

Press Release

## No One Thing. David Smith, Late Sculptures

1 February – 13 April 2024

Hauser & Wirth New York, 22nd Street

‘David Smith’s sculptures are—big or small, figurative or abstract—very complete, very attentive to your presence. They’re generous; they have no boring views. Circle them as you may, they are never napping. They present a total attention, and they are telling you that that is the way to be: on guard.’

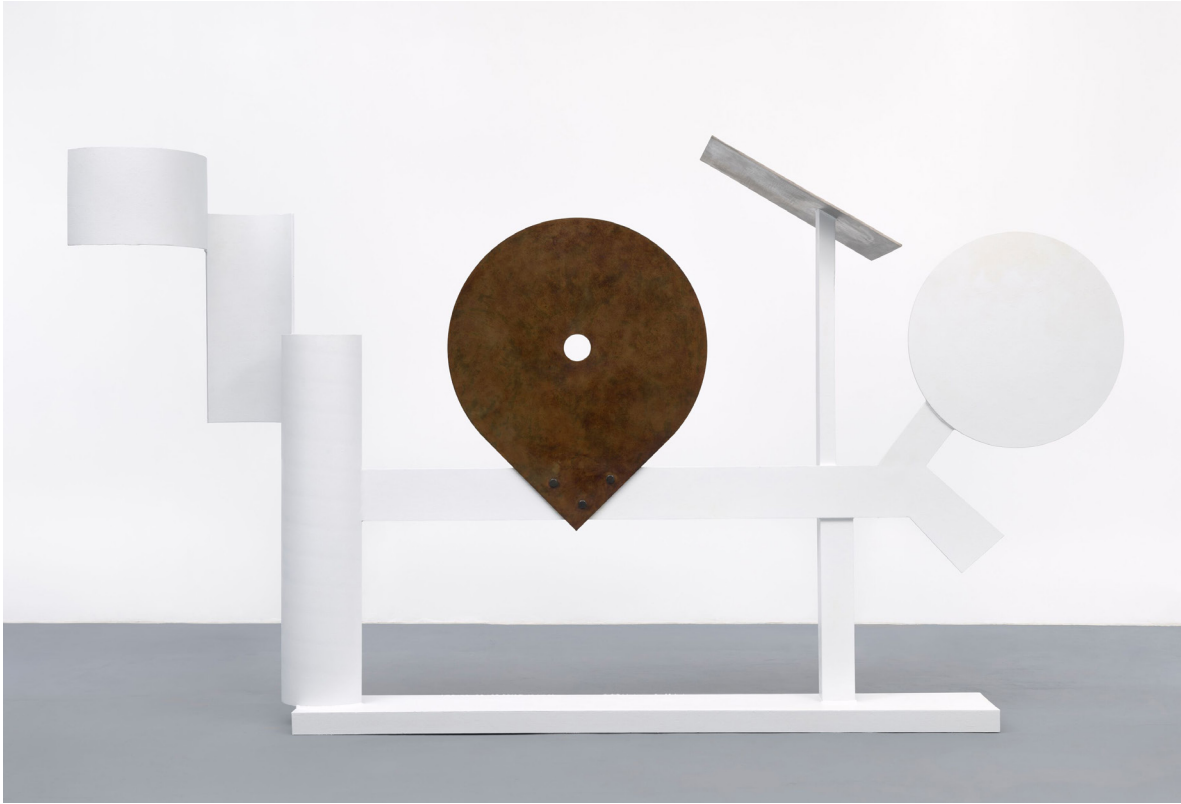
— Frank O’Hara, 1964



**New York...**One of the most influential and innovative artists of the 20th Century, and the sculptor most closely associated with the abstract expressionist movement, David Smith (1906 – 1965) was at his most experimental and prolific in the last five years of his life. During this period, he created approximately a third of his sculptural oeuvre. He deployed welding to newly monumental ends, integrated open space into his arrangement of planar forms and animated sculptural surfaces with paint in color combinations that transcended logic—all innovations that transgressed the norm, solidified his legacy and impacted generations of artists to come. In their sheer variety, Smith’s late works are nevertheless united by a single shared characteristic: blazing, liberated inventiveness.

Opening 1 February, ‘No One Thing. David Smith, Late Sculptures’ at Hauser & Wirth’s 22nd Street gallery presents seven of the artist’s most important sculptures from these final years. The title of the exhibition, curated by Alexis Lowry, pays homage to the legendary artist’s radical versatility, stylistic ingenuity and experimental spirit. As Smith said in 1951, ‘My reality...is not one thing; it is a chain of interlocking visions.’

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While Smith often grouped objects together with series titles, he worked on multiple series simultaneously and understood each sculpture as it ‘related to my past works, the three or four works in process and the work yet to come.’ He also cited the importance of painting in his practice, noting that not only is the history of sculpture painted, but for Smith each planar surface had its ‘own properties in form as well as in color, and then color adds another challenge.’ The seven painted sculptures in ‘No One Thing’ are exemplary of his refusal to adhere to one way of making or a single style. Drawn from signature series such as the Zigs, Primo Pianos and Gondolas, as well as important sculptures that were not serially designated, the works on view evidence the artist’s sustained conversation with materiality, form and surface.

Measuring thirteen feet in length and constructed of large sheets of steel, ‘Primo Piano II’ (1962) demonstrates Smith’s impulse to ramp up the scale of welded sculpture—an innovation made possible by technical skills he acquired while building tanks during World War II. Smith is the first American artist known to deploy welding in his practice. His use of industrial steel plates and bronze to create playful, nuanced constructions encourages viewers to explore his sculptures in the round, to perambulate for different points of view. He created the three sculptures that comprise his Primo Piano series during a six-week burst of creativity that followed a similarly intensive period of production in Voltri, Italy, when he created twenty-seven sculptures in a single month. As suggested by its title—Italian for ‘first floor’ (the floor above the ground floor) where, Smith explained, ‘most of the action takes place’—this work features two vertical elements that elevate a central horizontal beam, above which a dynamic interplay of different shapes and metals unfolds across a monumental span. These dynamic forms float upward with a lightness and progression that is counterintuitive to the weight of the materials used: a testament to Smith’s compositional prowess and adept handling of steel and bronze.



As with the *Primo Piano* series, Smith's *Zig* series also elevates the sculptural incident into multi-level constructions. However, where '*Primo Piano II*' exerts itself primarily across horizontal space, the seven *Zig* sculptures—among the most remarkable of his career—are triumphs of vertical and painterly expression. Affectionately titled after the ziggurats of Mesopotamia, '*Zig I*' (1961) translates the geometry, monumentality and solemnity of the ancient, stepped temples into modern, playful and seemingly improvisational constructions that demonstrate the artist's sense of whimsy. '*Zig I*' juxtaposes vertical and horizontal sections of flat and rounded steel tubes that ascend along a vertical axis, forms which recall the half-piping in '*Primo Piano II*' and which evidence how Smith accumulated and assembled materials in the studio. '*Zig I*' is activated by an application of frenetic, darkly colored brushstrokes over a burnt umber ground, harnessing the gestural vigor of abstract expressionist painting and urging the viewer to confront the work in an entirely novel way.

The last painted sculpture Smith ever completed, '*Gondola II*' (1964) is among his most accomplished confluences of painting and sculpture. It belongs to a small group of polychromatic sculptures titled after a gondola found in a factory—a type of hoist that is used to lift and move heavy objects—but which were begun partly in response to the format and gravitas of his close friend Robert Motherwell's renowned series of paintings, '*Elegy to the Spanish Republic*' (1948 – 1973), produced in lamentation of the Spanish Civil War. The palette Smith chose for this sculpture—warm cream, dusky purple and black—offers a poetic counterpoint to the industrial setting of his sculpture studio, and is evocative of an evening sky in the Adirondack landscape surrounding his home in Bolton Landing NY. As the art historian Sarah Hamill writes, 'For Smith, color was a material for sculpture, no less vital than forged steel or a welded bead.' The sculpture incorporates the ends of two rolled steel plates, an element Smith likened to 'chopped cloud[s],' that he first incorporated while working in Voltri.

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Presented alongside four additional, exemplary works from this period—‘Circles Intercepted’ (1961), ‘Ninety Son’ (1961), ‘Rebecca Circle’ (1961) and ‘Untitled’ (1963)—this exhibition demonstrates how Smith, in his use of negative space, painted color and interaction with natural and built environments, transformed the definition of sculpture and how it engages with its surroundings.

Hauser & Wirth will celebrate the enduring dynamism of the works on view with a series of walkthroughs and performances by artists from across disciplines, highlighting the sweep of Smith’s impact on future generations and reflecting the kind of intensive dialogue he often undertook with other artists, colleagues and students throughout his career. Moreover, the exhibition, flooded with constantly changing natural light in the gallery’s soaring fifth floor space, is presented in a way that evokes Smith’s own perspective of these works as they once were arranged in his fields at Bolton Landing. In 1956 Smith told a group of young artists, ‘I’ve been more concerned with questions than I have with answers.’ This reflection indicates Smith’s notion of his sculpture-making as an exploratory and ever-evolving practice, and invites viewers to locate connective yet open-ended threads among seemingly eclectic works.

### **About the artist**

Regarded as one of the most innovative sculptors of his generation, David Smith (1906 – 1965) redefined what sculpture could be in the modern world. Born in Decatur, Indiana, Smith worked as an automobile welder before moving to New York City, where he studied painting at the Art Students League. In 1929 he bought property in Bolton Landing, in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York. He would settle there permanently in 1940.

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Smith's metalworking experience inspired his choice to make sculpture by welding steel, eschewing the conventional sculptural methods of casting and carving. He is widely acknowledged to have created the first welded metal sculpture in the United States and for his ability to use steel as an expressive, sculptural material. Over a 33-year career, he broadened the cultural and material conditions of sculpture, while questioning and advancing its relationship with nature. Smith often worked on multiple series at the same time and regarded his sculptures, paintings and drawings as part of a continuous flow of creativity. When Smith died suddenly in May 1965, he left behind an expansive, complex and powerful body of work that continues to exert influence upon younger generations of artists.

'No One Thing. David Smith, Late Sculptures' occasions the artist's sixth solo exhibition with Hauser & Wirth. Exhibitions devoted to Smith's work have been presented internationally since the 1950s. The Museum of Modern Art in New York NY presented Smith's first retrospective in 1957. Smith represented the United States at the São Paulo Biennale in 1951 and at La Biennale di Venezia in 1954 and 1958, followed by Documenta II in 1959 and Documenta III in 1964. In 1962, at the invitation of Giovanni Carandente and the Italian government, Smith went to Voltri, near Genoa, Italy, where he produced 27 sculptures for the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto.

Subsequent retrospectives have been held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1979, 2006), which travelled to Tate Modern in London, UK and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, France; and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2011) in Los Angeles CA, which travelled to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York NY and the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus OH. Major surveys have been organized at the Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan (1994); the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Spain (1996); the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain (1996); Storm King Art Center, Mountainville NY (1997 – 1999); and Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, England (2019 – 2020). Smith's sculptural output has been definitively recorded in 'David Smith Sculpture: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1932–1965,' published in three volumes in 2021 by the Estate of David Smith and distributed by Yale University Press. 'David Smith: The Art and Life of a Transformational Sculptor' by Michael Brenson, the first biography on the artist, was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in October 2022.

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Zig I

1961

Steel, paint

245.1 x 144.8 x 81.9 cm / 96 1/2 x 57 x 32 1/4 in

Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zürich

Circles Intercepted

1961

Steel, paint

227.3 x 142.2 x 50.8 cm / 89 1/2 x 56 x 20 in

Photo: Jon Etter

Primo Piano II

1962

Steel, bronze, stainless steel, paint

225.1 x 408.3 x 79.4 cm / 88 5/8 x 160 3/4 x 31 1/4 in

Photo: Ron Amstutz

Gondola II

1964

Steel, paint

278.8 x 274.3 x 45.7 cm / 109 3/4 x 108 x 18 in

Photo: Jon Etter

Untitled

1963

Steel, paint

220 x 65.7 x 82.9 cm / 86 5/8 x 25 7/8 x 32 5/8 in

Photo: Sarah Muehlbauer

Rebecca Circle

1961

Steel, paint

215.3 x 124.5 x 61 cm / 84 3/4 x 49 x 24 in

Photo: Ken Adlard

David Smith with 'Ninety Father' and 'Ninety Son' (both in-progress, 1961), Bolton Landing, NY, 1961.

Photograph by the artist, 1961.

Ninety Son

1961

Steel, paint

188 x 50.8 x 33 cm / 74 x 20 x 13 in

Photo: Jon Etter