The Silent Totems Of a Restless Quest

There is always more to be learned about the hard-won, groundbreaking and singular art of the American sculptor David Smith (1906-65). The latest schooling is “The Forgings,” a revelatory exhibition of 10 narrow, adamantly vertical sculptures from 1955 that are on view at the Gagosian Gallery.

Robert Smith

Smith’s four-decade career forms an essential link between the sculpture of the first and second halves of the 20th century, and, not surprisingly, reveals a restless — sometimes tortured — quest of shifting motifs, styles, compositional premises and hands-on techniques. His work has a raw urgency that can be emotionally compelling if sometimes formally unresolved.

Starting in the late 1930s, Smith assimilated the lessons of Cubism and Surrealism, inspired foremost by the sculptures of Picasso, Julio González and Alberto Giacometti. His works were mostly welded iron or steel (or both), assembled into increasingly linear and lyrical compositions using rods, cutout shapes and parts of existing objects. These efforts might conjure figures, birds, interiors or landscapes, but they consistently involved more empty space than material — an equation that was basic to Minimalism. By the early 1950s, Smith was making some of the only sculptures that could be convincingly called Abstract Expressionist (as was Louise Bourgeois), and his attenuated pieces were often described as “drawing in space.”

Everything changed briefly but emphatically with the polished steel verticals that Smith called Forgings. About eight feet high and no more than a few inches across, they are possibly Smith’s most singular, least familiar series, and also his most serene.

Working with extruded steel bars of varying thicknesses, he made the Forgings in 1955 while teaching at Indiana University in Bloomington. Away from his beloved studio in Bolton Landing in upstate New York, with its roll of materials and metal scrap, he returned to basics.

Smith had access to a power forge, with automated hammer and press, which he used with the help of LeRoy Horton, a blacksmith. Mr. Horton would become a friend, as indicated by Smith’s 1956 sculpture “History of LeRoy Horton,” now in the Museum of Modern Art.

Smith made 11 Forgings, and unveiled the group in a solo show at the Willard Gallery in New York in 1956. All but one are at Gagosian, more than have ever been exhibited together since the Willard show.

Set in a narrow gallery, the Forgings may not look as stunning as in the Guggenheim Museum’s centenary retrospective of Smith’s work. But this show presents them on their own in an arrangement that encourages close looking at the variety of silhouette, surface, technique and association within their larger similarities, and illuminates Smith’s working and thinking processes.

With the Forgings, Smith predicts not only Minimalism but Process Art. They are whole without the disparate parts of his welded works and are actually monoliths, albeit unusually slim ones. It is as if Smith, freed from Bolton Landing, decided to concentrate on as much sculptural activity in as small an area as possible, a greatly elongated area that, when placed upright, asserted a commanding yet delicate presence.

These works are in effect highly distilled modern totems, and among the most assured Smith ever created. (In her review of the 1956 Willard show, the critic Dore Ashton lauded him for finally allowing more elegance into his art.) The Forgings are also rich in references that extend from streamlined Easter Island heads, ceremonial African staffs and Japanese swords to Gia-
"Forging II," foreground, one of 10 vertical sculptures created by David Smith in 1955 and now on display at the Gagosian Gallery.

cometti's stringy figures, Brancusi's birds in flight and Barnett Newman's vertical stripes — called zips — which Smith seems to liberate from canvas.

Arranged largely in chronological order, the Forgings reveal Smith exploring, pulling back and then (literally) pushing at the boundaries he had set for himself. "Forging I" and "Forging II" involve only small thickets of pounding marks; mostly, the beams appear to have been simply heated then manipulated, their edges pinched here, tucked there, slightly cut back or curled. Sometimes the results are fairly symmetrical: "II" seems to have a long neck and

a head. Sometimes, they are asymmetrical. The curves and veritable chin of "Forging I" present a figure in profile. "Forging III," involves a lot more pounding: The edges bulge and curve, and the results are less figurative. With "Forging IV," Smith reverts to traditional art motifs and an additive process. Choosing a flat, narrower bar and two smaller pieces, he creates the unavoidable suggestions of a cross and a phallicus.

With "Forging V," "VI" and "VII," Smith pursued an ingenious, organic method of adding elements. He cut holes in the beams and pounded in steel plugs until they were nearly flat. Wonderfully enlivening, the plugs evoke scars, knots on trees, cells inside veins, and sometimes the eyes of alert creatures.

The intimations of nonhuman life play against the ready evidence of process — flurries of scratches and dents accented by black from the metal's impurities. This is a reined-in kind of drawing, not lines looping in space but a surface completely worked over in ways both random and refined.

Smith takes a more geometric approach with "Forgings VIII," using a machine to clamp down on the bar, creating crisp shallow indentations of different lengths. The tapering of the piece toward its base is crucial, as is the fact that Smith painted most of it black. Its crenelated edge can simultaneously suggest a staff, a tool and a musical instrument.

"Forging IX" has fewer indentations including some small round ones, and an altogether more whimsical presence. "Forging XI" has a short plane inserted at its base, and an elongated plane intersecting halfway up. The piece brings to mind the understated elaborations on Russian Constructivism that the Brazilian artist Willys de Castro was making, in painted wood, at the same time. David Smith had a singular, solitary career, both as he lived it and as it exists in history. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the Forgings is how many more ties to other artists and histories they give his work. The company is good for it, and for us.