

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Boston Globe

Brilliant sculptures, beautifully displayed at Clark Institute

Sebastian Smee



WILLIAMSTOWN — The sculptor David Smith died in 1965, when his pickup truck careened off a road not far from Bennington, Vt. He was 58 at the time. His death was as great a loss for American art as the death of Jackson Pollock in a more notorious car crash nine years earlier.

Where Pollock's breakthrough achievement — “all-over” drip painting — was momentous but essentially narrow, Smith's innovations in sculpture spread out broadly before him, like a river in flood.

A kind of collagist in three dimensions, Smith favored steel, and especially discarded farm implements, which he welded together and sometimes colored with an inventiveness, an ebullience, and a rightness that has something almost athletic about it, like a graceful tennis player. His achievement has been matched by none of the hordes of steel sculptors (with the possible exception of Anthony Caro) who lustily took up where he left off.

Smith never accepted commissions. His works are scaled to individual bodies occupying open (preferably outdoor) space. They're responsive to daylight.

Smith was intrigued by the idea of metamorphosis, and by the ways in which forms and identities could unfold out of earlier incarnations. Instead of three-dimensional mass — the traditional concern of sculptors — he liked open assembly, intersecting planes. “I would prefer,” he once said, “my assemblages to be the savage idols of basic patterns.”

He liked to work in improvised series, taking his lead from whatever materials happened to be available. “Circles,” one of the best known and most popular of these series, is the subject of a small but beautiful exhibition in the Stone Hill Center at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

Timed to coincide with the Clark's reopening after a period of renovation and new building, "Raw Color: The Circles of David Smith" was to have opened in concert with "Make It New," a show of Abstract Expressionist and Color Field paintings from the collection of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. But the opening of that show, which will be installed in the new building designed by Tadao Ando, was set back a month, to Aug. 2.

Until then, visitors to the Clark, when not basking in returned Renoirs, Bouguereaus, and Corots, will focus their attention on Smith's "Circles," up the hill.

It's attention they deserve. Made in 1962 and '63, the "Circle" works have a casual authority and brilliance that feels close to timeless. They succeed individually. But they also combine in ways that — playing on intervals in space, harmonies of color, and subtleties of scale and symmetry — approach the finesse and richness of choral music.

All but one of the sculptures have been installed in two long, light-filled galleries divided by a corridor. The ninth, painted all in white, is on the terrace outside.

One gallery contains a small constellation of sculptures and paintings (Smith's paintings, sprayed enamel against abstract stencil shapes, are mostly uninspired). These sculptures occupy the periphery, so to speak, of the "Circle" series. They're either smaller, more conspicuously painterly, or more inclined to extend into three dimensions than those in the next gallery.

None is as riveting as "Circles Intercepted." This upright collage of differently colored hoops (and one dodecahedron), aligned around the same center but of slightly different diameter, is like a compressed version of the four works in the second room. Here, we see a series of circles lined up all in a row, each quite separate, essentially flat, and standing on plinths so inconspicuous they would be mostly invisible in grass.

To these thin disks with circular holes of varying size, Smith welded long flat rectangles (or in one case a semicircle) at jaunty, up-stretching angles. He painted each component part a different color, so that sky blue and black lines stand against a deep red circle, while a green semicircle is welded to a lighter red ring, and so on.

You walk around the Clark's installation as a cautious traveler might tiptoe around a sacred site — reverently, beguiled, drawn into an aura that escapes the rational mind. Everything is within reach. Everything is colored matte — and yet the ensemble as a whole is uncannily transparent, and constantly shifting.

The influences on Smith are not hard to point to. To the welded metal sculpture of Picasso and Julio Gonzalez, he brought the abstract, anti-gravitational aesthetic of the Russian Constructivists. In the US, he was affected, like so many others, by John Graham, the charismatic émigré from Kiev who had known various members of the Russian avant-garde, and by friends like Milton Avery, Robert Motherwell, and the critic Clement Greenberg.

There was never anything arrogantly outsize or arbitrarily inflated about Smith's assemblages. "Most of my sculpture is personal, needs response in close proximity and the human ratio," he said.

It's this intimate quality which makes the Clark's display of his work feel so felicitous. Compared to the vast East Wing of the National Gallery, where these works were seen as part of a major retrospective in 1982-83, the Clark galleries are open but human-scaled.

They're filled, too, with light and a breathing, proximate sense of the verdant spurt and buzz of the Berkshires in summer. You can begin to imagine the nearby Adirondacks, where Smith lived and worked, and even the buoyant childhood from which all of his work, so lithe and light-footed, so springily alert, ultimately issued forth.