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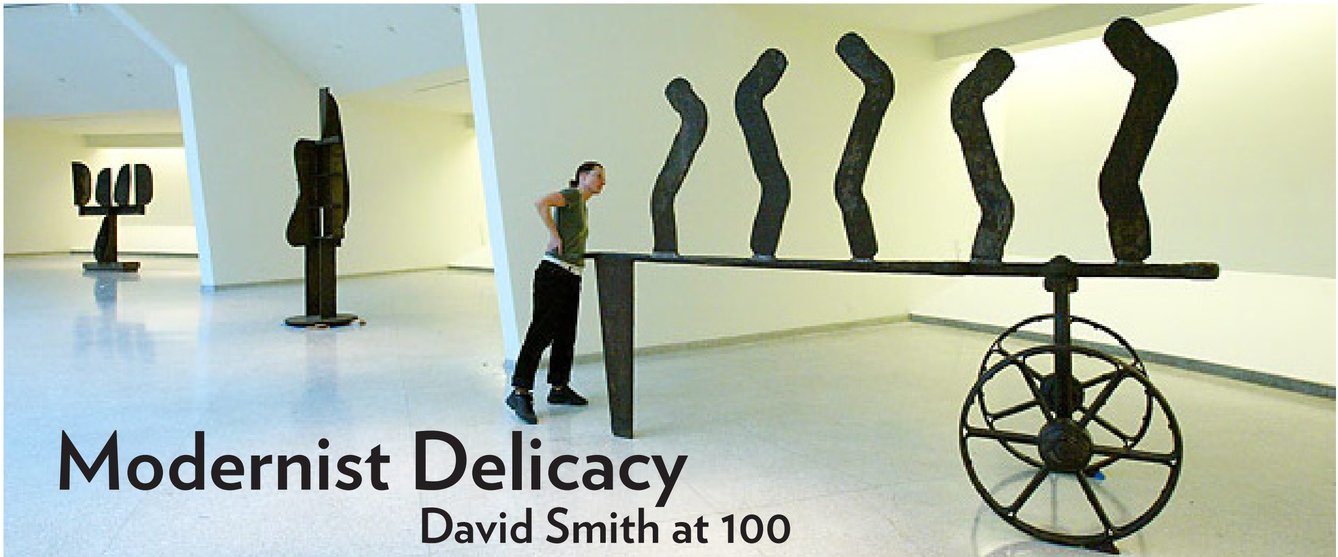
WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS LEISURE



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Modernist Delicacy

David Smith at 100

Art Review | 'David Smith'

By HOLLAND COTTER

SISSIES were second-class citizens in mid-20th-century American culture. And art was a he-man's game: booze, broads, Sasquatch manners, the whole nine yards. Sure, a little sensitivity was O.K., as long as you didn't get carried away. It's as if there was a sign at the Cedar Bar door: Girlie-men need not apply. Except this picture isn't quite right. Look at the art. De Kooning painted the way Tamara Toumanova danced, with a diva's plush bravura. Pollock interwove strands of pigment as if he were making lace. The sculptor David Smith, the biggest palooka of the Abstract Expressionist crowd, floated lines of welded steel in space the way Eleanor Steber sang Mozart's notes, with an unbaroque fineness, an American-style delicacy.

For proof, I refer you, with fervor, to "David Smith: A Centennial" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. It is one of the most beautifully judged displays of American Modernism I've seen in years. Even people cool to Smith's art — I've always felt nitpicky about it — will agree that he puts a best foot forward here.

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Smith is one of those artists best known for their worst work, in his case bulky sculptures of the "important" kind that museums and banks like to buy. Carmen Giménez, the Guggenheim's curator, seems not to share their taste. And like any great editor, which is basically what a great curator is, she has been bold in deciding what should go. In this first Smith survey since 1982, two late series, "Zigs" (1961) and "Circles" (1962), are practically absent, and are not missed.

Delightfully, however, all but one of the 1955 "Forging" series have been brought together and given a space of their own. Skinny and straight, they're like a grove of winter saplings, cuttings from Giacometti. The "Medals of Dishonor" (1939-40), the only body of overtly political work this professedly anticapitalist artist ever made, are present, too, as is a selection of notebooks and drawings.

And the Guggenheim is back. Over the last several years, the museum has been pouring streams of money and brainpower into making Frank Lloyd Wright's grand light-well of an interior look like someplace or something else, stuffing it with costly, old-fashioned, circusy shows that almost any conventional institution could do better, and most now know better than to do at all.

The current show interrupts that pattern. In Ms. Giménez's ultra-clean installation, Smith's mostly modest-size sculptures are set wide apart on the ramps, leaving expanses of white wall. This allows Wright's spiral to assume its famously diffused glow. And it lets Smith's dark metal sculptures be exactly what Ms. Giménez says they are: drawings in space. In short, what you get is a Guggenheim experience as well as a David Smith experience, which add up to a Modernism experience, with all the optical rigor and boutique-spirituality that that implies.

As in any career survey, an artist's personality is also in play. Smith said that where you found his art, you would find him. And he makes an expectation-altering appearance here.

Born in Indiana in 1906, descendant of blacksmiths, son of a Methodist schoolteacher, he has come down to us as a kind of Paul Bunyan figure, a giant striding out of the frontier with welding tools strapped to his back. In fact, he did support himself as a machinist and welder for years after arriving New York City in 1926. But he came wanting to be an artist. Soon after arrival, he married one, Dorothy Dehner, and began taking painting classes at the Art Students League.

For a while, the couple lived a footloose life. In 1931, they went to the Virgin Islands and stayed for eight months. In 1935, they traveled in Europe, where, along with collections of African, Greek and Sumerian art, Smith saw firsthand the work of the contemporary artists he would come to measure himself against as a sculptor: Picasso, Giacometti, Julio González.

The show has intriguing souvenirs from those years. The earliest are small assemblages Smith made from scraps of wire, wood and Virgin Island coral. The essentials of his later work are here: images from nature (birds, shells, human figures), floating forms and psychological tensions.

After Europe, Smith made tabletop-size cast- and welded-iron pieces, and kept making them into the 1940's. One, "Reliquary House" (1945), is like a Joseph Cornell box in bronze, a miniature stage populated with slightly scary things: a phallic biomorph lying like a mummy on a shelf, a larval Buddha set within the clawlike petals of a lotus. Or is it a Venus flytrap?But as early as 1936, we have something quite different in openwork pieces like "Aerial Construction." Here, the drawing in space begins, with angular connect-the-dots patterns that will

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grow gradually more organic. This style, which shares some of Pollock's dripped daintiness, culminated in two virtuosic 1951 sculptures: "Hudson River Landscape" and "Australia," the one a see-through vista of mountains and clouds; the other a fantastic animal, leaping almost free of linear containment.
These two pieces, which stand apart from a show otherwise arranged chronologically by theme and series, are the first things you see when you enter the museum. And by the time Smith made them, he had been living for more than a decade in a farmhouse at Bolton Landing in upstate New York.

Despite his removal from the city, Smith was no recluse. An art world insider, adept at navigating professional politics, he visited Manhattan regularly. But he was a workaholic, and life in the country eliminated all but the most basic distractions. Mow the field, shovel the snow, get the mail, then all the rest of the time was for the studio.

The country also meant nature, to which he had a Romantic attachment. And it meant space. As a young artist in the 1930's, Smith had often photographed his small sculptures outdoors and against the sky to give the illusion of large scale. Upstate, where there was endless sky, the work became monumental.

It developed in other ways, too. In the "Agricola" series of 1952, enclosed shapes fully burst open, sending lines bristling and fanning upward like sea plants, or ganglia, or grass. In the "Forging" series those single lines became sculptures themselves. The same was true, in more complicated ways, in the "Tanktotems" of the 1960's. Quasi-figural pieces with high-perched heads and oddly angled legs, they look like a marriage of African art and Martha Graham dancers.

By the 60's, Smith was a veteran star. He had begun to find steady buyers, though he actually seemed reluctant to sell much of his work, preferring to hold onto it. In 1962, he went to Italy for a month, turned out 27 amazing sculptures there, the "Voltri" series, and saw them installed together in an ancient Roman amphitheater.

Back in Bolton Landing, he produced the stainless steel "Cubi," which proved to be his best sellers; they are the Smiths most people know. But in the two years before his death in an auto accident in 1965, he became intensely focused on the dozens of his sculptures, new and old, that he had, over the years, placed in the fields around his house. Constantly rearranging and repositioning them, he effectively became the curator of his own grand career survey.

I know these installations only from photos, and I've never much liked what I've seen. The preponderance of the late sculpture is a problem. Smith always expressed contempt for museums and corporations, but this work is geared to them. More off-putting, though, is the way he installed the works, either in grim regimental battalions or corralled together and set in conflict, like battling animals in an open-air zoo, with Smith, the master keeper, overseeing all.

A fair chunk of the art of the Abstract Expressionist era from which Smith emerged was fueled by mythologies of power, turmoil, conquest. Artists were encouraged to see themselves as embattled heroes. Such attitudes have never felt as hollow as they do now, with machismo again ruling the world. So it comes as a relief to find this aspect of American Modernism played down at the Guggenheim. Indeed, Ms. Giménez offers an alternative to it in a view of Smith's art that emphasizes a dynamic of organic growth rather than conflict and conquest.

If exhibitions can be said to unfold, this one does, like a flower. Starting up the ramps you see the nuggetlike buds that are the early sculptures. As you move on, the sculptures loosen up, open up, get larger but lighter. In the "Voltri" pieces at the very top, the work gains weight and scale, but also self-mocking humor that will prove the saving grace of some of his later work.

How can you not smile at "Voltri VII," with its five phallic snakes doing a hula, or at the funky, divided panel in "Voltri VI," like a silhouette of giant ballet slippers in plié position?

Maybe a century on from this Smith centennial, when the strut-swagger attitudes in American Modernism are forgotten, people will not see Smith as the big lug of legend, but as a sculptural draftsman of wit, tough delicacy and unexpected grace. Ms. Giménez's show lets us think so.

"David Smith: A Centennial" remains on view through May 14 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street, (212) 423-3500.

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