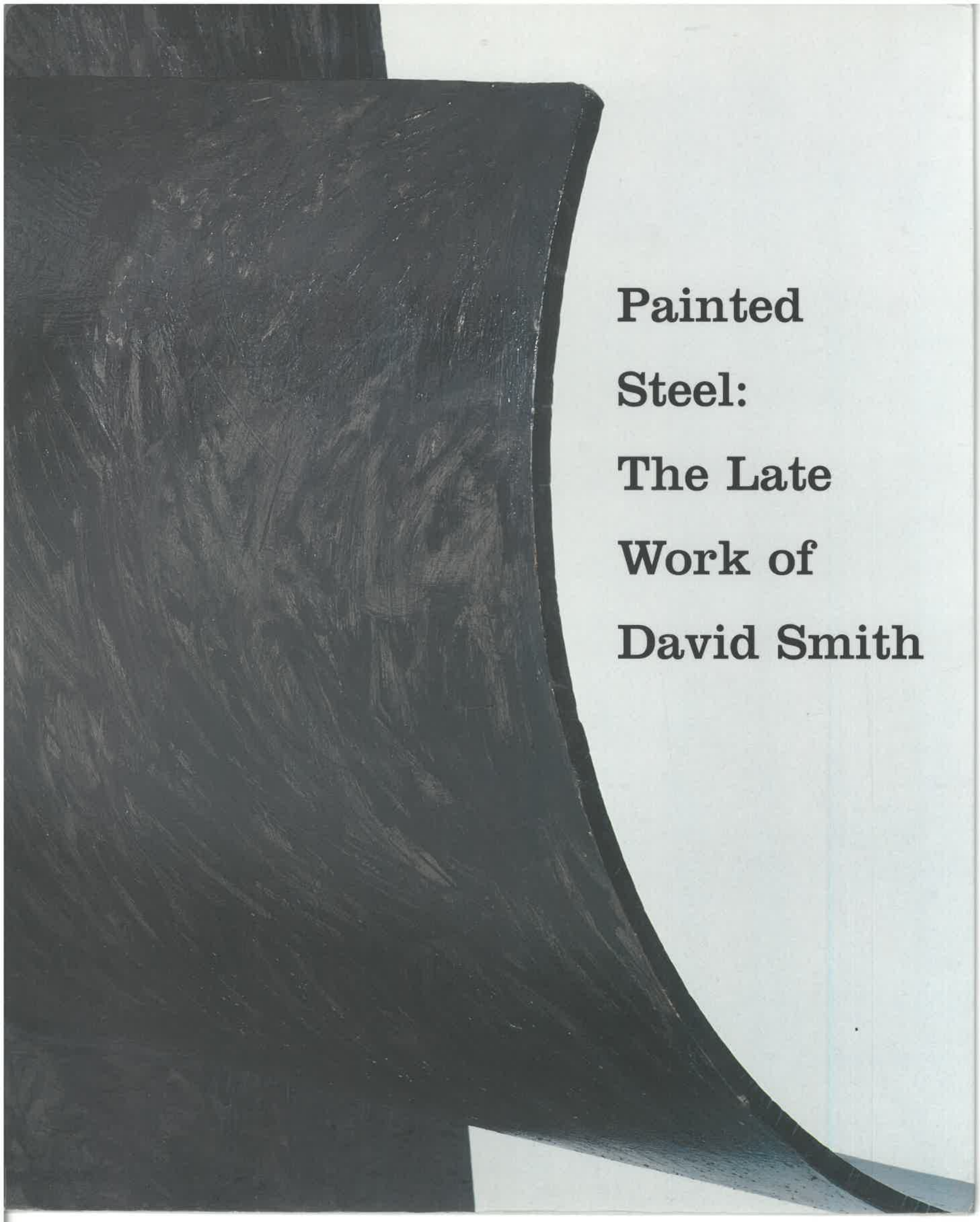
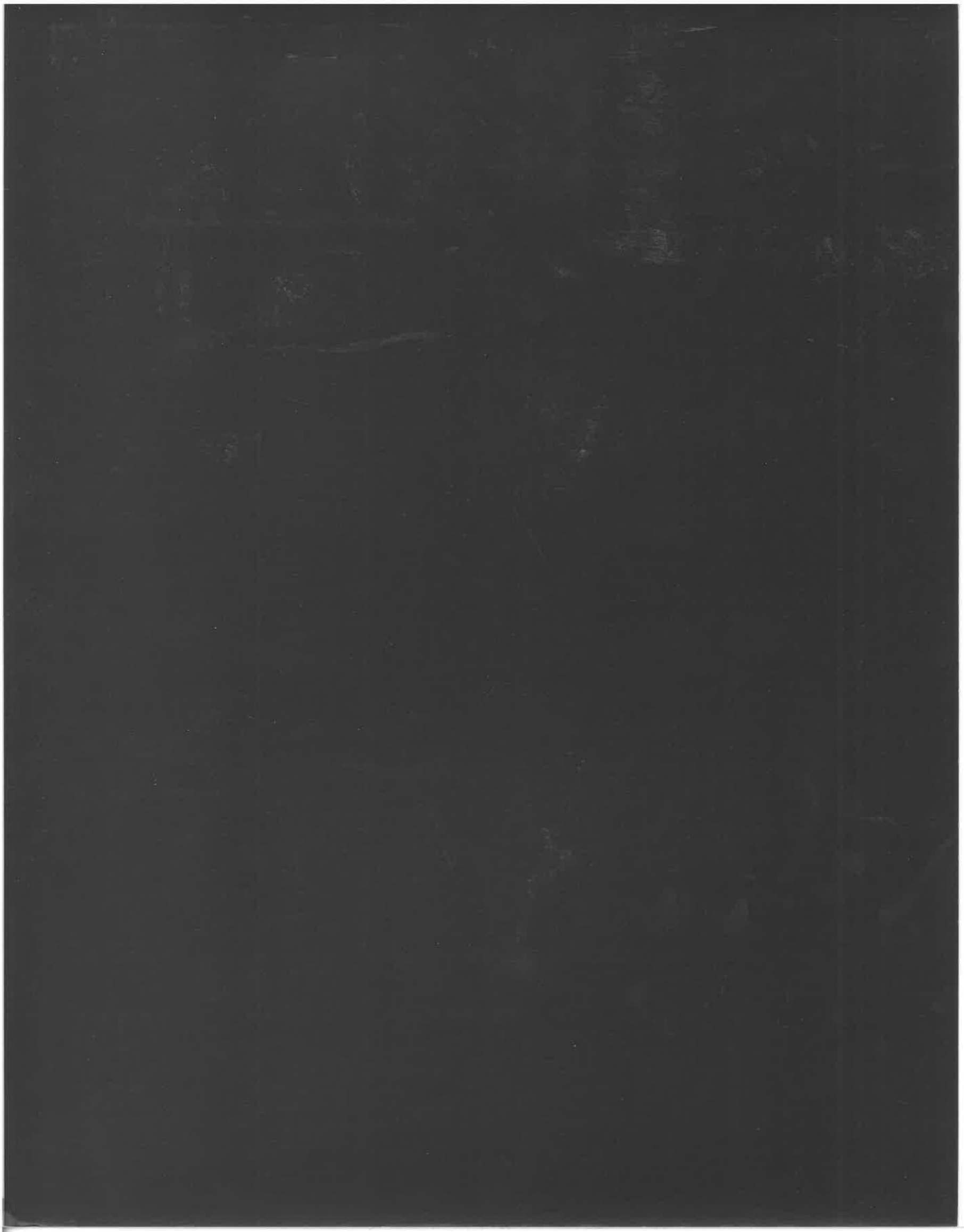


Painted Steel: The Late Work of David Smith



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Painted Steel:

The Late Work of

David Smith

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David Smith

Text by

William Rubin

Gagosian Gallery

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
Painted Steel: The Late Work of David Smith
April 18–May 23, 1998
Gagosian Gallery, 136 Wooster Street, New York, NY 10012
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Photography: Jerry L. Thompson
Frontispiece, and pages 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 52, 58: photography by David Smith
Page 9: Bruce C. Jones

Design: Katy Homans
Editor: Sheila Schwartz
Printed by Meridian Printing, Rhode Island

ISBN: 1-880154-23-4

Frontispiece:
Zig V, 1961
Painted steel, 111 x 85 x 44 inches
(282 x 215.9 x 111.8 cm)
Estate of David Smith
Right: **Black White Forward**, 1961
Painted steel, 88 x 39 x 36¼ inches
(223.5 x 99 x 92 cm)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
On loan from the Collection of Candida and Rebecca Smith, New York
Photo: David Smith

Front and back cover: **Black White Forward**, 1961 (detail)
Photo: Jerry L. Thompson

We appreciate the generosity of the National Gallery of Art, the Carnegie Museum of Art, and the Museo Rufino Tamayo for making the works in their care available for us to show. We would like to thank particularly Marla Prather of the National Gallery of Art and Juan Carlos Pereda and Patricia Bessudo of the Museo Rufino Tamayo for their assistance in expediting these loans. Thanks also go to the Storm King Art Center and its director, David Collens for cooperating with us on one of the loans, and to Joan Pachner for sharing her knowledge of David Smith's life and work in the informative new version of the biography that appears in this catalogue.

Graham Stewart brought creativity and intelligence to the management of all aspects of handling and installation. Jerry L. Thompson rearranged several weeks of his life to capture Smith's works as they have never been photographed before, and his photos, combined with Katy Homans' inventiveness and professionalism, produced a catalogue outstanding even in the context of the many excellent books on Smith. Alan Farancz provided invaluable expertise pertaining to the conservation and preservation of Smith's sculptures. The exhibition and publication were accomplished through the considerable efforts of Kay Pallister.

We are especially indebted to William Rubin, whose insights as essayist and scholar made a vital contribution to this catalogue.

The family of the artist has asked us to extend its personal thanks to Carmen Giménez for her support and guidance.

We gratefully acknowledge the committed involvement of Peter Stevens, administrator of the Estate of David Smith, and of Candida Smith and Rebecca Smith, whose vision and generosity in their father's spirit have guided this exhibition. It has been a rare privilege to work with them, and we have all come to understand more about David Smith's work as a consequence.

This project originated in casual conversations dating back several years. I wish to personally thank Barbara Flynn for directing the exhibition and catalogue in every aspect. Her extraordinary dedication and special relationship with the family of the artist have made this exhibition possible.

—Larry Gagosian

Introduction

Barbara Flynn

for Richard Bellamy

The painting of sculpture was one of the central preoccupations of David Smith's career. Fully one-third of the artist's works were painted, including the first freestanding sculpture he ever made, a coral head painted maroon in 1932. In 1960, the first year documented by the current exhibition, eighteen of twenty-four sculptures he made were painted. As a sculptor who had begun as a painter, Smith was uniquely qualified to fulfill his ambition of creating something even Matisse and Picasso had not attempted to achieve: sculpture informed by painting, or, as Frank O'Hara put it, "sculpture looking at painting and responding in its own fashion."[1]

The late painted works are the culmination of Smith's long meditation on the subject of color in sculpture. Among the major series included in the exhibition are the Tanktotems, the Circles, the Zigs, and the Gondolas. Increasingly throughout his career, Smith grouped certain works within the self-imposed confines of various series. But even in these cases, openness and diversity both of approach and materials was the rule, and within a given series, works tended to vary significantly in mood and subject matter. For Smith, the concept of a series was both defining and liberating.

The large-scale *Agricola I*, painted red, inaugurated Smith's first series in 1951, but it was in the Tanktotems, begun in 1952, that Smith developed the painterly treatment of sculpture on a large scale. The last four Tanktotems, completed in 1960, represent his first full-scale exploration into the fusion of an overtly painted surface with sculptural form.

The Zig series is comprised of seven numbered works produced during the final four years of Smith's life (1961–65). All seven, as well as three Zig-related works (including *Black White Forward*, 1961, in the current exhibition), are fabricated out of thick, flat steel planes incorporating I-beams, concave and convex elements, and discs; they are finished with a highly controlled painterly surface that gives depth and solidity to their shifting sculptural planes.

Contemporaneous with the Zigs were the Cubis, which were constructed of geometric elements of burnished, prefabricated stainless steel. The two series are related in that both, although abstract, explore the varied themes of figure, still life, and gate; most important, they declare a highly inflected surface treatment.

Zig V is a geometric construction based on Cubism with the mass and presence of a Cubi. As conservator Albert Marshall has noted, the Cubis were burnished to a brushstroke appearance that owes a lot to Smith's way of feathering different colors together on the surface of *Zig V*.[2] Indeed, color was essential to Smith's vision for the Cubis: "I like outdoor sculpture and the most practical thing for outdoor sculpture is stainless steel, and I make them and polish them in such a way that on a dull day they take on the dull blue, or the color of the sky in the late afternoon sun . . . the colors of nature."[3]

In the Zig series, Smith confronted the issue of the base in radical terms. *Zig IV, VII,* and *VIII* are all built upward, in levels, from a wheeled base element. On the other hand, *Zig I, II,* and *V* meet the ground directly, avoiding the need for a base altogether. In each, the point of contact is a "foot" that performs a structural role, contributing a certain weight and balance that enables the piece to stand. Smith's "feet" also read anthropomorphically, an effect emphasized by the paint, even though both series were evolving to a level of abstraction and monumentality that sought to transcend such figurative suggestions. *Zig V* also exemplifies Smith's unique and grand style of drawing in space, in large

gestures, proportionate to his size, which sets up yet another relation to the body. In fact, the Zig series signals a dramatic shift to what may be termed painting in space.

I'm building the biggest, the best god-damned sculptures I can make within my present limits, conceptually and financially. If I could have built sculpture within my conception years ago, they would have been 25 to 30 feet high. [4]

At the time of his death in an automobile accident in 1965, Smith was on the threshold of inventing his own form of sculpture on a monumental scale. He put *Gondola II* on wheels when he was working on it because it was big and he needed to move it around. He was also planning a group of large-scale sculptures to be built onto movable tractors.

Smith understood that what was industrial was the future, but he remained a man of his time. One of the most poignant dramas played out in his sculpture is the desire for a monumentality that did not lose the measure of man. And it was through paint that Smith succeeded in retaining the human dimension. "Most of my sculpture is personal, needs a response in close proximity and the human ratio." Smith's color is hand-applied, tactile, and local when compared to the sleek all-over color of a Calder or a di Suvero. Furthermore, series like the Zigs were painted with passion, even tenderness. It seems that Smith intended them to be viewed close up and intimately, indoors, like paintings. "The demand that sculpture be outdoors is historic and royal and has nothing to do with the contemporary concept. It needn't be outside any more than painting. Outdoors and far away it makes less demand on the viewer."[5]

Throughout his career, Smith was fascinated with the circle.[6] It assumed a wide range of roles, from a simple wheel form to the conceptual underpinning of whole groups of work. Smith's Circle series consists of five numbered works, dating 1962–63, with a unique relationship to each other, since they were installed in the North Field outside his home and studio in Bolton Landing, New York. When viewed from the front, the space between the works disappeared into a planar image of concentric circles reminiscent of the contemporaneous Target paintings of Smith's friend Kenneth Noland. Whether intentional or not, the effect was to collapse the distinction between sculpture and painting—and this was Smith's abiding concern.

One of the numbered works in the Circle series falls out of the norm. *Circle IV* was installed in the South Field when it was completed in 1962, a placement which tended to emphasize its singularity and distance from the concerns of the other four. The work expresses the idea of the circle as torso—an idea it shares with *Dida's Circle on a Fungus* (1961), also in the current show. In the series as a whole, we again see Smith working in varying degrees toward flatness and monumentality while at the same time retaining a benchmark in the body.

Color in sculpture served several interrelated functions for Smith. In *Black White Forward*, the elements of the sculpture are presented to the viewer on a painted plane, as if to press home the connection between painting and sculpture. Paint also holds your gaze as you circumnavigate *Circle IV*: the color disappears for a moment, only to reappear and define another form entirely, from another

vantage point. In this sense, Smith employed color to organize the experience of the sculpture for the viewer, whom he relied on to complete the work. As Rosalind Krauss has observed in her important study of Smith, views are more like a series of projected pictures, distinct and resolved in themselves, than a traditional sculptural experience in the round (like that of a Brancusi), and they slip in and out of our physical reality as we move in the space of a sculpture.[7] "I identify form in relationship to man. The front view of a person is oft times complete in statement. Sculpture to me may be 1-2-3-4 sides and top view since the bottom by law is the base. Projection to indicated form, continuance of an incompleted side, I leave to the viewer."[8] Smith requires the viewer to recall and recombine views for a complete experience of a work, an experience which is more empirical and synthetic than organic. The pressure that Smith puts on our retentive memory as we circle a piece is extraordinary, as in *Gondola II (1964)*, where we must track the shifting relationships of violet to black to white as we cross to the other side. Younger artists looking at Smith learned from this: Richard Serra's work would develop the idea of a location for confrontation and make similar demands on the viewer.

Gondola II represents a new step in every sense. Visually, it resembles two of Smith's last works, the stainless steel pieces *Becca* and *Untitled (Candida)*, both of 1965, and in that way stands as a harbinger of the way Smith would likely have proceeded in the future. In *Gondola II,* he introduced industrial bolts and the technique of painting in a flat, all-over way that emulated the painting of cars on the assembly line. But not entirely, for we still have Smith's artistry, and the human reference, albeit more understated and cerebral, played out in the formal juxtaposition of black and violet planes that are reversed on the flip side. As the viewer traverses the front plane and crosses to the side, the sculpture becomes a thin white line, virtually disappearing.[9]

For Smith, color was the vehicle for this radical reduction of the expected three-dimensional space of sculpture. Not surprisingly, the first *Gondola* had been directly inspired by Motherwell's series of paintings, *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. That a steel sculpture could become apparently weightless and immaterial, could defy its material mass and volume, was a willed anomaly found throughout Smith's career. As Krauss has observed in *Terminal Iron Works*, as early as 1960, in *Tanktotem IX*, Smith used paint to set up a surface that separated itself from the mass of the sculpture so that it could be read in and of itself, thereby allowing the sculpture to transcend its physical materiality.[10]

Smith may have extolled the beauty of steel, but he spoke at least as frequently about the challenge of painted color. He associated the material of steel with the old, and he wanted to involve himself with industrial methods and colors, which he associated with the new. The color red was particularly charged for him: it represented the color of rust and the intrinsic tendency of steel toward self-destruction and, at the same time, the eye-catching, industry-developed color of fast cars and consumer packaging. Smith intended both these contradictory meanings to be present wherever he applied red.

Smith painted the surfaces of his late sculptures with two parts experience and one healthy dose of the artist's rightful anarchy. He spoke of using the "wrong" color, and some of the color in the show, probably all the more "right" as a result, was put on with a dirty brush. "Sometimes I need total

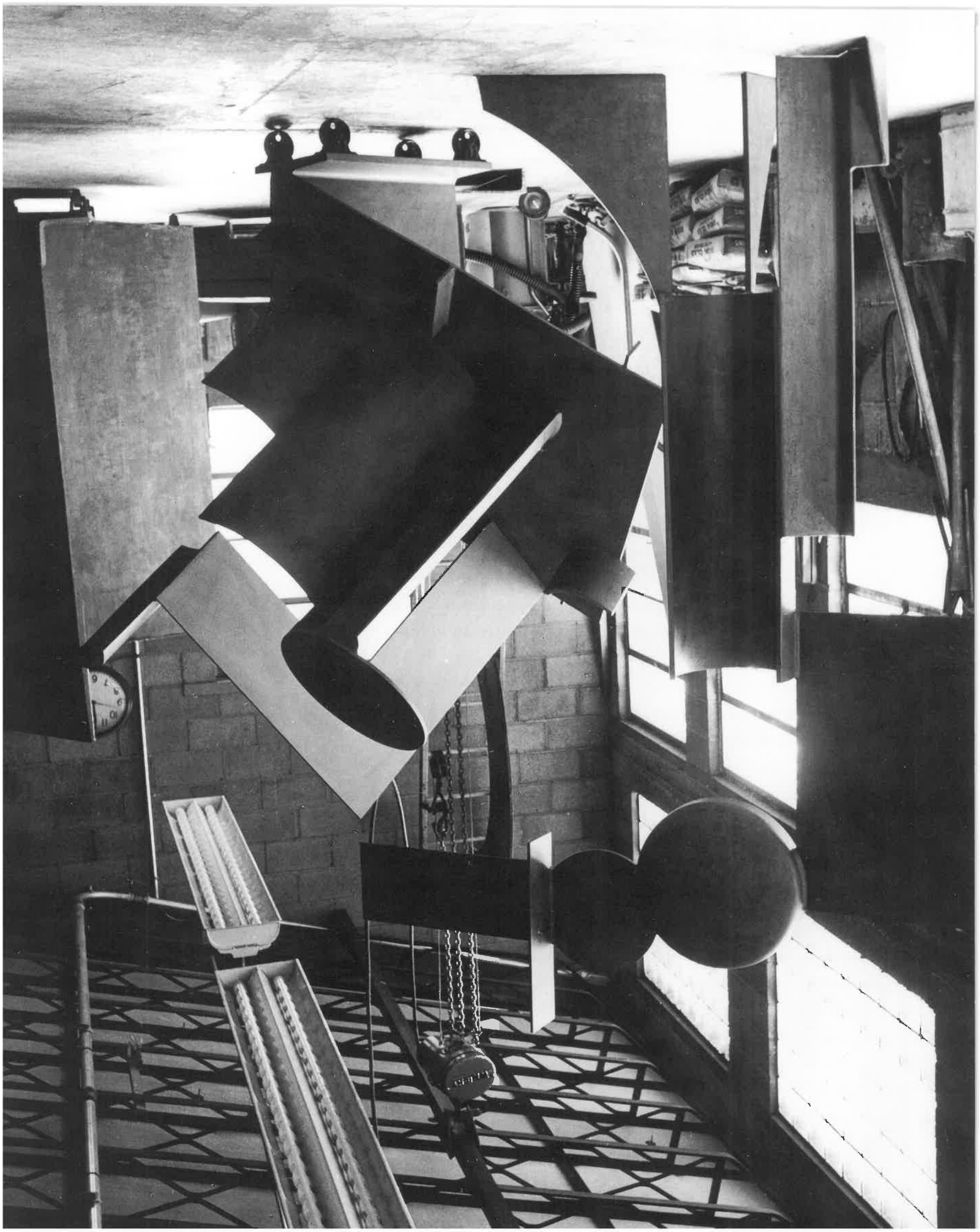
disrespect for the material and paint it as if it were a building."[11] Disrespect but also great deliberation, since color choices were sometimes debated for as long as a year, according to both Robert Motherwell and Frank O'Hara.

Smith was the first modern sculptor to make art in a factory situation, following the code of modern industrial production. This meant availing himself of various techniques in steelworking as well as color. He descended from a line of pioneers and a father who was a part-time inventor, and in the deepest sense was acting out who he was. He admired the Mercedes car, observed how the public responded to marketed colors, and was canny enough to spring into that realm full force and get his hands dirty. In his own words, he wanted "to push beauty and imagination farther towards the limits of accepted state, to keep it moving and to keep the edge moving, to shove it as far as possible towards that precipitous edge where beauty balances but does not topple over the edge of the vulgar."[12] His way of painting his sculptures—in thirty coats—attempted to surpass the industrial standard that he admired, and his color was intended to be strident and provocative and, most important, new.

Smith's sculptures had a unique impact on later generations. His factory setup was the innovation that would make the greatest impression on every younger sculptor, from Serra to De Maria to di Suvero. Smith was taking the stand that art should be treated as seriously as modern industrial production, a position that lent extraordinary self-confidence to younger artists.

It was interesting in the course of organizing this exhibition, with the majority of Smith's late works in museum collections around the world, to take a fresh look at the debate that his use of color originally provoked. Few knew what to make of it. Plenty of others were on the fence, implying by their lack of commentary that the work had moved beyond them and their definition of the possibilities of sculpture. The catchphrase of those years was truth to materials, an idea that reached its full expression in Minimalism. Smith accepted no such limitations. His use of color was a radical yet logical outgrowth of the challenges he had set down for himself long before the advent of Minimilisam and its theoretical accessories. Now, thirty years after Smith's death, having long digested Minimalism's reductive message, we can finally look more objectively at his late work and begin to evaluate his innovations on their own terms.

1. Frank O'Hara, "David Smith: The Color of Steel," *Art News*, 60 (December 1961), p. 69.
2. Albert Marshall, "A Study of the Surfaces of David Smith's Sculpture," in *Studies in the History of Art*, 51 (1995), "Conservation Research," p. 102.
3. Cleve Gray, ed., *David Smith by David Smith* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 123.
4. David Smith, "The Secret Letter," interview with Thomas B. Hess, June 1964, in *David Smith*, exh. cat. (New York: Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, 1964), n.p. Reprinted in David Smith, "A Personal Portfolio: Photographs by Dan Budnick and Ugo Mulas," *Art in America*, 54 (January–February 1966), p. 34, and Garnett McCoy, ed., *David Smith* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 179.
5. David Smith, "Notes on My Work," *Arts Magazine*, 34 (February 1960), p. 44.
6. Smith's method of working in series and his engagement with the circle in particular are documented in E.A. Carmean, Jr., *David Smith*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1982), pp. 129–47.
7. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 1971), pp. 12–16, 37, 40, 51, 54, in which Krauss discusses this issue extensively in relation to *Zig IV*.
8. David Smith, "Notes for David Smith Makes a Sculpture," *Art News*, 67 (January 1969), p. 48.
9. One can see how an artist like di Suvero would seize on these changing and contradictory views of Smith's sculptures in the round and develop them on a grand scale through the use of a crane.
10. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, pp. 98–102. Krauss' discussion of the Tanktotems is the definitive study of the series.
11. Smith, in Gray, *David Smith by David Smith*, p. 118.
12. Ibid., p. 77, and Carmean, Jr., *David Smith*, pp. 63–64.



Smith's Painted Sculptures

William Rubin

David Smith was six years old when Picasso's sheet-metal Guitar of 1912 announced the invention of constructed sculpture. Here was statuary that was neither carved nor modeled; instead, the artist assembled the work from elements he either fashioned himself or found. These were bonded by a number of different methods, of which welding would emerge as the one most pregnant with possibilities. This challenging kind of three-dimensional object represented a more radical break with received assumptions about sculpture than *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* did with assumptions about painting.

Smith's three-decade career constitutes one of the most remarkable epics in the history of modernism. More than any other sculptor, including Picasso himself, Smith *realized*—in the sense of bodying forth—the possibilities inherent in the construction aesthetic of the Spanish master's new methodology. Picasso's work contained many signposts. But his comparatively limited sculptural production showed him failing to press the possibilities of constructed sculpture with the same alacrity and persistence he brought to his explorations of drawing and painting. This, perhaps, because Picasso took relatively little pleasure in honing plasters, and none at all, he said, in carving wood or cutting metal. Such activities, he remarked, were time-consuming and effortful. Hence, most of Picasso's extraordinary ideas for sculpture quite literally never left the drawing board. Any fully satisfactory account of his three-dimensional work would have, therefore, to be founded as much on his notebook studies for sculpture as on the actual objects he only occasionally realized from those drawings. Picasso's dialogue with the ironsmith Julio González, who welded his metal sculptures for him, eventually fatigued the painter. The "collective execution" of these objects brought Picasso little of the pleasure and excitement he derived from painting and drawing.[1]

The Russians Tatlin and Rodchenko made important additions to Picasso's constructivist vocabulary (as did Giacometti, in some works of his Surrealist period). But the most immediate heir to Picasso's constructivism—its morphological aspects in particular—was González himself, whose mature career was largely inspired by the work he welded for Picasso.[2] Given the degree of this dependence, and considering the bantam size of González's oeuvre, it is not unfair to say, I think, that the inherent possibilities of welded sculpture were never satisfactorily explored prior to the Balzacian achievements of David Smith.

We tend to think of González, whom Smith deeply admired, as a pre-World War II sculptor, and Smith as a postwar artist. In fact, Smith got on to Picasso's constructivism from reproductions in *Cahiers d'Art* in 1928; thus his and the older González's careers as modernist sculptors were, in their beginnings, nearly synchronic. Many of Smith's youthful works of the thirties (e.g., the iron and steel *Agricola Head* and *Saw Head* of 1933, *Swung Forms* of 1937, and the enameled *Blue Construction* of the following year) comfortably hold their own against González's work. This is all the more amazing when we consider that Smith was a continent away from the Parisian center of the avant-garde, and could see only a handful of reproductions of Picasso's constructions—no originals at all—whereas González had access to Picasso's studio, his notebooks, and to the artist himself. To be sure, constructions did not constitute the sole medium of twentieth-century sculpture, though they clearly emerged as its defining one. The carver Brancusi and the modeler Giacometti were not

Left: **Zig V**, 1961
Steel, 111 x 85 x 44 inches
(282 x 215.9 x 111.8 cm)
Estate of David Smith

Right: **Zig IV**, 1961
Steel, 95⅜ x 84¼ x 76 inches
(242.6 x 214 x 198 cm)
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York
Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman

Photo by David Smith of both works not yet painted

only great masters, but specifically *modernist* ones. I consider Smith's oeuvre to be qualitatively on a par with theirs, with the advantage that it is also larger and more varied.

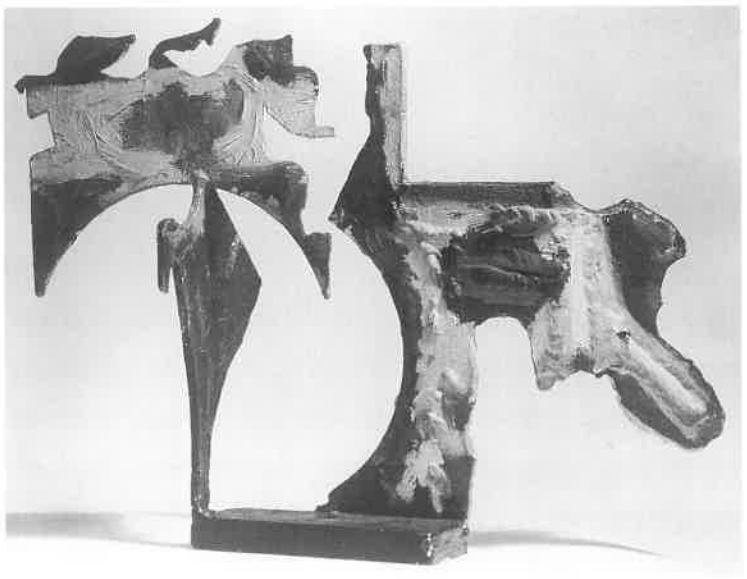
Saul Steinberg observed that, in some profound if elusive way, great artists "look like their work." This was certainly true of the rugged and powerful, bearlike Smith—at least in the poetic French sense of *ressemblance*. People who watched him at work recognized that Smith's deep-seated passion for iron and steel, which had been intensified and refined by his wartime experience as a high-skilled welder, generated a sort of body language that carried over into his art—not in the sense of some sculptural counterpart to the discredited notion of Action Painting but, as in the case of Pollock, as a manifestation of a towering physical mastery of the artist's chosen medium.

Zig IV, 1961
Painted steel, 95⅜ x 84¼ x 76 inches
(242.6 x 214 x 198 cm)
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York
Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman
Photo: David Smith

The rubric "painted steel" under which the directors of the Smith Estate have decided to organize the present exhibition draws attention to a salient aspect of Smith's art, but one that may appear problematic for some modern tastes (though polychromy was, of course, the rule in ancient and medieval sculpture, and not uncommon in the Renaissance). Curiously, the fact that Smith painted many of his steel constructions has been largely skirted or evaded in the critical and scholarly literature on him. Thus, in the finest book on his sculpture, Rosalind Krauss' *Terminal Iron Works*, the issue of color was simply never confronted. Krauss devotes two paragraphs to the problematically polychromed *Helmholtzian Landscape* of 1946—a work almost unique in Smith's oeuvre in its quasi-modeled color—without ever mentioning that it is painted.[3] In fact, the only observation about painted color in her entire book is a citation of Smith's concession that "the color he applied to the surfaces of his earlier work was largely arbitrary and almost never really successful." But what about the color in Smith's later work, which, with the exception of the Cubis, is as much painted as not? Would he have persisted in painting so many of his sculptures had he not changed his opinion? Krauss' extended and otherwise excellent discussion of the masterpiece *Zig IV* of 1961, for example, a work that is boldly scumbled in two colors (a mustardy yellow against a ground of rust-orange), contains not a word about its color or brushwork—or the manner in which these necessarily inflect the reading of its planar surfaces. The

Zig series represented the first monumental sculptures to which Smith applied color in a painterly way; *Zig V* (1961), is included in the present exhibition.

The paucity of commentary on Smith's color in critical and art historical writing warrants a few personal observations. It is not surprising that Smith, who always insisted that his sculpture was generated "out of painting," should have returned to polychromy at many points in his career, and with an increasing passion. To be sure, modernist sculpture as a whole can be said to have been informed by painting and drawing in the same sense that Florentine Renaissance painting can be said to have evolved from ancient and High Gothic sculpture. Smith's early, small-scale essays in polychromy were nevertheless unpromising.[4] In *Untitled* (1937?), for example, variegated color patches were superimposed on the work's metal planes in a manner largely unrelated to them, and Smith employed far too many different hues for anyone but a highly gifted colorist to have held together. Smith, in any case, was not a colorist in the same way we say that Picasso was "not a colorist." [5]



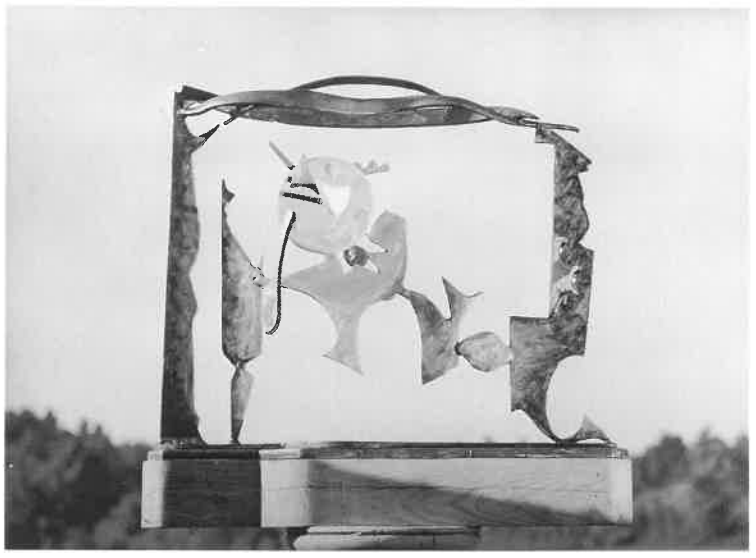
Untitled, 1937 [?]
Painted iron, 11¾ x 16½ x 5¾ inches
(29.8 x 41.9 x 14.6 cm)
Collection of Frank Stella, New York

Smith clearly conceived *structure*, as did Picasso, in terms of light and dark. Both artists were essentially draftsmanly composers. Smith was to deploy color in his mature work in the same manner Picasso did in all his painting and sculpture, essentially as an "add-on," a way of intensifying, both emotionally and poetically, compositions whose formal logic nevertheless rested primarily on their light/dark armatures. The painter's famous throw away line, "When I run out of red, I use green," is universally taken merely as evidence of Picasso's braggadocio. Yet it contains a profound and subtle truth: given that Picasso, no matter how much color he might employ, always organized his paintings in terms of areas of light and dark—as opposed, for example, to Matisse's more hue-determined compositional scaffoldings—his substitution of green for red, while it might alter the affective or symbolic character of the image, would never undermine its formal coherence or "rightness," so long as the artist used a green that was of the *same value* (i.e., degree of lightness or darkness) as the red he had planned to use. The "add-on" role of color common to Picasso and Smith may be likened to that of musical orchestration. Composers traditionally wrote their music first in a piano score. When later orchestrated, the character and affective nature of the composition changed, but its tonal system and structure remained intact.

Old Master polychromy usually involved the synchronizing of two systems. The local colors on the surface of an object were sometimes applied in unmodulated form. In the majority of instances, however, the artist reinforced the light/dark modeling established by the fall of natural light on the surface with a parallel (painted) value schema of its own. Following the inception of openwork construction sculpture, this type of traditional polychromy—still recalled in marginal modernist works, such as Degas' *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans* and a few painted busts and figures by Giacometti—was no longer feasible.

During Smith's earlier search for new ways to use color, he experimented with a number of different approaches. The virtually modeled color we see on some components of *Helmoltzian*

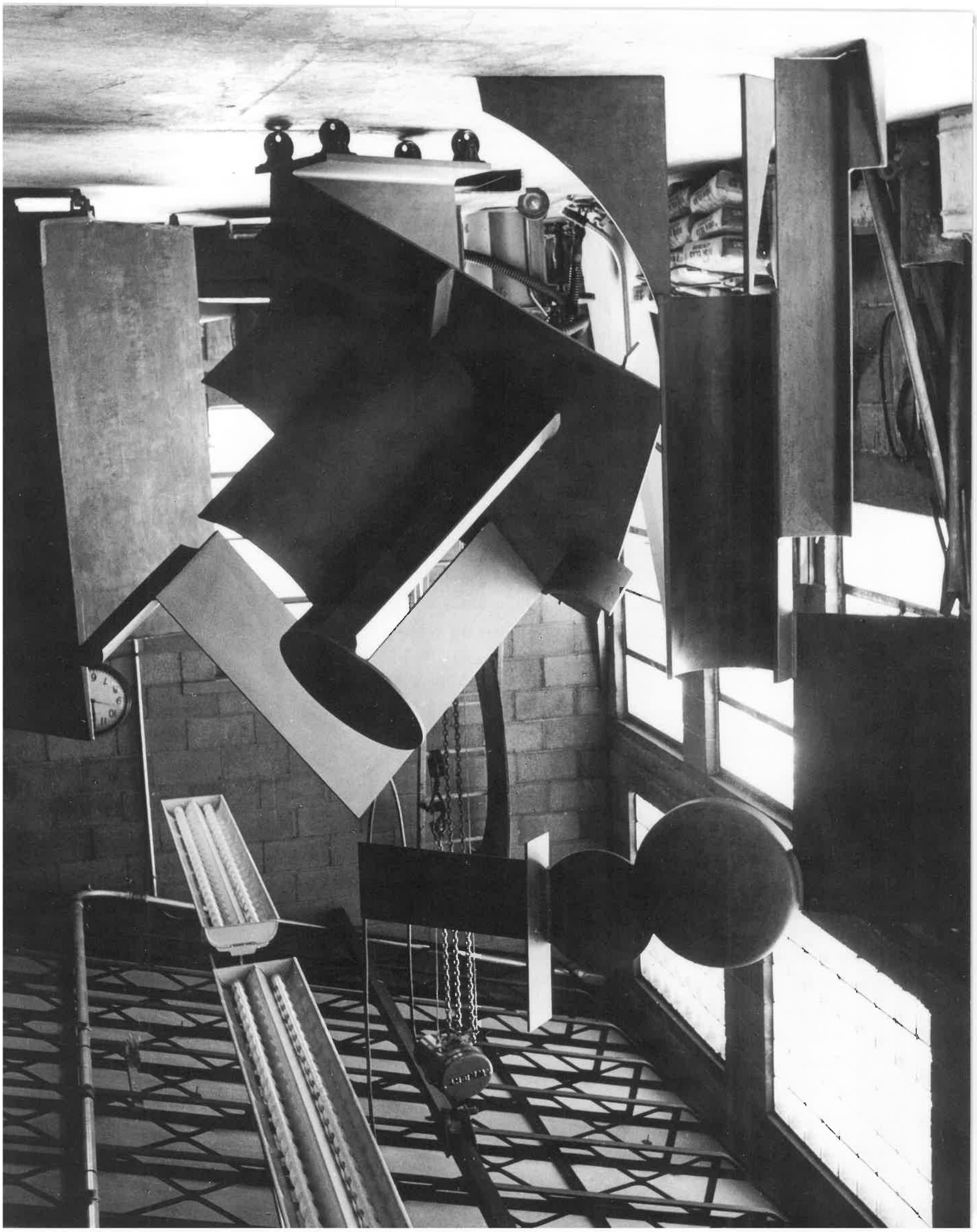
Landscape—an application that almost illusionistically reinforces the work's three-dimensional abstract forms—is as close as Smith would come to joining traditional polychromy with modernist structure. He evidently concluded that this was a meaningless, if not contradictory, pursuit. Thereafter, he would feel his way by trial and error through a range of more modernist uses of painted color. In this, he was not wholly without available models, since the occasionally polychromed objects of such artists as Picasso, Laurens, Archipenko, and Lipchitz, among others, were visible here and there in New York in the thirties and forties; color reproductions of them began to multiply only in the late fifties. Smith had probably seen some examples of such polychromed work during his nine-month stay abroad in 1935–36; and he likely saw exhibitions in New York City galleries that contained painted works by Americans such as Storrs, Calder, and Roszak.



Helmholtzian Landscape, 1946
Painted steel, 15⅞ x 17⅝ x 7⅛ inches
(40.1 x 44.7 x 18.3 cm)
The Kreeger Museum, Washington, D.C.
Photo: David Smith

Smith had all along painted some of his metal objects in a close-to-monochrome brown, which alluded to the color of steel. To be sure, the works of the forties and fifties, among them many of the Agricolas, Tanktotems, and "drawings-in-air" (or "landscapes") are assumed by most viewers to be simple steel or iron. To some extent, the force of Smith's own idealizing and poetic rhetoric, which extolled the virtues of raw iron and steel, played a role in this assumption, tending to blind some to the fact that any number of these pieces were clearly overpainted. So strong was the will to see Smith's work as preserving a supposed "truth to material" that even a presumably authorative source could assert that Smith "never painted anything dark brown," i.e., so as to look like steel.[6] Yet among the steel sculptures of Smith's maturity, the pivotal *Australia* (1951) is only one of many works overpainted in dark brown. In this instance, Smith sprayed some exceedingly fine purple droplets into the brown, perhaps to further enhance a flickering metallic illusion. As he mentioned to this author, it was often necessary to paint all or part of such pieces in order to visually unify them, more specifically, to obliterate eye-popping patches or residues left by the grinding and welding.

Smith's monochrome works are by no means limited to a steel-resembling brown. There are pieces painted entirely in various shades of blue, red, yellow, green, and orange as well as in black and white. In situations where only one color was to be applied, Smith's choices demonstrated a rather consistent rightness. The Naples yellow he laid on *Lunar Arcs on 1 Leg* (1956–60), for example, enhances the buoyancy of this choreographic figure. Yellow, the lightest of the primary colors, was clearly associated in Smith's sentiments with grace and weightlessness, and we find a similar Naples yellow on the lacily elegant *Yellow Vertical (Construction in Three Elements)* of 1955. But while monochrome painting raises the question of the possible inappropriateness of a particular color to the emotive character of a specific configuration, the real challenges in the structural use of color in sculpture only begin with polychromy, and become particularly acute when a sculptor uses three or more colors in a single work. Any two juxtaposed large color areas, whatever their hues, tend to be seen primarily as a light/dark relationship, rather than as a relationship between pure colors.



disrespect for the material and paint it as if it were a building."[11] Disrespect but also great deliberation, since color choices were sometimes debated for as long as a year, according to both Robert Motherwell and Frank O'Hara.

Smith was the first modern sculptor to make art in a factory situation, following the code of modern industrial production. This meant availing himself of various techniques in steelworking as well as color. He descended from a line of pioneers and a father who was a part-time inventor, and in the deepest sense was acting out who he was. He admired the Mercedes car, observed how the public responded to marketed colors, and was canny enough to spring into that realm full force and get his hands dirty. In his own words, he wanted "to push beauty and imagination farther towards the limits of accepted state, to keep it moving and to keep the edge moving, to shove it as far as possible towards that precipitous edge where beauty balances but does not topple over the edge of the vulgar."[12] His way of painting his sculptures—in thirty coats—attempted to surpass the industrial standard that he admired, and his color was intended to be strident and provocative and, most important, new.

Smith's sculptures had a unique impact on later generations. His factory setup was the innovation that would make the greatest impression on every younger sculptor, from Serra to De Maria to di Suvero. Smith was taking the stand that art should be treated as seriously as modern industrial production, a position that lent extraordinary self-confidence to younger artists.

It was interesting in the course of organizing this exhibition, with the majority of Smith's late works in museum collections around the world, to take a fresh look at the debate that his use of color originally provoked. Few knew what to make of it. Plenty of others were on the fence, implying by their lack of commentary that the work had moved beyond them and their definition of the possibilities of sculpture. The catchphrase of those years was truth to materials, an idea that reached its full expression in Minimalism. Smith accepted no such limitations. His use of color was a radical yet logical outgrowth of the challenges he had set down for himself long before the advent of Minimilisam and its theoretical accessories. Now, thirty years after Smith's death, having long digested Minimalism's reductive message, we can finally look more objectively at his late work and begin to evaluate his innovations on their own terms.

1. Frank O'Hara, "David Smith: The Color of Steel," *Art News*, 60 (December 1961), p. 69.
2. Albert Marshall, "A Study of the Surfaces of David Smith's Sculpture," in *Studies in the History of Art*, 51 (1995), "Conservation Research," p. 102.
3. Cleve Gray, ed., *David Smith by David Smith* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 123.
4. David Smith, "The Secret Letter," interview with Thomas B. Hess, June 1964, in *David Smith*, exh. cat. (New York: Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, 1964), n.p. Reprinted in David Smith, "A Personal Portfolio: Photographs by Dan Budnick and Ugo Mulas," *Art in America*, 54 (January–February 1966), p. 34, and Garnett McCoy, ed., *David Smith* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 179.
5. David Smith, "Notes on My Work," *Arts Magazine*, 34 (February 1960), p. 44.
6. Smith's method of working in series and his engagement with the circle in particular are documented in E.A. Carmean, Jr., *David Smith*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1982), pp. 129–47.
7. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 1971), pp. 12–16, 37, 40, 51, 54, in which Krauss discusses this issue extensively in relation to *Zig IV*.
8. David Smith, "Notes for David Smith Makes a Sculpture," *Art News*, 67 (January 1969), p. 48.
9. One can see how an artist like di Suvero would seize on these changing and contradictory views of Smith's sculptures in the round and develop them on a grand scale through the use of a crane.
10. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, pp. 98–102. Krauss' discussion of the Tanktotems is the definitive study of the series.
11. Smith, in Gray, *David Smith by David Smith*, p. 118.
12. Ibid., p. 77, and Carmean, Jr., *David Smith*, pp. 63–64.

vantage point. In this sense, Smith employed color to organize the experience of the sculpture for the viewer, whom he relied on to complete the work. As Rosalind Krauss has observed in her important study of Smith, views are more like a series of projected pictures, distinct and resolved in themselves, than a traditional sculptural experience in the round (like that of a Brancusi), and they slip in and out of our physical reality as we move in the space of a sculpture.[7] "I identify form in relationship to man. The front view of a person is oft times complete in statement. Sculpture to me may be 1-2-3-4 sides and top view since the bottom by law is the base. Projection to indicated form, continuance of an incompleted side, I leave to the viewer."[8] Smith requires the viewer to recall and recombine views for a complete experience of a work, an experience which is more empirical and synthetic than organic. The pressure that Smith puts on our retentive memory as we circle a piece is extraordinary, as in *Gondola II (1964)*, where we must track the shifting relationships of violet to black to white as we cross to the other side. Younger artists looking at Smith learned from this: Richard Serra's work would develop the idea of a location for confrontation and make similar demands on the viewer.

Gondola II represents a new step in every sense. Visually, it resembles two of Smith's last works, the stainless steel pieces *Becca* and *Untitled (Candida)*, both of 1965, and in that way stands as a harbinger of the way Smith would likely have proceeded in the future. In *Gondola II*, he introduced industrial bolts and the technique of painting in a flat, all-over way that emulated the painting of cars on the assembly line. But not entirely, for we still have Smith's artistry, and the human reference, albeit more understated and cerebral, played out in the formal juxtaposition of black and violet planes that are reversed on the flip side. As the viewer traverses the front plane and crosses to the side, the sculpture becomes a thin white line, virtually disappearing.[9]

For Smith, color was the vehicle for this radical reduction of the expected three-dimensional space of sculpture. Not surprisingly, the first *Gondola* had been directly inspired by Motherwell's series of paintings, *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. That a steel sculpture could become apparently weightless and immaterial, could defy its material mass and volume, was a willed anomaly found throughout Smith's career. As Krauss has observed in *Terminal Iron Works*, as early as 1960, in *Tanktotem IX*, Smith used paint to set up a surface that separated itself from the mass of the sculpture so that it could be read in and of itself, thereby allowing the sculpture to transcend its physical materiality.[10]

Smith may have extolled the beauty of steel, but he spoke at least as frequently about the challenge of painted color. He associated the material of steel with the old, and he wanted to involve himself with industrial methods and colors, which he associated with the new. The color red was particularly charged for him: it represented the color of rust and the intrinsic tendency of steel toward self-destruction and, at the same time, the eye-catching, industry-developed color of fast cars and consumer packaging. Smith intended both these contradictory meanings to be present wherever he applied red.

Smith painted the surfaces of his late sculptures with two parts experience and one healthy dose of the artist's rightful anarchy. He spoke of using the "wrong" color, and some of the color in the show, probably all the more "right" as a result, was put on with a dirty brush. "Sometimes I need total

gestures, proportionate to his size, which sets up yet another relation to the body. In fact, the Zig series signals a dramatic shift to what may be termed painting in space.

I'm building the biggest, the best god-damned sculptures I can make within my present limits, conceptually and financially. If I could have built sculpture within my conception years ago, they would have been 25 to 30 feet high. [4]

At the time of his death in an automobile accident in 1965, Smith was on the threshold of inventing his own form of sculpture on a monumental scale. He put *Gondola II* on wheels when he was working on it because it was big and he needed to move it around. He was also planning a group of large-scale sculptures to be built onto movable tractors.

Smith understood that what was industrial was the future, but he remained a man of his time. One of the most poignant dramas played out in his sculpture is the desire for a monumentality that did not lose the measure of man. And it was through paint that Smith succeeded in retaining the human dimension. "Most of my sculpture is personal, needs a response in close proximity and the human ratio." Smith's color is hand-applied, tactile, and local when compared to the sleek all-over color of a Calder or a di Suvero. Furthermore, series like the Zigs were painted with passion, even tenderness. It seems that Smith intended them to be viewed close up and intimately, indoors, like paintings. "The demand that sculpture be outdoors is historic and royal and has nothing to do with the contemporary concept. It needn't be outside any more than painting. Outdoors and far away it makes less demand on the viewer."[5]

Throughout his career, Smith was fascinated with the circle.[6] It assumed a wide range of roles, from a simple wheel form to the conceptual underpinning of whole groups of work. Smith's Circle series consists of five numbered works, dating 1962–63, with a unique relationship to each other, since they were installed in the North Field outside his home and studio in Bolton Landing, New York. When viewed from the front, the space between the works disappeared into a planar image of concentric circles reminiscent of the contemporaneous Target paintings of Smith's friend Kenneth Noland. Whether intentional or not, the effect was to collapse the distinction between sculpture and painting—and this was Smith's abiding concern.

One of the numbered works in the Circle series falls out of the norm. *Circle IV* was installed in the South Field when it was completed in 1962, a placement which tended to emphasize its singularity and distance from the concerns of the other four. The work expresses the idea of the circle as torso—an idea it shares with *Dida's Circle on a Fungus* (1961), also in the current show. In the series as a whole, we again see Smith working in varying degrees toward flatness and monumentality while at the same time retaining a benchmark in the body.

Color in sculpture served several interrelated functions for Smith. In *Black White Forward*, the elements of the sculpture are presented to the viewer on a painted plane, as if to press home the connection between painting and sculpture. Paint also holds your gaze as you circumnavigate *Circle IV*: the color disappears for a moment, only to reappear and define another form entirely, from another

Introduction

Barbara Flynn

for Richard Bellamy

The painting of sculpture was one of the central preoccupations of David Smith's career. Fully one-third of the artist's works were painted, including the first freestanding sculpture he ever made, a coral head painted maroon in 1932. In 1960, the first year documented by the current exhibition, eighteen of twenty-four sculptures he made were painted. As a sculptor who had begun as a painter, Smith was uniquely qualified to fulfill his ambition of creating something even Matisse and Picasso had not attempted to achieve: sculpture informed by painting, or, as Frank O'Hara put it, "sculpture looking at painting and responding in its own fashion."[1]

The late painted works are the culmination of Smith's long meditation on the subject of color in sculpture. Among the major series included in the exhibition are the Tanktotems, the Circles, the Zigs, and the Gondolas. Increasingly throughout his career, Smith grouped certain works within the self-imposed confines of various series. But even in these cases, openness and diversity both of approach and materials was the rule, and within a given series, works tended to vary significantly in mood and subject matter. For Smith, the concept of a series was both defining and liberating.

The large-scale *Agricola I*, painted red, inaugurated Smith's first series in 1951, but it was in the Tanktotems, begun in 1952, that Smith developed the painterly treatment of sculpture on a large scale. The last four Tanktotems, completed in 1960, represent his first full-scale exploration into the fusion of an overtly painted surface with sculptural form.

The Zig series is comprised of seven numbered works produced during the final four years of Smith's life (1961–65). All seven, as well as three Zig-related works (including *Black White Forward*, 1961, in the current exhibition), are fabricated out of thick, flat steel planes incorporating I-beams, concave and convex elements, and discs; they are finished with a highly controlled painterly surface that gives depth and solidity to their shifting sculptural planes.

Contemporaneous with the Zigs were the Cubis, which were constructed of geometric elements of burnished, prefabricated stainless steel. The two series are related in that both, although abstract, explore the varied themes of figure, still life, and gate; most important, they declare a highly inflected surface treatment.

Zig V is a geometric construction based on Cubism with the mass and presence of a Cubi. As conservator Albert Marshall has noted, the Cubis were burnished to a brushstroke appearance that owes a lot to Smith's way of feathering different colors together on the surface of *Zig V*.[2] Indeed, color was essential to Smith's vision for the Cubis: "I like outdoor sculpture and the most practical thing for outdoor sculpture is stainless steel, and I make them and polish them in such a way that on a dull day they take on the dull blue, or the color of the sky in the late afternoon sun . . . the colors of nature."[3]

In the Zig series, Smith confronted the issue of the base in radical terms. *Zig IV, VII,* and *VIII* are all built upward, in levels, from a wheeled base element. On the other hand, *Zig I, II,* and *V* meet the ground directly, avoiding the need for a base altogether. In each, the point of contact is a "foot" that performs a structural role, contributing a certain weight and balance that enables the piece to stand. Smith's "feet" also read anthropomorphically, an effect emphasized by the paint, even though both series were evolving to a level of abstraction and monumentality that sought to transcend such figurative suggestions. *Zig V* also exemplifies Smith's unique and grand style of drawing in space, in large

We appreciate the generosity of the National Gallery of Art, the Carnegie Museum of Art, and the Museo Rufino Tamayo for making the works in their care available for us to show. We would like to thank particularly Marla Prather of the National Gallery of Art and Juan Carlos Pereda and Patricia Bessudo of the Museo Rufino Tamayo for their assistance in expediting these loans. Thanks also go to the Storm King Art Center and its director, David Collens for cooperating with us on one of the loans, and to Joan Pachner for sharing her knowledge of David Smith's life and work in the informative new version of the biography that appears in this catalogue.

Graham Stewart brought creativity and intelligence to the management of all aspects of handling and installation. Jerry L. Thompson rearranged several weeks of his life to capture Smith's works as they have never been photographed before, and his photos, combined with Katy Homans' inventiveness and professionalism, produced a catalogue outstanding even in the context of the many excellent books on Smith. Alan Farancz provided invaluable expertise pertaining to the conservation and preservation of Smith's sculptures. The exhibition and publication were accomplished through the considerable efforts of Kay Pallister.

We are especially indebted to William Rubin, whose insights as essayist and scholar made a vital contribution to this catalogue.

The family of the artist has asked us to extend its personal thanks to Carmen Giménez for her support and guidance.

We gratefully acknowledge the committed involvement of Peter Stevens, administrator of the Estate of David Smith, and of Candida Smith and Rebecca Smith, whose vision and generosity in their father's spirit have guided this exhibition. It has been a rare privilege to work with them, and we have all come to understand more about David Smith's work as a consequence.

This project originated in casual conversations dating back several years. I wish to personally thank Barbara Flynn for directing the exhibition and catalogue in every aspect. Her extraordinary dedication and special relationship with the family of the artist have made this exhibition possible.

—Larry Gagosian

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
Painted Steel: The Late Work of David Smith
April 18–May 23, 1998
Gagosian Gallery, 136 Wooster Street, New York, NY 10012
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Consultant/Coordinator for transport, handling, and installation: Graham Stewart

Photography: Jerry L. Thompson
Frontispiece, and pages 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 52, 58: photography by David Smith
Page 9: Bruce C. Jones

Design: Katy Homans
Editor: Sheila Schwartz
Printed by Meridian Printing, Rhode Island

ISBN: 1-880154-23-4

Frontispiece:
Zig V, 1961
Painted steel, 111 x 85 x 44 inches
(282 x 215.9 x 111.8 cm)
Estate of David Smith
Right: **Black White Forward**, 1961
Painted steel, 88 x 39 x 36¼ inches
(223.5 x 99 x 92 cm)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
On loan from the Collection of Candida and Rebecca Smith, New York
Photo: David Smith

Front and back cover: **Black White Forward**, 1961 (detail)
Photo: Jerry L. Thompson

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David Smith

Text by

William Rubin

Gagosian Gallery