

DAVID SMITH: A CENTENNIAL.

Guggenheim Museum, Fifth Avenue at 89th Street; (212) 423-3500. Through May 14.



James
Gardner

IN the history of modern art, David Smith commands a reputation of almost mythic stature. There are intelligent critics who solemnly believe that he was the finest sculptor of the 20th century.

The new retrospective at the Guggenheim certainly makes a powerful case for it.

Part of the reason is that the Guggenheim itself — despite its love-hate relation to the art it displays — has never been put to better use. Each of the white modules into which

it is divided has been given to a single object whose generally dark profile comes alive against this gleaming backdrop.

Smith (1906-1965) is one of those rare artists whose work emerges stronger from a retrospective. The individual objects, though forceful in themselves, derive an entirely new resonance when seen together in the hundreds.

As important, there are no clunkers here. Every last one is of the highest caliber and each displays wit, curiosity and an indomitable will to expand the boundaries of sculpture.

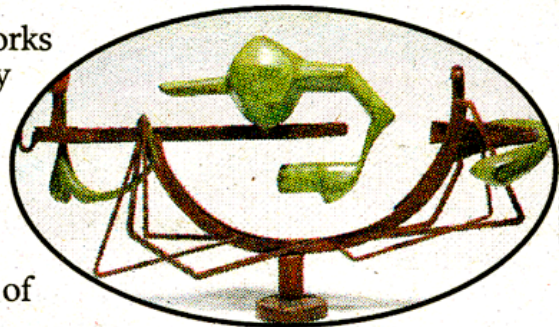
Seeing all the works together, you easily appreciate the general coherence of Smith's career — he came of age in the early '30s, during the heyday of surrealism.

Most of the works here

tend to be smallish bronze objects, abstract but unmistakably suggestive of the spatial realities of the world we inhabit.

It's also true, however, that he breaks out of such constraints toward the end of his career, when his sculptures become simpler. The only criticism of this show is that, by the very nature of the space, it de-emphasizes that large part of his career that was consecrated to big steel cubic sculptures.

Some of these are on display and look splendid. But they are in a side gallery easy to miss.



David Heald

"Egyptian Landscape," 1951.