



HORCHOW

\$5,000
HOME DECOR SWEEPSTAKES
ENTER TO WIN ▶



[?](#) [POLITICS](#) [FINANCE](#) [MEDIA](#) [THE CITY](#) [PROPERTY](#) [CULTURE](#) [LOVE](#) [OPINIONS](#) [OUR CROWD](#) [THE DAILY OBSERVER](#)

[Ben Smith](#) | [NYTV](#) | [Jason Horowitz](#) | [Michael Calderone](#) | [Off the Record](#) | [Anna Schneider-Mayerson](#) | [Financial Press](#)



The Lessons of Modernism, Minus the Mystery of Space

BY MARIO NAVES

David Smith (1906-1965) is generally considered the most significant American sculptor of the 20th century. Certainly, Carmen Giménez, curator of *David Smith: A Centennial*, has bet the farm—or, rather, the better part of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum—on the “melancholy solitude,” “independence” and “grandeur” of the “Blacksmith of Space.”

In thrall to Smith’s protean gift for absorbing the lessons of Modernism—Surrealist portent and Russian Constructivism no less than the sculptural innovations of Picasso and Julio González—Ms. Giménez has laid out an appreciative and perhaps definitive accounting of the *oeuvre*. Smith’s adventures in welded-steel sculpture, derived from the Cubist-inspired practice dubbed “drawing in space,” are given a generous airing. So, too, are his robust sense of humor and his surprising lifelong dedication to the human form, however obscured or distilled.

Clement Greenberg asserted that Smith was “higher than any sculptor since Donatello”—for such a stringent critic, Greenberg was prone to wild hyperbole. Whether or not Ms. Giménez would agree is less important than the dignity she affords the sculptor’s work. In its attention to pacing and aesthetic principle, the installation is a model of its kind. The Guggenheim has rarely been such a pleasant place to visit.

Or so sobering. As a retrospective should, *David Smith: A Centennial* illuminates one artist’s contribution to culture, but the light it shines is less flattering than one might have anticipated. Notwithstanding the scope of Smith’s ambitions or the heady propulsion that motivated the sculptures, the artist who emerges at the Guggenheim seems never to have mastered his *métier*. The pieces get ample room—many are placed in the rotunda’s walkway, allowing visitors to move around them. Yet this tack only underscores how ineffectively Smith engaged with actual space. For a sculptor, that’s some shortcoming.





DAVID SMITH © THE ESTATE OF DAVID SMITH,
LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

David Smith with *Australia*, 1951.

In fact, Smith failed to understand the dimensionality of sculpture. Too often, the sculptures seem like physical transcriptions of pictorial ideas. As a consequence, the pieces can be flabby. *Blackburn, Songs of an Irish Blacksmith* (1949-50), can't even work itself up to meandering; its juxtapositions lack contrast, rhythm and rationale. Smith's hokey figurative allusions are reminders that he was a Surrealist before he was anything else. Scale has little import—when the work is big, there's no discernible reason. Materials are a drag on Smith's remarkable talent; they're never completely transformed. In the end, he comes across as a painter working in the wrong medium.

Absent is the lilt of Miró, the gravity of Giacometti, the grace of González, the brute magic of Picasso—all pivotal influences on Smith's art. Instead, we get an earnest but fussy resolve that's not exacting enough to merit great-sculptor status. To be sure, there are fine pieces on view—*The Royal Bird* (1947-48) melds the primitive and the industrial to impressively tensile effect—but even the best work doesn't much transcend pastiche.

Ultimately, it's Smith's influence that is his true legacy. Richard Stankiewicz, Sir Anthony Caro and Mark di Suvero are all followers. Their art, while not necessarily as rich or as complex as Smith's, is more sculpturally true and, as a result, more aesthetically justified. *David Smith: A Centennial* highlights a wide-ranging but deeply flawed accomplishment. Excitement buzzes around its edges, but less because of the actual art than the possibilities it set into motion.

David Smith: A Centennial is at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, until May 14.

Wintry Mix

The paintings of Lois Dodd, on display at Alexandre Gallery, are funny—not ha-ha funny, but funny as in peculiar, arid and cool. Despite the conventional character of Ms. Dodd's subjects—the Vermont countryside, trees and ponds being her specialty—the pictures themselves aren't conventional at all.

Winter is the title of the show. Ms. Dodd undoubtedly responds to the sweep and beauty of snowy vistas, but the paintings don't dwell on the awe-inspiring or the picturesque. We respond to a canvas like *Gihon River Thaw, Johnson, Vermont* (2005) because of what it does as painting—as a jutting array of spiky brush strokes, say, or an elastic warp of space—and not for its homage to nature.

SPONSORED LINKS

(Panhandle Paradise), the Forgotten Coast of Florida. Invest in paradise today.

Reserve your own private island vacation!

Own a Piece of Paradise in SW Florida.

? 30-70% OFF 1st & Business Class AirFares-Europe,Asia,Australia... Worldwide

OCEANFRONT DEVELOPMENT PROPERTIES
100-50,000 Acres Baja, Mexico

Apts Studio,1-2 bdrm & Rooms! Short/ Long Term; Furn/Unfurnished
1-877-367-7368

It's Winter so Save big on the Luxurious Villas At Covecastles, Anguilla.

Moving? GET IT DONE RIGHT! Flat Rate Moving. NYC's Most Recommended Mover

FLORIDA VACATION RENTALS

High Yield Investment: GET PAID interest every 2 WEEKS. Turn 4 figures to 5 figures. Join FREE.

CONTINUED

1 2 NEXT

You may reach Mario Naves via email at: mnaves@observer.com .

This column ran on page 16 in the 2/20/2006 edition of *The New York Observer*.

 **Print Article**

**SUBSCRIBE TO THE NEW YORK
OBSERVER**

 **Email Article**

 **BACK TO TOP**

SEARCH OUR ARCHIVE

GO

[PAGE ONE](#) | [POLITICS](#) | [FINANCE](#) | [MEDIA](#) | [THE CITY](#) | [PROPERTY](#) | [CULTURE](#) | [LOVE](#) | [OPINIONS](#) | [OUR CROWD](#) | [THE DAILY OBSERVER](#) | [CLASSIFIED](#) | [PERSONALS](#)
[CUSTOMER SERVICE](#) | [ABOUT US](#) | [EMAIL](#) | [GIFT SUBSCRIPTIONS](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#) | [ADVERTISE WITH US](#) | [TERMS OF SERVICE](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#)  (800) 542-0420

COPYRIGHT © 2006 THE NEW YORK OBSERVER, L.P. | ALL RIGHTS RESERVED