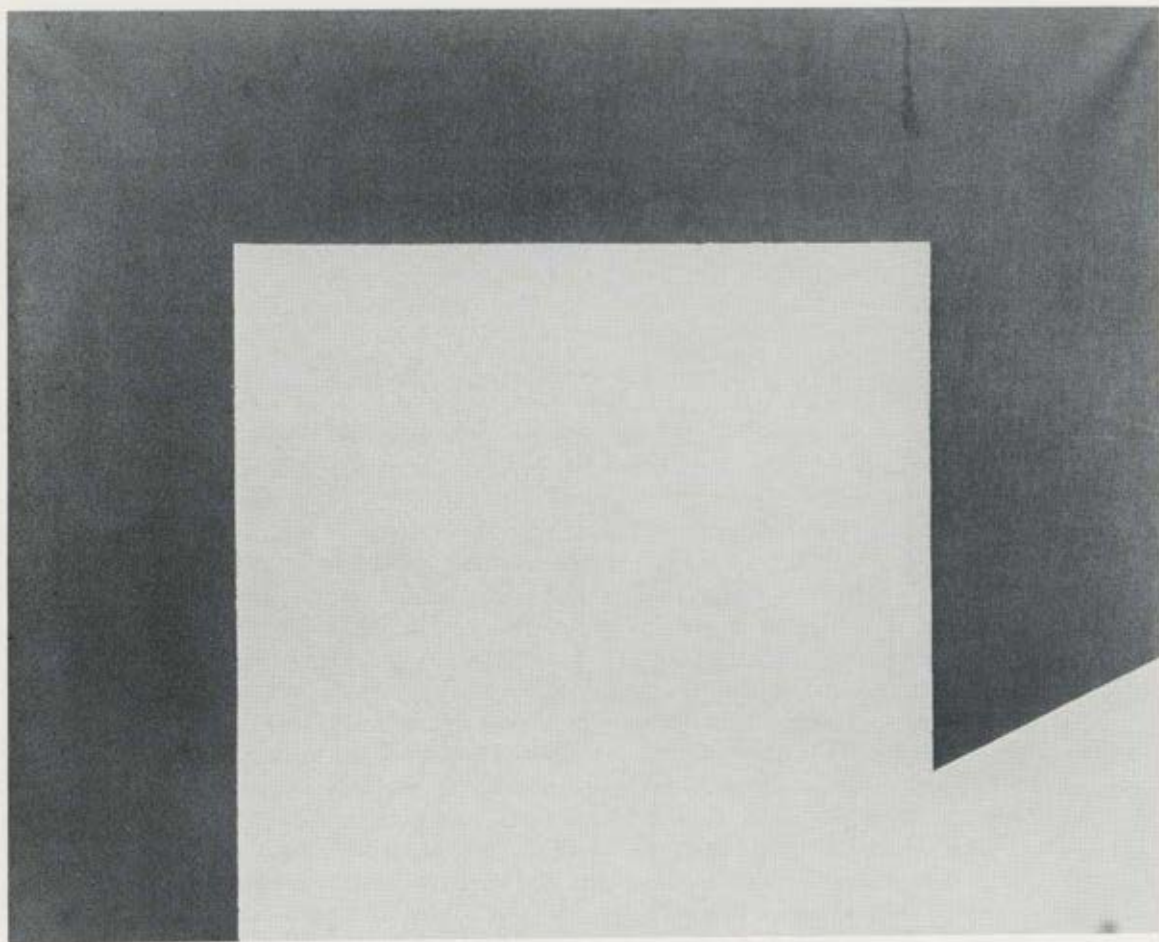


some discrete irrational solutions. If related groups of Smith's paintings can be considered as serial (it is not clear whether or not they precisely fit the definition) they tend to be closed series done in short periods of time. Smith is not patient enough to make a career of exploring all possible 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 series more explicitly organic working with free forms growing inward from the edges on the canvas or he may add color as another variable to the equation.

The colors tend to be close to the primaries, unmixed and readily available commercially. Smith has never been preoccupied with subtleties of hue and tone, rather, as he said in a 1971 interview, he is "mainly involved with trying to make an equilibrium over the surface based on fairly close values."<sup>4</sup> Other remarks made in the same interview, however, give the impression the artist has distinct, if not contradictory, feelings about the proper relationship of color to form in sculpture and painting which also apply to different modes of painting. It is rather a chicken and egg question of whether color is generated from shape or shape from color.<sup>5</sup>

In discussing colored sculpture he might have been speaking of the geometrically structured paintings as well when he said, "the essential premise is primitive, giving clarity to certain kinds of forms, but very often using the colors symbolically . . ." In the black, blue, and yellow painting, for example, the two absolutely flat "primitive colors" act in exactly this way; they clarify but do not determine shapes and, at the same time, reinforce the surface equilibrium as they lock the black form in place.

The case of paintings with amorphous forms is quite different. Of these, 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." The artist was probably referring specifically to the *Louisenberg* series of modular canvases with floating "peanut" forms done in Germany in 1953 which were intended to be hung as a unit. The stay in Europe had been a time of thinking in terms of building from very simple units. In addition to the *Louisenberg* painting there were architectural projects for workingmen's quarters with houses and courtyards interspersed as they were in Aknaton's new city of Amarna; there were also sculptures made from milk cartons; and daily drawings in charcoal on eighty by one hundred centimeter wrapping paper that anticipate the organic black and white paintings of the early sixties. Then, on return to America, the artist was momentarily fascinated by aerosol cans of paint, new on the market since his departure. Both the black and white spray paintings and the big, blue, silver, and ochre canvas have an understructure related to the *Louisenberg*



EXIT  
40 x 50 inches  
Lent by the artist



UNTITLED, 1956  
204 x 70 inches  
Lent by the artist

series. The diameters of the circles are the same as in the earlier paintings, but their number is vastly increased. Instead of loosely connecting pairs of circles to make dumbbell, peanut, or, as Lucy Lippard calls them, "testicular" forms floating on the ground, the entire surface is overlaid with tangent circles in a grid pattern. As always, the beginning is modular, repetitive, then in this case the grid is largely obliterated in the painting process. Several circles treated as units of color, their edges made soft by the technique of spraying, cease to seem geometric. The soft-focus forms that emanate from the canvas become a function of the color and not of the compass as they couple and become confluent. It is this painting, least like any of the sculptures in outward form, that most closely approximates them in the sense that pulsing movement and the implication of life is effected by modification of primary geometric forms. The colors that effect this transformation of the form are not artist's colors; the blue, silver, and ochre (it was labeled as gold in the can) are just what happened to be available in the store, yet by their very banality 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, there are sculptures based on diagrams of Fermi surfaces.<sup>6</sup> They will be elegantly garbed in marble, ordered according to the sophisticated concepts of solid-state physics and modeled by the finest Italian craftsmen; nevertheless, they will echo the erotic forms and mood of the spray paintings from the mid-fifties. The large silver and blue canvas was quickly executed with commercial spray cans the summer before the artist'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 conceptual or how direct 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 aesthetic has never been reductive. To the contrary, his sensibility is compound; his method a kind of alchemy which turns both geometric and curvilinear forms into metaphors for life and organic growth.

*Eleanor Green*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Eugene Goosen, *Nine Sculptures by Tony Smith*, catalogue of exhibition at Newark and three other New Jersey museums, 1971-2, n.p.

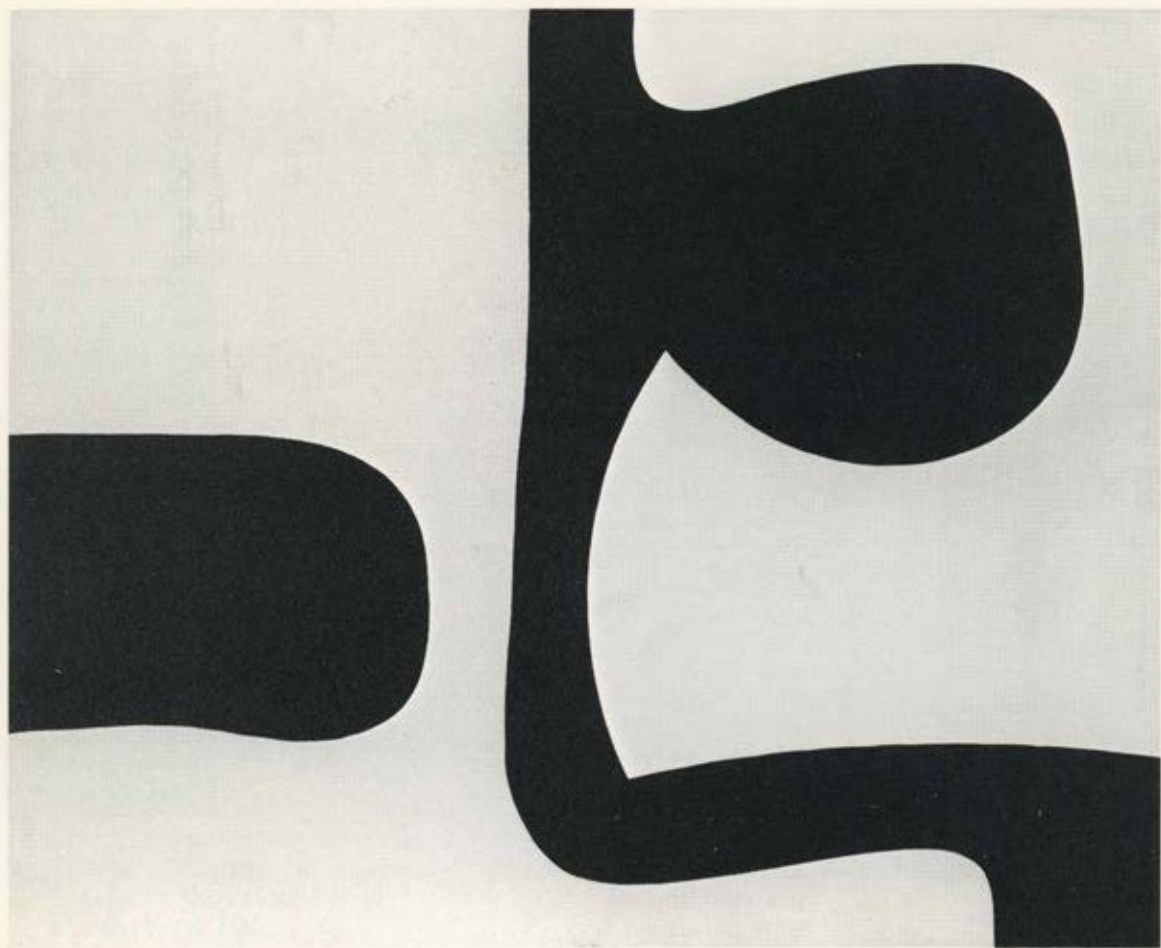
<sup>2</sup>*Tony Smith*, catalogue of exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford and The Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1966-7, n.p.

<sup>3</sup>Smith has always remained aloof from bitter controversies over dating that engaged his good friends of the early fifties. The only "first" he claims is recognition of Newman, Pollock, Rothko and Still as giants, "The Four Horsemen," as he called them.

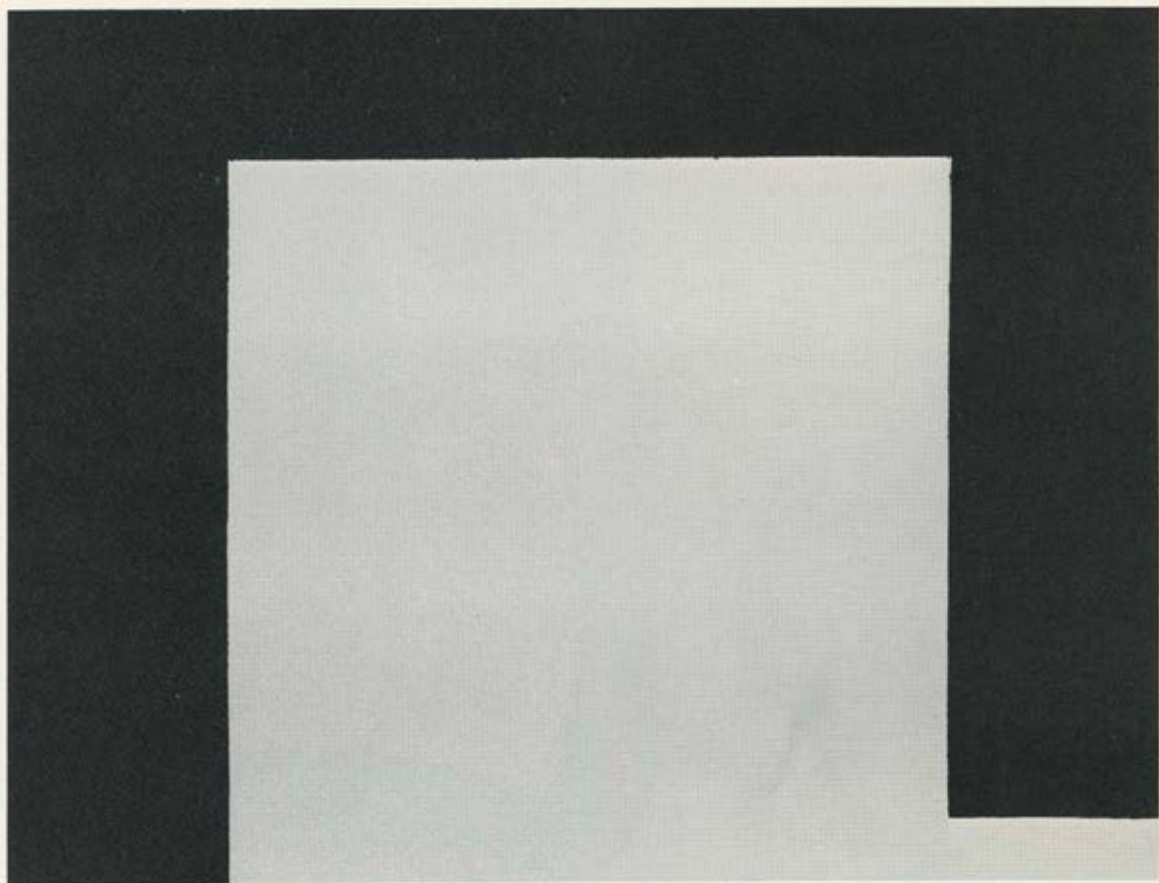
<sup>4</sup>Lucy R. Lippard, "Tony Smith: Talk about Sculpture," *Art News*, April, 1971, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup>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 blue and a monumental sculpture soon to be installed in Pittsburgh will be yellow so that it will not disappear between two large dark buildings.

<sup>6</sup>According to *The Encyclopedia of Physics*, the Fermi surface of a metal, semi-metal, or semi-conductor 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 . . ."



UNTITLED, 1962  
48 x 60 inches  
Lent by the artist



UNTITLED, 1962  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist

## CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

### PAINTINGS

1. UNTITLED, 1953  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
2. UNTITLED, 1953  
39½ x 31¼ inches  
Lent by the artist
3. UNTITLED  
30 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
4. UNTITLED, 1956  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
5. UNTITLED, 1956  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
6. UNTITLED, 1956  
30 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
7. UNTITLED, 1956  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
8. UNTITLED, 1956  
204 x 70 inches  
Lent by the artist
9. UNTITLED, 1962  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Joseph V. Crecca
10. UNTITLED, 1962  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
11. UNTITLED, 1962  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
12. UNTITLED, 1962  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
13. UNTITLED, 1962  
30 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
14. UNTITLED, 1962  
30 x 24 inches  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Richard Weinstein
15. UNTITLED  
40¼ x 64¼ inches  
Lent by Mr. Scott Burton
16. UNTITLED  
36 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
17. UNTITLED, 1962  
64 x 46½ inches  
Lent by the artist
18. UNTITLED  
48 x 60 inches  
Lent by the artist
19. UNTITLED, 1962  
48 x 60 inches  
Lent by the artist
20. UNTITLED  
48 x 60 inches  
Lent by Miss Jane Rosenthal
21. UNTITLED, 1962-3  
52 x 64½ inches  
Lent by the artist
22. UNTITLED, 1962-3  
52 x 64½ inches  
Lent by the artist



23. UNTITLED, 1962-3  
52 x 64½ inches  
Lent by the artist
24. UNTITLED, 1962-63  
52 x 64½ inches  
Lent by the artist
25. UNTITLED  
30 x 24 inches  
Lent by the artist
26. EXIT  
40 x 50 inches  
Lent by the artist
27. UNTITLED, 1962  
42 x 48 inches  
Lent by the artist
28. UNTITLED, 1962  
50 x 40 inches  
Lent by Prof. and Mrs. James Zito

#### SCULPTURES

29. BLACK BOX, 1962  
22½ x 33 x 25 inches  
Lent by Fourcade, Droll, Inc.
30. FOR J.W., 1969  
60 x 46 x 75 inches  
Lent by Fourcade, Droll, Inc.
31. FOR W.A., 1969  
112 x 33 x 60 inches  
Lent by Fourcade, Droll, Inc.
32. HUBRIS, 1969  
5 x 41 x 82 inches  
Lent by Fourcade, Droll, Inc.
33. NEW PIECE, 1966  
96 x 96 x 204 inches  
Plywood mock-up