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David Smith with *Australia* (1951), outside his home in Bolton Landing.

ART

Mr. Smith Goes to New York The Guggenheim figures out how to evoke the graceful sculptural groupings that David Smith favored.

BY MARK STEVENS

THE CATALOGUE FOR "David Smith: A Centennial" at the Guggenheim Museum contains several celebrated photographs of the artist's farm at Bolton Landing, New York, where, in the meadows around his home, he arranged dozens of his own sculptures. Smith (1906–1965) did not position them in the carefully tailored, just-so manner of museums. Some were placed in long, ragged lines. Others were gathered into a rural crowd. They had a slapdash, spontaneous air of freedom, as if they'd just stopped milling about. The individual sculptures, far from being faceless, appeared remarkably distinctive. They seemed to be conversing among themselves, and they created connections—both momentary and lasting—with the surrounding woods, light, and sky.

These wonderful photographs of Bolton Landing inevitably create, in the mind's eye, an ideal setting for Smith's work—one the sculptor himself fashioned. Unfortunately, no museum or gallery setting can possibly reproduce that setting. Smith's oeuvre is dispersed. His pieces stand, often alone, in sterile rooms. But curators can learn from the photographs what to emphasize in Smith's art. In this regard, the show at the Guggenheim, which has been organized by Carmen Giménez, is exemplary—a masterpiece of sensitive installation. "David Smith," given the recent history of the Guggenheim,

could easily have become a plodding academic enterprise or an overproduced extravaganza. Instead, it has a pristine, graceful air. Smith's rural crowd is dressed for the city but not ill at ease.

The Guggenheim, which is so unlike a traditional museum, particularly suits Smith. Its ambient light has nature's radiance, and no cramped rooms box up the sculpture. The curators have laid out the artist's familiar history in clear, concise form. From the Cubists and their followers Smith gained a rigorous sense of structure, and from the Surrealists a beguiling sense of fantasy and improvisation. Collage taught him to mix and match and to make use of found objects. A talented welder, he quickly recognized the formal possibilities in Picasso's free, open-ended sculptures and began, early in his life as an artist, to draw in space with metal.

Smith's burly blacksmith's build has led some people to romanticize him as a kind of blue-collar modernist. He certainly understood heft, but, like Pollock, he was not nearly as macho as the clichés suggest. Both artists were intensely lyrical, and Smith, in particular, possessed extraordinary visual intelligence. For all his brilliance, he spent the thirties and forties within the frame of modern con-

DAVID SMITH:
A CENTENNIAL
GUGGENHEIM
MUSEUM.
THROUGH MAY 14.

vention. After World War II, together with his Abstract Expressionist friends, Smith reached for a larger feeling beyond that frame, prewar art having become too small and fine-fingered. He elevated both the physical and metaphysical scale of his work and began drawing in space with a kind of fierce joy.

(*Australia*, his great sculpture from 1951, could be the ancient bird that wings through our dreams.) He immersed himself in nature, finding the human trace in its enlarging energies. A landscape, he wrote in 1947, "is a still life of Chaldean history / it has faces I do not know / its mountains are always sobbing females / ... it is the place I've traveled to and never found."

During the fifties, Smith became increasingly absorbed in making series of works. The curators, to emphasize how one piece seemed to flow from another, have given the High Gallery at the Guggenheim to an ensemble of his Forgings, narrow totemic sculptures made in 1955 that look like abstract Giacomettis; other rooms off the rotunda contain groupings of the Voltri and Cubi series. The Cubis—which he made before his death in a car crash—are probably the most famous abstract sculpture of the postwar period. Geometric but not distant in feeling, they do not literally describe the figure but convey nonetheless a remarkable human presence; they seem more alive than most figurative sculpture does. Made of burnished stainless steel, the shapes have a surface dazzle that can transform mass into light.

The spiral ramp at the Guggenheim encourages viewers to make connections across periods in an artist's work. Usually, these are of just academic interest. Here, however, the coiling evokes the intense sensation of family that Smith created among his pieces at Bolton Landing. Within Smith's oeuvre, there is enormous variety but no ruptures of sensibility; his pieces all have the same DNA. Perhaps the most powerful juxtaposition in the exhibit comes at the opening, where the curators have placed *Australia* near *Cubi I*. On a superficial level, the two could hardly appear more different: One is open in form, the other closed. But each is as strongly, and delicately, balanced as a ballerina on point. And each acknowledges, and transcends, the weight of the world. ■

BACKSTORY

Last fall, David Smith's *Cubi XXVIII* became **the most expensive contemporary artwork ever** sold at auction. Larry Gagosian, bidding on behalf of billionaire Eli Broad, won it at Sotheby's for \$23.816 million. "I was prepared, frankly, to pay **more than what I bid**," Broad told the Website ArtInfo after the sale. The deep-pocketed collector is funding the \$60 million expansion of the Los Angeles County Museum of



Art, where the Smith is **likely to go on display**.