



Figure 15 Sculpture group by David Smith (American, 1906–1965), including *Circles III, II, and I* (all 1962), Bolton Landing. Photograph by the artist

There Is No Color in the Great Outdoors

I have never been to Bolton Landing, but as long as I have known of the work of David Smith I have been aware that this is where he made his sculptures. It's not just a location but also a place with a temporal dimension. You can drive from New York City to Lake George and find the town of Bolton Landing. From there, make your way to Edgecomb Pond Road, and the location of the studio and house will be apparent. This is due to memories of numerous photos taken by Smith of his sculptures in the surrounding fields (fig. 15). But what we want from Bolton Landing won't be there. The house and studio and a few sculptures may still be present, but the artist is long gone and the life events that centered on the creation of these sculptures have receded into the past. Still, I would like to go there to think and meditate on Bolton Landing as an important place and time in the history of modern sculpture.

The desire to visit comes not just from appreciation of this artist's work, but also from the nature of the photographs I have seen of him in his studio and of sculptures he placed in the fields of his rural property. The photographs are aging; the character of the people and equipment—even the pictorial nature of the pictures themselves—has all faded into a bygone era. During a lecture on sculpture I presented, I showed several well-known images of Smith's sculptures placed in the upper and lower fields surrounding his studio and home. A colleague in the audience commented that I cheated by showing photos of Bolton Landing in the snow. I was polite. I didn't care about the sting the comment brought. The reduction of sculptural complexity to graphic imagery is an affectation of high-contrast photography from the era of the works' creation. The romantic quality of this photographic effect is obvious, and my own memories are full of similar tricks. Affection for my life has allowed me to see this

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imagistic effect as a mental necessity. This beautiful gestalt, if not fully true to what the work was, breaks down the parts of figure-ground with flat scrap metal in the late industrial age. The white ground and stark winter landscape bring a primal quality to the images of *Tanktotems*, *Cubis*, and other sculptural constructions standing in formation in the fields. They feel simultaneously modern and ancient in their connection to society and ourselves. Is this a reading of the photograph or of how the sculptures really are? Looking at these pictures of sculptures in the snow, I sense the cold hard steel and the brittleness of frozen ground. Yet if you want to truly understand a sculpture like *Zig IV*, pound on it with a closed fist when the museum's guard leaves the room. It's made of steel. It reverberates and is indestructible to your hand or hammer. In a very real sense you have to be in the presence of the thing. You cannot hear it or see it in a photograph.

But where and what is this location where one must be? Is it at Bolton Landing in the presence of Smith's sculptural constructions? That time has passed for the artist and his property. The past is in memory, and sculpture in the real world moves through time differently than sculpture perceived in the mind. While the photographs are fading, these sculptures from a different time acquire fresh cultural color and continue to be seen in a different light with each change in the time of day, month, year, and decade. The origins of their creation are perhaps less important than we would like. The photos of Smith's workplace are romantic and bring on nostalgia for a place I have never visited (fig. 16). These pictures are a visual record and can be interesting and useful for simpler reasons than the ones I mention. If you know how and where a sculpture was made, you have a means to understand an aspect of the work that is often missed in its viewing. This glimpse into a



Figure 16 Smith cutting out a circle from sheet steel for *Primo Piano III*, December 1962. Photograph by Dan Budnik

sculpture's history helps us understand the object by stepping back from its obvious function.

Today we have no idea how the ancient Greeks viewed sculpture, but we know how their sculptures were made. The ancient carvers used round punches rather than flat chisels. This is important when you realize the punch must hit the stone at a 90-degree angle, while a flat chisel hits and glances off the stone at an oblique angle. Working with punches shatters the crystalline structure of the marble, but the flat chisel removes material by shaving off the surface, preserving the stone's molecular structure. The use of punches necessitates working completely in the round. A carver must pass all the way around a block, peeling it like an onion, before changing down to a smaller-size punch. Detail is refined as the punch sizes are reduced. This is why in a kouros figure there is a great democracy of events across the surface of the sculpture. Details slowly emerge across and around the entire stone: a hand is equal to a knee, a lip to a toe, and even a fingernail to an eye. All elements of the figure emerge equally together, at the pace dictated by the method of carving. Renaissance sculptors used flat chisels, and shaving and reducing areas of stone allowed an entire face to emerge while the rest of the block was simply roughed out. One cannot separate mind and vision from method and technique. Classicist Richard Neer explains why the block of stone is important to a kouros figure. The quarry is its place of origin, and these beautiful archaic figures bring the quarry with them, stepping forward in time as smooth objects in a rough and textured world. Smith put his work in the landscape, using it as a tool in the making of his sculptures: Bolton Landing was a chisel.



Figure 17 Smith with some of his sculptures, c. 1962–64. Photograph by Dan Budnik

The critic Peter Schjeldahl once commented to me that Bolton Landing was a cocktail party (fig. 17). This cartoonish image brings another quality of the work to our attention. I think of a wedding reception for two families—the *Tanktotems* and the *Cubis*—as they stand around the fields and pond of Bolton Landing on a summer afternoon. This image takes hold due to the totemic quality of Smith's abstract sculptures, which are modern and ancient simultaneously. The vertical organization of Smith's work begins or ends on the ground. The sculptures stand upright, creating an awareness that we

are in the presence of work that, although made today, shares with ancient figuration our common relationship to the past.

There is, I think, a human attempt to carve meaning or narrative out of the pure sculptural and expressive power of Smith's constructivist sculptures. Aerial photographs of his property at Bolton Landing reveal a reality of intent that is not domesticated by a plastic relationship to the pictorial setting of a rural neighborhood (fig. 18). Studio, house, fields, fence, flowers, and trees, seen from the sky, show the path of a river of expression flowing out of the studio into the surrounding fields.



Figure 18 North Field at Bolton Landing, c. 1967. Photograph by Dan Budnik

Smith called this momentum of sculptures his “work stream.” His daughter Candida used these photographs to illustrate an exhibition essay for a show at Storm King, *The Fields of David Smith*. In this same catalogue Anthony Caro is quoted: “Smith must have been lonely up there; Moore put his work out in the landscape to show the world that he was great, but Smith did it to show himself that he was great.”¹

What we see in others is often true, even when it reflects oneself, and I think both Smith and his work can be understood partly through their relationship to what we often refer to as the “great outdoors.” The outdoors is something outside our door. It is where we go sledding, horseback riding, hunting, gardening, and swimming. The great outdoors, however, is so far out it is found back inside, and comes forth in an expressive flow. Perhaps the great outdoors is where no difference remains between what is external and internal. Smith used the landscape to produce his sculptures—not as a vessel in which to place or arrange them. His river of expression, his work stream, had a strong momentum, and this expressive force comes with erosive power that can carve thoughts as a river carves the landscape or as chisel or punch in an artist’s hand shapes a block of stone. The landscape of Bolton Landing was not an exhibition space but a template, vise, wrench, or workbench. Nor was it just a place where this artist worked. Bolton Landing was the landscape that, through sculptural thought, brought a unique vision of spatiality to Smith’s construction (fig. 19).

Constructivism brought the tradesman’s methods to the studio. The artist-welder abandoned the idea of additive and reductive techniques, such as carving wood and stone, or building on an armature with clay. Modeling and shaping form into an orchestrated whole was abandoned in favor of building

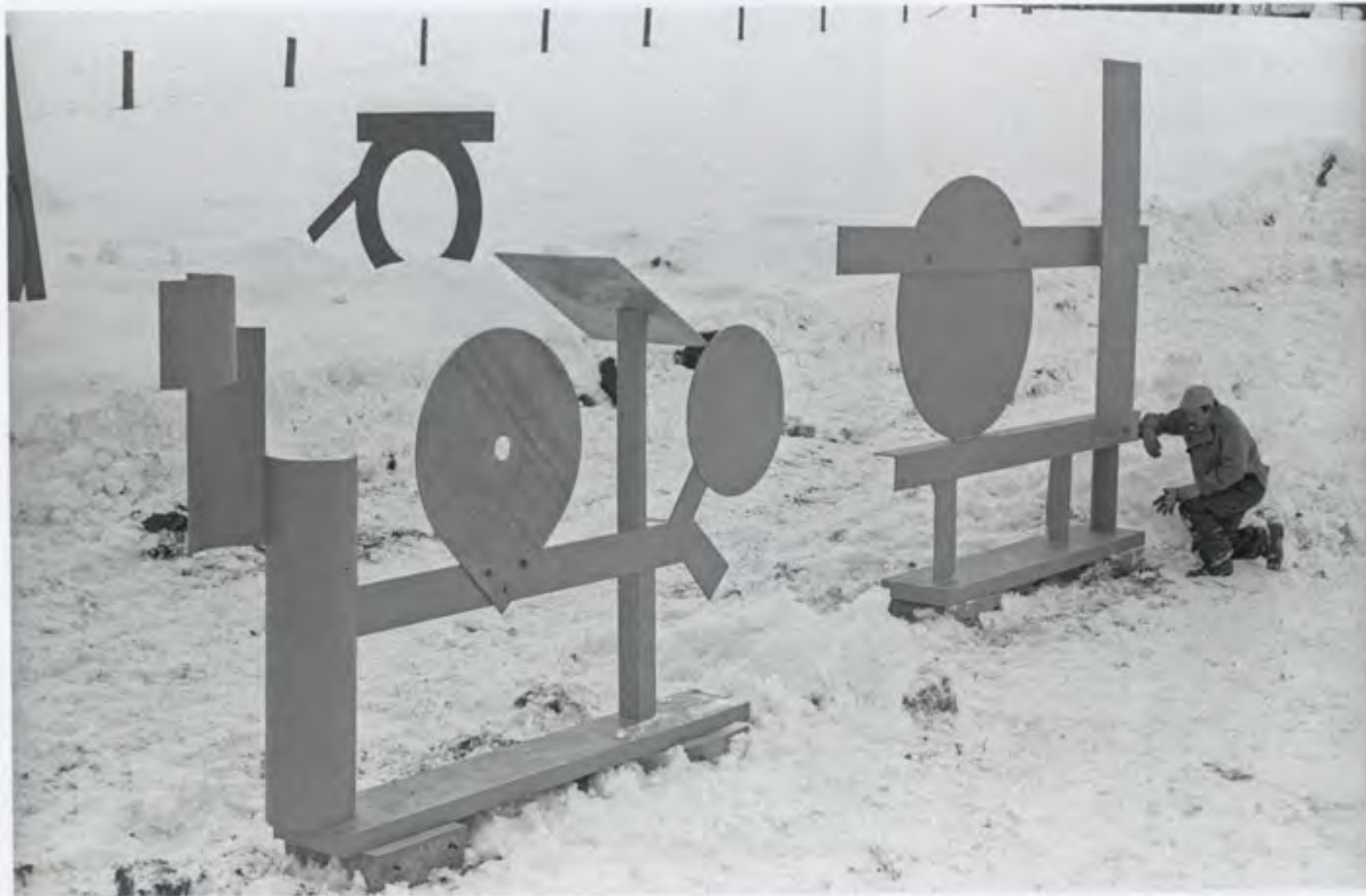


Figure 19 Smith checking the level on *Primo Piano III*, 1962, after installation with *Primo Piano II*, 1962, at left, and *Circle I*, 1962, at rear. Photograph by Dan Budnik

in space and developing a philosophical eye for a relationship of parts. Space is brought into this equation in an active way. It is no longer what material the sculptor builds *in*, but what he or she builds *with*. We grasp at meaning where there is none. Constructivism in the early twentieth century freed line drawn on surface by extending linearity into space, causing a singularity in art. Cubism in painting is a radical approach to pictorial structure. In sculpture it is a reinvention of art itself. Meaning is not depicted as much as it is generated.

I think we tend to stay with familiar terminology when looking at unfamiliar things. We need what is identifiable not just in contour but also in the events with which the unfamiliar is engaging. Once

Pablo Picasso and Julio González extended the steel line out into our space, as line became the medium of the sculptor, space lost its neutrality. Space as a container or empty field is lost forever. Albert Einstein's equations tie space to time, and we learn that force is the shape and form of space. If we don't understand the math, we look at modernist sculpture to understand how we are of the world rather than *in* the world. Containers lose their meaning, if not their function. A steel line drawn in space is not a bridge for pedestrians, cars, or trains (fig. 20).

Smith's work is awake to the location of its creation. Through the elements of the local landscape—a line of trees, a mountain, sloping fields, a pond—a sculpture such as *Australia* has less literal

reference to the Adirondacks than to elements of landscape. Steel bars and end cuts and other industrial scrap magically become like clay. Each element is extruded through Smith's hand, yet simultaneously forged by industry. The work acquires energy from the sculptural thought and touch of the artist's intentionality. If the title *Australia* refers to the springy kangaroo emerging from



Figure 20 David Smith, *Stainless Window*, 1951, Bolton Landing. Stainless steel, 31½ × 27 × 6 in. (80 × 68.6 × 15.2 cm). The Estate of David Smith. Photograph by the artist

elements of the sculpture, this pictorial quality is a starting point for a sculpture of real scale born out of the real space around Smith's studio. Yet, it does not refer to anything else. The sculpture is not Australia. The elements referring to a kangaroo are important poetically as an abstract spring or the life or heartbeat of a world. Landscape is abstract. Smith's sculpture is an armature for space, not clay. Turn the sculpture, and the world turns with it. The sculpture is no more in the world than a tooth is in your mouth. It is rooted to your jaw like a tree to a meadow. I do not mean this literally, as if the sculptures were site specific. I am saying that the sculptures are qualities of the landscape.

Take your cell phone and throw it at a Henry Moore sculpture. It will sail right through the hole. Throw the same phone at the empty space in the middle of David Smith's *Untitled (Candida)* from 1965 (fig. 21), and it will bounce right off. It can't go through. The empty space is the same size and shape as the staggered plates of this great work, but it is also as solid as the stainless steel plate upon which Smith ground reflective patterns across the surface. Light bounces and is refracted, and the sculpture is held in place by light itself. This sculpture never becomes a frame. A topologist will tell you that a two-dimensional creature is impossible. A digestive tract would cut the poor creature in two. Smith's *Untitled (Candida)* is shallow, but it reverberates and fills the third dimension. The landscape is digested and visible in the internal structure or belly of the sculpture. The sculpture eats and then retains space as a central element of its relational construction. It's a great example of how exterior space and interior space are really one and the same.

We could ask the question, Is the great outdoors outside? The philosopher Quentin Meillassoux sees it as what is here



Figure 21 David Smith, *Untitled (Candida)*, 1965. Stainless steel, 103 × 120 × 31 in. (261.6 × 304.8 × 78.7 cm). The Estate of David Smith

when we are not. This brings me to the story of certain sculptures that find a way to remain as objects when other artifacts are long lost or have disintegrated. With time, sculpture sheds its ideas, and what is left is what the artist made. How do certain works enter time while others die when we forget the purposes they originally served?

Whether indoors or outdoors, these works, I think, are found only in the great outdoors. David Smith found a way to allow his work to enter time. As we say, “time will tell,” but look at much of Smith’s work and it can feel frontal and

especially flat. Looking closer, we see that it is never flat but often so shallow and three-dimensional that perhaps it was compressed—rather than exploded—into being. Your art professor may have told you that Smith’s early works relate to painting of the time. The historian and critic Michael Fried once told me that Smith’s sculptures are great, despite their painted surfaces. I think he meant that the sculptures were so strong that even the painted surfaces affecting abstract painting of the time could not hold the works back. Painted inside the studio, the sculptures step outside and enter the great outdoors.

I do not mean to sound negative concerning the painted surfaces of David Smith’s sculpture. As an artist-viewer, I like and learn from Smith’s use of color. I do not see it as secondary or applied. Smith brought everything he had to bear on his creation of the sculptures. The painted surfaces of ancient Greek sculpture, while not lost to us in fact, have lost the relation to the aesthetic of the work as we perceive it today. Similarly, the age worked through Smith, and you can notice the decades shift as his color shifts from abstract expression to the more solid colors of pop. Smith launched his sculptures into the stream of time, and as they float away from our critical control, new relations among the viewers, the sculptures, and the world continue to engage. The form of archaic sculpture as well as the work of David Smith carries the figure of the man, and color is left to claim itself only as a fact.

Note

- 1 Candida N. Smith, *The Fields of David Smith* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 54