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## David Smith's Heroic, Exuberant Sculptures Shine at Guggenheim

(The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of Bloomberg.)

By Linda Yablonsky

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Feb. 9 (Bloomberg) -- Try building a stairway to the stars from a haphazard succession of welded stainless steel cubes. And then balance them on the edge of a large square tipped on one corner like a blocky ballerina on point.

An impossible task, perhaps. Yet that nimble assemblage of burnished steel blocks is currently anchoring the Guggenheim Museum's exuberant ``David Smith: A Centennial'' on view in New York through May 14.

The work, ``Cubi I," from 1963, is only one of a hundred buoyant moments in the finest single-artist survey that this museum has mounted in years. It is not just the best possible experience of Smith's drawing and sculpture, which has never seemed so joyful, but also shows how the loopy Guggenheim was always supposed to work.

Smith, who died in an upstate car crash in 1965 at the age of 59, was the abstract expressionist who spent more than three decades welding hard, industrial metals into the sculptural equivalent of an unchained melody played in several exquisite parts. At least that's the impression made here.

Starting with the with small, wood-and-coral, Cubist- inspired figures Smith made in the 1930s, the show includes a number of Surrealist-influenced tabletop sculptures from the 1940s, with which Smith developed a personal vocabulary of forms (birds, landscapes, interiors and human figures). It then steps off the pedestal to sample the seven series of tall, freestanding iron and polished-steel abstractions that would occupy his life, including the ``Agricola," ``Sentinel" and painted ``Tanktotem" series, with which he mastered his art in the 1950s.

## Looking From Every Angle

With a luxurious amount of space around each piece, viewers have a chance to encounter the Smith oeuvre close-up, and from every possible angle. A good thing, too, since his work looks entirely different from different points of view.

Here was a welder who loved nature, a formalist who anticipated Minimalism by at least a decade but who never lost his early connection to representational painting. In fact, Smith didn't have the slightest interest in molding solid masses. Transparency was his game. He made sculpture to see through.

``Australia," a seminal work from 1953, is the monumental hieroglyph of an insect-like bird looming over the Guggenheim's rotunda, its antenna-like cockscomb and prickly tail jutting into the air around it. Measuring nine feet across and five feet high, it is made of strips of painted brown steel but it has no bulk, only character.

## `Drawing in Space'

It is a prime example of Smith's hallmark ``drawing in space," the phrase first applied to Picasso's wire sculptures. That also describes the cartoony, semi-abstract forms of the ``Voltri" series, made during a single month in 1962 while Smith was working with found scraps of iron pipes and wheels at an abandoned forge in Italy. One work looks like a fat cactus; another is a wagon carrying a group of flattened poles that suggest couples bowing at a square dance.

These works have a smaller presence than the heroic, gate- like constructions that make up the late ``Cubi" series (named for the square blocks that distinguish each piece), which ultimately defined Smith's identity as an artist. (At an auction at Sotheby's in New York last November, the billionaire collector Eli Broad paid a record

\$23.8 million for ``Cubi XXVIII.") Yet they are the more expressive and alluring.

#### Affection for Art

In 1952, frustrated by the many museums eager to show his work but not buy it, Smith asked the audience attending one lecture, ``Does the onlooker realize the amount of affection which goes into a work of art -- the intense affection -- belligerent vitality -- and total conviction?"

For the duration of this exhibition, at least, the answer is a resounding yes.

``David Smith: A Centennial" continues through May 14 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Ave. at 89th Street. The corporate sponsor is Deutsche Bank. The exhibition was organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou in Paris and Tate Modern in London and will travel to both places. For more information call (1)(212) 423- 3500 or visit <http://www.Guggenheim.org> .

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*Last Updated: February 9, 2006 00:04 EST*

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