

A STUDIO? I don't really have one," muses sculptor and art professor Tony Smith. "I'm always embarrassed when people want to see where I work." No wonder, because Smith doesn't get involved in the kind of physical heroics that make up the sculptor myth. "It's more like I sit down at one of those little folding tables, have my breakfast, read the paper, and then play around with some modules." (He uses four-inch cardboard ones.) When he likes what he's got, Smith calls up an industrial welding firm and orders a sculpture, say 16 or 20 feet high.

"Master of the Monumentalists" is what *Time* called him in 1967, just five years after his "black and probably malignant" structures began populating his suburban New Jersey lawn. Smith was an architect and design teacher then (he was just starting at Hunter), and his sculptures were known to only a few close friends. Today his works are in numerous museum and private collections and loom, stretch and generally make their presence felt in public places from the World's Fair in Osaka to university campuses and office complexes, most recently at the Westinghouse building in Philadelphia.

Amidst all the acclaim, Smith remains mild-mannered and self-effacing. He's unpretentious about his successes and prefers to talk about the geometry underlying his works or the associations that make them meaningful. "Tetrahedra," "octahedra," "space lattice" and an infinity of other geometrica pepper his conversation. Of meaning, he says simply, "Most dreams are visual, people bring associations and meanings to visual things."

Cryptic Creatures

Smith's massive, geometric — but curiously anthropomorphic — works have certainly started a lot of people guessing. They've been called "primal creatures," "cryptic, menacing forms," "antique architectural monuments." Smith himself probably fueled some of the conjecturing when he wrote that he saw them as "seeds or germs that could spread growth or

Tony Smith's Sculptures: From Modules to Monuments

By Patricia Molino

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disease." Laughing about that now, he tosses his head back, pushes his white curly hair from his face, and says, "I wrote that as sort of a joke. I never dreamt the gallery people would use it in the catalogue." Joke or no, Smith still likes his works to exude mystery and a touch of menace. "They sometimes remind me of Stonehenge . . . If the light is subdued, they have an archaic or prehistoric look I like."

Meanings and Associations

It's not hard to see the menace in Smith's sculptures. From one angle a piece like *Gracehoper* might appear friendly enough, but walk a few steps, and watch out! It seems to be moving fast — in your direction. Some of the more compact sculptures, like *Amaryllis*, give the feeling of tremendous latent power, like a gigantic clenched fist.

But, said Smith, "I never think of these associations when I'm doing a piece. I just start putting the components together and when it looks like it's almost finished, I figure out how it's going to stand up." Well, if Smith doesn't know which end is up until it's done, he surely can't fuss with meanings and titles. And he doesn't. "I've never named a piece before it's done. I might not even name it right away."

There are a few untitled pieces in his oeuvre, but, by and large, Smith

gives his presences (he doesn't think of them as objects) names that fit their physical personalities. He does this by free associating. A six-foot black steel cube was called *Die* because "die has a lot of associations. Six feet has the suggestion of being cooked. Six foot box, Six foot under."

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Smith Fund Established

"The people on the art faculty were very sad that Tony was retiring at the end of the semester. We wanted to do something to honor him," explains Prof. Raymond Parker. "So we set up the Tony Smith Fund." The fund, which will be used for student scholarships, special lectures and other projects, has already attracted gifts from numerous persons in the art world. Prof. Smith himself recently contributed the cash prize he received from the College Art Association — he was named Distinguished Teacher, the second time that national body has ever bestowed such an award.

"The mark of a great art teacher," Prof. Parker notes, "is that his students establish their own reputations." And in Tony Smith's 25 years as a teacher (N.Y.U., Pratt, Cooper Union, Bennington and Hunter) he's undoubtedly secured that mark. "One continually meets mature artists who are grateful for having been in his classes," says critic and former department chairman Eugene Goossen.

Of teaching, Prof. Smith says, "I don't do it in any doctrinaire way. It's as though I'm always taking something in and putting something out."

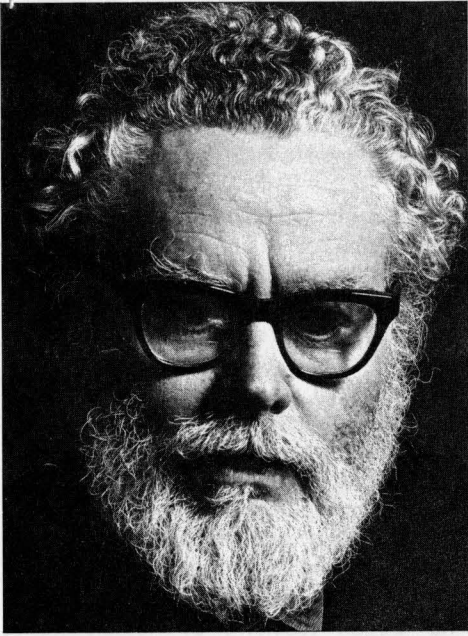


photo by Hans Namuth

Left: Professor Tony Smith

Below: Gracehoper. "It's from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*," says Smith. Here's how Joyce described his mythical character, "... always jiggling ajog, hopyy on akkant of his joyicity, (he had a partner pair of findlesticks to supplant him) ..."



photo by Batehazar Korab

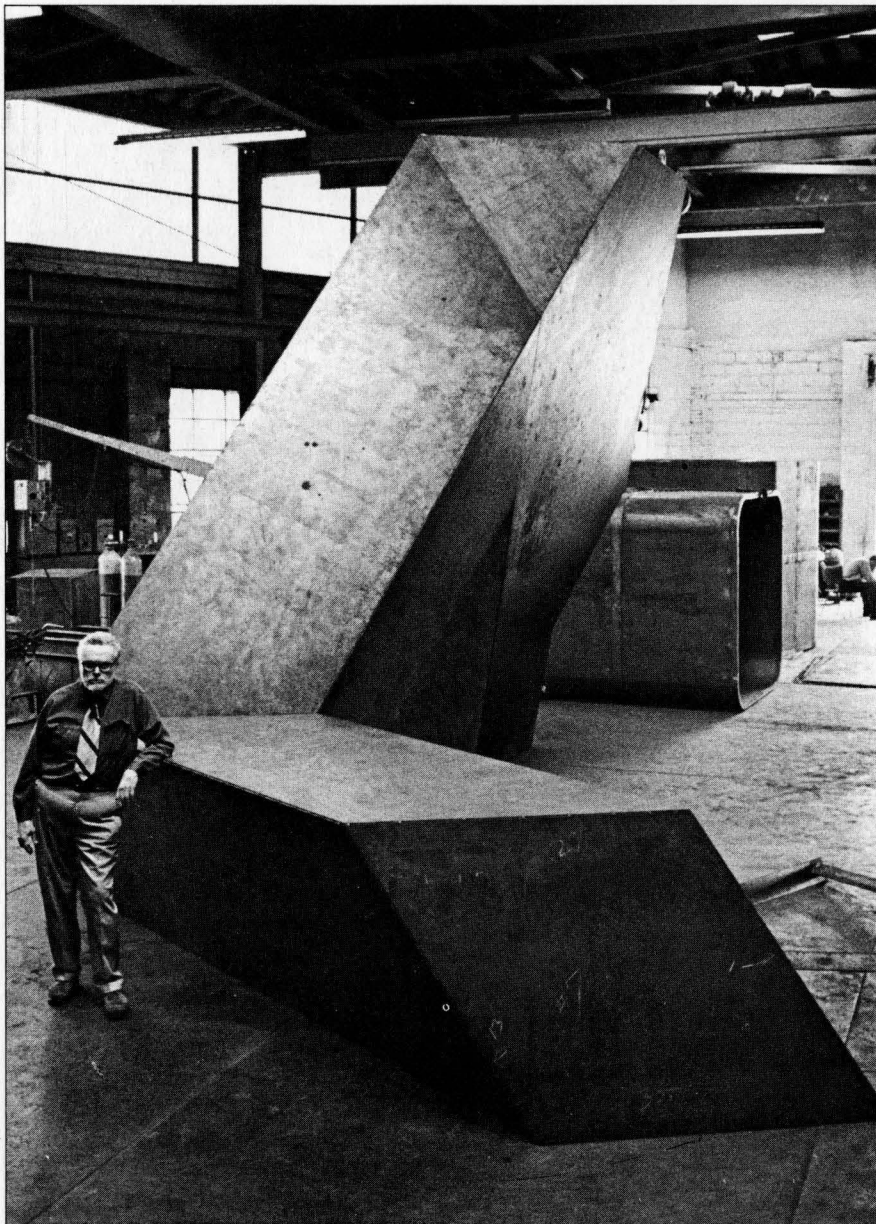


photo by Hans Namuth

The artist poses with *The Snake is Out* in the welding factory where it was made up. Most large Smith pieces have manholes to allow workmen to descend for repairs.

Sometimes friends suggest titles, as with *Willy*. "I didn't name *Willy* for a long time. To tell you the truth I didn't even like to look at it. It seemed so peculiar, so revolting." Smith mentioned this to a friend whose daughter was appearing in Beckett's *Happy Day*. "He suggested *Willy* after the husband in the play who was always crawling around making unintelligible utterances. It just stuck."

Although Smith says his works are not "illustrative," *Gracehoper* looks as much like an illustration of James Joyce's mythical character as you'll

ever find. "It's from a verse in Finnegans Wake, 'The Ant and the Gracehoper.'" Smith's mein is pensive as he lifts himself from his chair and searches through several shelves of books for the Joyce tome. It's apparent he feels a deep affinity for the author, a shared sensibility perhaps. And, in fact, he and Joyce have a lot in common besides *Gracehoper*. Most obviously an Irish, Jesuit upbringing. Smith returns with the book and a photo of his sculpture. "The verse is really an argument between space and time. The ant represents

the static values of classical civilization whereas the gracehoper represents the dynamic ideas associated with Twentieth Century thinking."

The Early Works

Although he was brought up with the "classical values," Smith's very much a modernist. He began painting during his childhood (his earliest extant canvases are somewhat cubist), worked as an apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright, set up his own architecture practice in 1940, and soon after, began teaching design as well. All the while, he was painting and making sculptures but, considering them private and experimental, he never showed them in any galleries. By the early 1960's, around the time he began teaching at Hunter, he dropped his architecture practice ("I'd had it with all that building") and focused his energies on sculpture. That's when he first called up Industrial Welding, a company whose stock in trade is smokestacks and chemical tanks, and ordered *Black Box*.

That work and some later pieces seem somehow connected to a dense black image from Smith's childhood that hovers in his imagination. Confined to bed with tuberculosis for many months, he was quarantined in a little bare cabin whose only prominent feature was a black stove. Of that experience he says, "If one spends such a long time in a room with only one object, that object becomes a little god." And it doesn't seem a coincidence that Smith's *Black Box* should be a kind of prototype for the seemingly eternal black monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film, *2001*.

No matter what the size or shape of his works, Smith is extremely sensitive to how people will experience them. "The pieces aren't intended to be looked at. They're more related to a kinesthetic experience, where a person feels himself in their presence." His favorite photos of his works are invariably those taken from underneath, looking out through the legs. Head-on photographs, he maintains, make his works look like objects. And, "there are too many objects around already." ■