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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Leon Polk Smith Goes Beyond His Inspiration

By ROBERTA SMITH

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Leon Polk Smith, whose austere, uneven, yet often inspiring retrospective is at the Brooklyn Museum, is one of a sprawling generation of American artists for whom geometry came naturally. His original inspiration, as it was for some of the others, was the work of Piet Mondrian, which Mr. Smith encountered shortly after arriving in New York from Oklahoma. The year was 1936 and Mr. Smith, a young art teacher, was just becoming aware that he wanted to be an artist.

By the late 40's, he had moved decisively beyond Mondrian into an unexplored terrain, where his fellow travelers included Myron Stout, Paul Feeley, Ellsworth Kelly and Alexander Liberman. Untouched by the gathering momentum of Abstract Expressionism, which would propel American art onto the international map, each of these artists evolved a distinct way of distilling ideas and experiences into a vocabulary of seemingly pure geometric form. Each helped pave the way for the abstract paintings and sculpture of the 1950's and 60's that would be gathered under the umbrella of Minimalism.

It may be a cliché to say that the work of these artists, especially in its scale and overt simplicity, often seems quintessentially American, but in the middle of Mr. Smith's exhibition, this cliché acquires a decided reality. A painting like "Twilight" (1980), with its broad expanse of deep violet pressing down upon two narrow symmetrical wedges of black, seems to describe in abstract form a dramatically receding perspective and an openness of space reminiscent of the American Southwest, even as the two colors lock together into a plane of perfect flatness. The painting is also part of an American tradition of distilled landscape images that stretch throughout the century, from Georgia O'Keeffe to Ed Ruscha. Similar arguments could be made for "Hill-House Green," from 1978, which posits a house shape on a field of blazing red, disguising the fact by pivoting the square canvas into a diamond, and the more blatant "Midnight Pyramids (or Midnight Tepees)," from 1986, in which black triangles intrude into three tondo canvases of night-sky purple.

The reality of an American aesthetic becomes almost undeniable if Mr. Smith's biography is taken into account. Born outside Chickasha, Indian Territory, in 1906, one year before it was incorporated into the state of Oklahoma, Mr. Smith was exposed to the open spaces of the American West from the start. He grew up in a farming community that included Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians, and Mr. Smith's parents,

who were both part Cherokee, imbued their son with a belief in equal opportunity for all: a second kind of openness. Furthermore, when the Depression delayed his education, Mr. Smith worked as a rancher and on highway construction for seven years after high school.

In 1934, he graduated from Oklahoma State College (now East Central University) in Ada. In 1936, he came to New York City, which he loved on first sight, to pursue graduate study in art education at Columbia University's Teachers College. It was during his first semester that one of his painting teachers took him to see the Gallatin Collection, then at New York University, where he had his formative encounter with the work of Mondrian, as well as Brancusi's and Arp's.

Most striking about Mr. Smith's show is the extent to which these experiences -- of Oklahoma, of modernist abstraction and of New York City -- are played out in his art and accessible to the viewer. He juggles them with particular smoothness in the show's early works. Among the lively semaphores of red, white and yellow in "O.K. Territory" of 1943, a cluster of black shapes has a tail, suggesting a cow whose origins lie in both Theo van Doesburg's famous de Stijl deconstruction of that animal and Mr. Smith's own life. In the 1945 "N.Y. City," one of the best paintings in the show, horizontal bands of bright color suggestive of an Indian textile are overlaid with a veritable cityscape of carefully spaced gray rectangles, a work that restates the syncopated rhythms of Mondrian's art by independent means.

Nearby, the less autonomous "Homage to 'Victory Boogie-Woogie,' No. 1" of 1946 tackles Mondrian's last masterpiece (which is included in the Museum of Modern Art's Mondrian show opening Sunday) head-on. All vestiges of the Dutch artist's famous grid are eliminated so that squares of pure color -- some large and many small -- bounce up and back in space. Deliberately derivative as it is, this work exudes the buoyant, slightly unhinged optimism that is at the heart of Mr. Smith's sensibility.

Mr. Smith's declaration of independence from Mondrian is the tondo painting "Diagonal Passage 120 Large" (1947-50), which greets the viewer at the start of the show's third gallery. In many ways it sums up both the artist's strengths and weaknesses. Here the grid reappears, fragmented and thick, pushing against the painting's edges to create a spatial pressure that will become his consuming interest. Yet with its carefully placed segments of red and blue, the work also has the flashiness of graphic design. It's almost a logo, the first occurrence of a brittleness that mars several subsequent works, especially in the late 1980's and 90's.

For the next few years, Mr. Smith largely avoids exclusively straight lines and simple right angles as if to get as far away from Mondrian as possible. In "Expanse" (1959), a curvilinear white shape suggestive of an overweight genie freed from its lamp seems to flow onto and nearly obliterate a field of black. In "Stonewall" (1956), two spheres of red bump against each other on a round field of black, creating the impression that one is seeing a circular fragment of a much larger abstract design.

During the 60's and 70's the shapes in Mr. Smith's painting push aggressively against one another, flipping back and forth between solid and void, and also press toward the real space of the wall. He may be at his best in the "Correspondence" series, in which the competition is between two colors, divided in eccentric,

unpredictable ways. In "Correspondence: Blue-Red" (1964), a huge noselike shape of blue pushes in from the left. In "Correspondence: Blue-Yellow" (1963), the intrusion is much more restrained: a narrow curve of blue, little more than a folded bird wing.

The idea of fragments, of a painting as a glimpse of a much larger configuration, occurs frequently after 1970, as Mr. Smith pushes his designs into real space. In "Constellation Milky Way" (1970), in which a butting tondo and ellipse are divided into areas of blue, white and black, the eye encounters a tremendous rush of space, as if tracing a meteor's trail. Similarly "At Sunrise" (1983) presses an ellipse of red against a rectangle of black, as if the sun's top edge had suddenly popped into view.

In one of the show's text panels, Mr. Smith is quoted as saying that he found Abstract Expressionism "very naturalistic in content." The accompanying implication, that his own work has nothing to do with nature, is not borne out by his art. In his best paintings, the immediate experiences of form, color and space are continually balanced by the sense of worldly experience, of nature seen and life lived. His art disputes the view, prevalent in many quarters, that abstract art is impersonal, devoid of meaning and without larger relevance. Mr. Smith's ability to embed his own story in the larger one of modernist abstraction and to make his vision unusually accessible to the viewer is his greatest achievement.

"Leon Polk Smith: American Painter" remains at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park, through Jan. 7. It was organized by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, the museum's associate curator of painting and sculpture, and Robert T. Buck, the director.

Photo: Curvilinear shapes: "Expanse," a 1959 oil on canvas by Leon Polk Smith, from a retrospective of his work at the Brooklyn Museum. (Brooklyn Museum)