

Man of steel

A Guggenheim exhibit celebrates the centennial of a generation's greatest sculptor

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February 12, 2006

David Smith may not be a household name, his celebrity not quite on a par with his contemporaries Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, but he struts by their side in the macho pantheon of 20th century Modernism. And these days, his sculpture is worth more than its weight in gold: In November, a massive steel piece from 1961 sold at auction for \$23.8 million at Sotheby's, the highest price ever paid for a contemporary work.

Smith's reputation is secure as the greatest sculptor of his generation. Like his painter friends, he forged an abstract expressionist language that was bold, muscular and delicate at the same time. Unlike most of them, he kept changing and trying new things. Where Pollock's breakthrough was followed by a sad decline and Rothko kept up a steady stream of floating rectangles, Smith grew and evolved and his work kept getting better.

Guggenheim retrospective

Smith's achievement can be admired at the Guggenheim in a full-bore retrospective celebrating the centennial of his birth. The spare, almost ascetic installation favors his large, sweeping pieces more than the tabletop objets. In the skylit upper bays and top-floor annex, the dark steel floats against the light as it would outdoors, which is how Smith imagined it.

He cultivated an image of himself as a tough metal-twister, a brawny welder who swaggered out of the Midwest to mingle in the 1950s New York art world. Born in Decatur, Ind., in 1906, he was descended from blacksmiths. His father, a telephone technician and part-time inventor, inspired in him a passion for machinery. After a brief stint in art school, Smith got a summer job as a welder and riveter at a Studebaker factory, where he picked up the skills he would cultivate throughout his career.

Smith arrived in New York in 1926, and initially took a turn as a painter. But his affinity for working in three dimensions led him to sculpture, and by 1934 he had installed himself in an improvised studio at the Terminal Iron Works, a Brooklyn foundry. There he welded together works of art out of scrap metal, odd parts of machines and other detritus.

Artistic influences

Like the rest of his cohorts, Smith struggled to come to terms with the inspiration of his European elders. It's impossible not to see Picasso's influence in "Saw Head (1935)" in which he welded an assortment of scraps to the blade of a circular saw. The lopsided face with its beaked nose, eye patch and grimacing mouth recalls Picasso's sense of humor as well as his fondness for the visual pun.

Smith also came under the influence of the surrealists, and his work in the 1930s took a turn toward the hyperserious. Smith invoked Giacometti to guide him in plumbing the depths of his unconscious. The "Reclining Figure" of 1936 is a product of these explorations. It ingeniously marries woman and insect; what first seem like a thin female's bony ribs can equally be read as an upside-down bug's wispy legs, squirming wretchedly in the air. Smith, along with the surrealists, saw women as ambivalent figures, to say the least.

"Reclining Figure" bears a patent resemblance to Giacometti's masterpiece of misogyny "Woman With Her Throat Cut" (1932). The Italian also used arthropodal metaphors; he conflated the female body with that of a splayed mantis, the insect that decapitates its mate during intercourse. He also invoked the scorpion, with its venomous erectile tail. But he neutralized the threat by cutting her throat, leaving her sprawled on the ground in all her hideous vulnerability.

Smith, too, leaves his helpless insect-woman to die in despair.

Throughout the 1940s, the artist continued to work in a heavily symbolic mode. The sculptures of these years have a fussy quality, as if too many discrete bits been heaped upon one another, wedding-cake style. Take "Royal Incubator" of 1949, a green fetus perched on a pedestal, surrounded by an intricate metal framework. This fleshy, ovoid form teeters on two wormy legs and sprouts the sexual parts of both genders. Perched above it, atop a criss-crossing skein of wires, sits what might be a winged guardian - or is it a devil? Smith kept his meanings close to his burly chest.

Around 1950, Smith abandoned these dense webs of signs in favor of a bolder, more abstract vocabulary on a much grander scale. Where the works of the '40s might have been mistaken for high-end tchotchkes, those of a decade later resemble mythical titans.

A career-definer

The breakthrough came with the "Tanktotems" of 1952, which merge all of Smith's interests to date: Part-bird, part-insect, part-woman, part-man, they thrust their huge heads forward, wobbling on skinny limbs. But it's wrong to invoke animal counterparts to Smith's imagery. These sculptures possess only vestigial traces of nature - a few familiar forms metamorphosed

into a terrible beauty.

Smith didn't pause to bask in his profound originality. He kept refining, abstracting and experimenting. He's best known for the "Cubi" series of the early '60s, massive agglomerations of squares and rectangles that add up to the most classically balanced creations of his career. A whole room of the Guggenheim is devoted to these elegant works, but curator Carmen Giménez is justifiably more interested in the breadth and changefulness of Smith's career.

Some retrospectives dribble out; this one culminates in a flourish of big statements. By the time it reaches the top story, the show looks closed and complete. But Smith was killed in a car crash in 1965, so the Guggenheim tribute actually ends not with a final cadence, but an interrupted crescendo.

WHEN&WHERE "David Smith: A Centennial." Through May 14 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Ave. at 89th Street, Manhattan.

For exhibition hours and admission prices,

call 212-423-3500 or visit www.guggenheim.org.

ARTifacts

The knots of significance in David Smith's sculpture - all those abstracted beasts, humanoid shapes, wheels, dancers and runes - cry out for exegesis. The Guggenheim has helpfully called in a corps of explainers for a series of lectures. On Feb. 21, critic and curator Michael Brenson, who is working on a biography of Smith, explores the themes of "Primitivism, Magic and Myth." What was the man doing festooning his lawn in the Adirondack town of Bolton's Landing with brushed-steel totems?

A week later, on Feb. 28, a pack of sculptors discuss Smith's continuing impact. On April 4, a panel of experts gathers to argue about what Smith's sculptures actually mean. On April 25, another conclave looks at the meeting between the master welder and the flexible mermaid of modern dance, Martha Graham. For tickets and a complete list of lectures and special events, call 212-423-3587 or go to www.guggenheim.org.

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