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Review/Art; A 12-Work Gift Sampler From Leon Polk Smith

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The best approach to the show of Leon Polk Smith's work at the Brooklyn Museum is straight through the permanent collection of contemporary art that precedes it in the museum's newly renovated west wing. This long, high, crowded space has the distracted atmosphere of an open-air bazaar. Pluralism reigns. From Karel Appel to Adrian Piper, the good, the bad and the ugly sit side by side, and the viewer is importuned, seduced or preached to every step of the way.

By contrast, the atmosphere in the larger of the two galleries set aside for Mr. Smith's work is calm, airy, even a trifle chilly. The dozen paintings, a promised gift from the 87-year-old artist to the museum, are all of a piece: smooth of surface, spare but often vivid of color, and eccentrically geometric. It is clear at a glance that they require time and attention from the viewer, in the form of both close-up scrutiny and a slow, contemplative 360-degree turn from the center of the room.

Mr. Smith is one of a number of American artists who explored European abstraction in New York in the 1930's, and like many of them his roots lay far away from the city. He was born in 1906 in what at the time was called "Indian territory," soon to be the state of Oklahoma. His parents, of mixed Cherokee and European ancestry, were farmers. Mr. Smith, one of nine children, worked on ranches and oil fields before entering college to study education.

His teaching career, first in Oklahoma, then in Georgia and Delaware, is of interest in itself. As state supervisor of art and education in Delaware in the 1940's he advocated racial equality in the schools and succeeded in combining the state's two teachers' conventions, one all black and the other all white, into a single body. The largest painting in the Brooklyn show, the moody, horizontally oriented "Black Anthem" from 1960, with its areas of white, black and gray, was painted just after the struggle for integration had been precipitated in the South.

Mr. Smith was already a painter, largely self-taught, when he came to Manhattan in the late 30's and encountered Mondrian's work for the first time; in a sense, his output through the 50's can be seen as a gradual and radical series of adjustments to this model. He loosened the Dutch painter's strict rectilinear grid with diagonals and softened it with curves, becoming the first American artist to use circular canvases. He expanded the vocabulary of primary colors to include vermilions, violets and greens. He dramatically expanded Mondrian's scale and decisively rejected his utopian program. "I paint neither politics, religion nor philosophy," Mr. Smith has written, "but you may find your own in my work."

The paintings and works on paper in the Brooklyn installation, which was organized by the museum's director, Robert T. Buck, and is scheduled to remain on view until Mr. Smith's full career retrospective in 1995, span almost 50 years. The small 1943 oil on canvas "OK Territory" shows the artist working a fairly standard arrangement of Constructivist colored planes. Ten years later, however, in the large tondo titled "Black-White With Yellow" (1953), he is bending Mondrian's right-angled structures to create a swelling, volumetric form. Mr. Smith relates that he got the idea for creating this illusionistic extension into the viewer's space from illustrations of basketballs, with their stitched surfaces, that he came across in sporting-goods advertisements.

In terms of spatial play, the artist's multi-panel paintings are among his most exciting works. In "Constellation Milky Way" (1970), he vertically joins two canvases, one a circle, the other an ellipse. At the left edge of each canvas he paints an area of solid blue and a similar black area on the far right. This creates the impression that a wide, continuous swath of white is passing through both components, but it also means that the work's center, at first glance, blends optically into the white gallery wall.

In the 80's the forms become angular again. In "Form Space No. 2" (1980), two black-painted, shaped canvases, one hung slightly higher than the other, are placed adjacent to each other in a corner of the room, the subtle sheen of their surfaces emphasizing their mysterious, extra-architectural presence. The amazing, tension-filled "Lobster Red," done four years later, joins angle and curve. A half-circular form, painted scarlet, seems to be propped open by a single solid black framing edge that threatens to snap shut at any moment.

The second and smaller of the two galleries devoted to Mr. Smith is a cramped, utilitarian space, yet the works displayed here -- drawings, watercolors and collages, along with two modest-size paintings -- expand one's picture of this artist's scope. "Drawings" made of carefully torn paper have a sense of organic, hands-on texture little seen elsewhere in the show. Other pieces, like a dark-blue cloth collage from 1981, might seem to be too subtle to be scaled up for painting, were it not for the example of Mr. Smith's "Jubilee" (1992), an even sparer acrylic on canvas that hangs nearby, with its four thin, angled black lines facing each other on a gray ground.

The odd, intense clarity of form in this recent painting, along with its unisistent potential for metaphor, are characteristic of Mr. Smith's work as a whole. They are features much admired by an earlier generation of "hard edge" American painters, Ellsworth Kelly notable among them, who closely emulated his style. Yet Mr. Smith's vision, at once plain and sonorous, is entirely his own. Like other distinguished but under-studied American artists, he has quietly helped to create the body and substance of this century's art, and "Leon Polk Smith: A Promised Gift" is evidence of artistic promise long and brilliantly fulfilled.

"Leon Polk Smith: A Promised Gift" remains at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park, through the spring of 1995.

Photo: Leon Polk Smith's "Constellation Milky Way," at Brooklyn Museum.