

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Leon Polk Smith 1940 – 1961

11 January – 17 February 2024
508 West 24th Street, New York

Opening: 11 January, 6 – 8pm

Considered one of the founders of the hard-edge style of Minimal, abstract art, Leon Polk Smith began experimenting with the forms and motifs that would shape his practice in the early 1940s, around when he first moved to New York City to pursue his art. This exhibition highlights those pieces made in the 1940s to 1950s, including a selection of key paintings from the era, alongside a group of studies, drawings and maquettes. These works reference his vast array of influences, from his investigation of the likes of the De Stijl painters and Piet Mondrian, to his own experience of the flatness of the Midwestern plains and the bright colors of Native crafts from his home state of Oklahoma. The work Smith produced during these pivotal years shapes the key themes of what would become his legacy.

Born in Indian Territory just one year before it became the state of Oklahoma, Leon Polk Smith was one of nine children born to parents with Cherokee ancestry. From his youth Smith's and his large family's identity emerged within the complex history and interconnection of Chickasaw and Choctaw native people living in rural Oklahoma communities surrounded by the beauty of vast plains. Smith knew at a young age that a life on the farm was not for him, and after stints supporting his family in their agrarian pursuits and as a rancher, he chose to pursue his studies as an educator. He graduated from Teachers College at Columbia University in New York City in 1938, a period in which he also began to explore his artistic practice. Much has been made of this pivotal early time spent in New York, where he first visited Albert E. Gallatin's Gallery of Living Art at New York University in 1936 and encountered works by the likes of Piet Mondrian, Constantin Brancusi and Hans Arp.

While ruminating on this Modernist style over the forthcoming years, Smith spends the late 1930 and early 1940s creating paintings and drawings with characteristics of Cubism, Surrealism and Expressionism. Examples in the exhibition include such notable paintings as *Repeated Forms* (1949), a colorful canvas depicting exactly as its title suggests—a repetition of various shapes such as rectangles, squares and a dominant bowl-like shape, rendered in varying hues, sizes and picture planes. Also included is *Black Fruit Bowl* (1940), which extends the bowl motif and sees repetition of form in the shape of lemons, and the especially illustrative *Western Landscape* (1943), in which the bowl is set against a divided picture plane, reminiscent of a prairie horizon.

It is not until the 1940s that he begins to make works such *Untitled* (1946) or *Diagonal Passage No. 2* (1946-47) that share a resemblance to a geometric approach. He recognized a universal visual language shared between the abstraction of the Europeans and the craft of early America. The critic Arthur Danto also noted that Smith's time in the plains of Oklahoma and the deserts of New Mexico had a profound impact on his work, believing one's sense of geometry comes from the landscape they know as home. Smith also referenced his background in more overt ways as well, and his painting titles were often names of Oklahoma towns—as seen in *Ada* (1958) or *Okie* (1957)—or references to early-life experiences such as *Lariat* (1938).

Geometric patterning can be seen throughout Smith's career, from the early grid-like patterns and diagonal passages compared with Mondrian, and even his later shaped canvases are often comprised of a collection of repeated shapes with bold, pure color. This devotion to pattern is no doubt influenced by Smith's exposure to Native American craft. Smith was familiar with a design device used in the ribbonwork and beadwork of Oklahoma's artists. Ribbonwork, in particular, uses highly intricate combinations of layered strips, folded or cut to reveal patterns of varying color.

The enormous impact that early Tribal art had on Smith cannot be underestimated, but his own unique combination of his biographical proclivities alongside his careful and curious study of European Modernist tradition is what created an entirely individual and radical oeuvre. While his *Constellations* or *Correspondences* may have gone on to receive the widest acclaim, the formative years spent defining this approach to geometric abstraction created perhaps the most revolutionary artworks in his practice.

About the artist

American artist Leon Polk Smith (May 20, 1906 – December 4, 1996) is often credited as pioneer of the hard-edge abstract style of painting, working on a scale and with simplicity that pre-dated the Minimalist painting styles that rose to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s. Born in Indian Territory, the year before it was declared the state of Oklahoma, he was deeply influenced by his own Cherokee ancestry and his time spent amongst the vast and arid plains of the Midwest and Southwest regions of the United States. Underrecognized during his lifetime, Smith's dedication to form, space and line, as well as his exploration of positive and negative space, would inspire the distinctive shaped canvases he would later come to be known for.

Smith's work has been the subject of several significant solo exhibitions in recent years, including 'Leon Polk Smith: Going Beyond Space' at Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich (2023); 'Leon Polk Smith: 1945-1962' at the Palm Springs Art Museum (2022); 'Big Form, Big Space' at Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, Canada (2021); and 'Hiding in Plain Sight' at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona (also 2021). A major retrospective of Smith's work was organized by The Brooklyn Museum, New York, in 1996. His work is in numerous public and private collections worldwide including Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, USA; Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois, USA; The Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, USA; Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, Arkansas, USA; Dallas Museum of Art, Texas, USA; Detroit Institute of Art, Michigan, USA; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA; The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., USA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California, USA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA; Morgan Library and Museum, New York, USA; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA; Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Germany; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; MACBA – Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Buenos Aires, Argentina; Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany; Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany; and Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia, Canada, among others.

The Leon Polk Smith Foundation was established by the artist and has been active since Smith's death in 1996 at the age of ninety. Its mission is to preserve and promote Smith's art and legacy. More information on Leon Polk Smith can be found at the foundation's website, www.leonpolksmithfoundation.org.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across spaces in London, New York, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estate of Leon Polk Smith. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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