LISSON

LEON POLK SMITH
Line, Color, and the Concept of Space

PRESS RELEASE

EXHIBITION DATES:
20 NOVEMBER – 1 FEBRUARY 2027
1037 N. SYCAMORE AVENUE, LA

OPENING: 20 NOVEMBER, 6 – 8PM



Lisson Los Angeles and Marc Selwyn Fine Art are pleased to present concurrent exhibitions of works by Leon Polk Smith (1906–1996), marking the artist's first solo exhibition in Los Angeles in more than a decade. Spanning both galleries, the presentations bring together more than twenty paintings alongside a selection of related works on paper, tracing the development and breadth of Smith's mature practice from the mid-1950s through 1980. Featuring several works never before exhibited, the exhibitions explore Smith's pioneering investigations of positive and negative space, line, color, and form, revealing the remarkable range of an artist whose approach to geometric abstraction remained both rigorous and inventive.

While sharing a common focus on Smith's sustained exploration of geometry and space, the two presentations offer distinct perspectives on his practice. At Lisson Los Angeles, works including *Inca* (1970), *Red Triangle*, *Black Square* (1968), and *Stretch of Black II* (1961) foreground the relationships between individual shapes and the larger compositions they comprise. At Marc Selwyn Fine Art, *Romance of the Spheres* (1963) and *Rising Red* (1980) highlight Smith's investigations of curved forms, spatial tension, and the interplay between painted shape and surrounding ground. Together, the exhibitions illuminate the breadth of an artistic language in which seemingly simple geometric elements give rise to complex and shifting perceptions of space.

Smith was a foundational figure in American abstraction and one of the first artists of his generation to develop a personal geometry addressing space, repetition, modularity, and infinity. From the mid-1950s, he increasingly employed irregularly shaped canvases alongside oblong and circular formats. His *Correspondence* paintings, typically composed of vibrantly colored shapes divided by a precise, often irregular contour, anticipated aspects of the Hard-Edge and Minimalist styles that emerged over the following decade. Yet while many of his contemporaries moved away from Modernism's relational principles, Smith continued to develop its formal and rational possibilities, using color and contour to unsettle traditional distinctions between figure and ground.

Smith's path to abstraction was unconventional. Born in 1906 into a farming family in Chickasha, Indian Territory, in what became the state of Oklahoma a year later, he worked as a rancher and held various manual jobs before turning to art in his late twenties while studying at Oklahoma State College. He moved to New York in 1936 to pursue graduate study, where he drew formative inspiration from the Modernist works of Constantin Brancusi and Piet Mondrian. As he later recalled, "I set out from Mondrian to find a way of freeing this concept of space so that it could be expressed with the use of the curved line as well as the straight." This ambition is evident in *Correspondence Red-Blue* (1964), in which the meeting of distinct fields of color establishes a precise yet dynamic relationship between the two.

Smith's interest in the spatial possibilities of the circle also informed *Romance of the Spheres* (1963), reflecting his conviction that a flat painted surface could suggest movement and curvature in multiple directions. This line of inquiry began in the late 1940s, when he became interested in the forms of balls depicted in an athletic catalogue. Their apparent combination of flatness and volume prompted him to investigate how simple geometric forms might generate an expanded sense of space, even within the confines of a rectangular canvas. The resulting works reveal an artist less concerned with depicting an illusionistic world than with

activating the surface itself.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Smith extended these investigations through increasingly complex, multipart compositions. His *Constellation* paintings, composed of multiple shaped canvases arranged in carefully calibrated configurations, approach a sculptural presence. Circles, arcs, bands, and blocks of color interact across separate panels, creating visual rhythms that shift according to the relationship between each component and the whole. The resulting compositions resist a single, fixed reading: their forms appear to advance or recede, expand or contract, as the eye moves across and between the individual canvases.

In works such as *Inca* (1970), this approach reaches a striking level of complexity. Comprising 48 round-cornered squares arranged in a panoramic grid, the work brings together configurations of straight and curved lines, bands, and semicircles. Shades of red, purple, and blue cohere and disperse across the composition, producing patterns that appear at once systematic and unpredictable. The title also reflects Smith's enduring engagement with Indigenous American traditions. Of Cherokee descent, Smith drew upon his early experiences in the American Southwest, where color and form informed his understanding of the natural and cultural worlds around him. As he once reflected on his early surroundings, "I grew up in the Southwest where the colors in nature were pure and rampant," and where his "Indian neighbors and relatives used color to vibrate and shock."

By 1980, Smith's commitment to abstraction remained undiminished. In *Rising Red* (1980), the expansive canvas continues his investigation of the expressive and spatial possibilities of color and form, demonstrating the vitality of a visual language he had spent decades refining. Across both exhibitions, Smith emerges as an artist who continually tested the limits of geometric abstraction, finding in the relationship between shape, color, and space an inexhaustible source of invention.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Considered one of the founders of the hard-edge style of Minimal, abstract art, Leon Polk Smith (20 May, 1906 – December 4, 1996) rose to prominence in the late 1950s and early 1960s with his distinctive shaped canvas series — the Correspondences. These large canvases typically consist of two vibrantly-coloured painted shapes defined by a precise but often irregular contour. By 1967, Smith's circular explorations introduce additional panels and define his shaped, multi-part Constellation series of paintings and drawings, among his most exuberant and inventive compositions.

Smith established his key motifs while perusing an athletic catalogue in the late 1940s. Examining the pencil drawings of baseballs and tennis balls in it, Smith began to imagine that from these simple shapes he could create a new kind of space. As he described: "It was flat and the same time it was curved. It was like a sphere. The planes seemed to move in every direction, as space does. And so I thought, maybe that is because that's on the tondo. I've got to find out if that is true or not. I've got to do some on a rectangle to see if the form and the space still moved in every direction. And it did. So it was exciting to do a painting on a rectangle that seemed to have a curved surface. It was the first time, you see, that I had made an important step myself, or contribution in art."

By introducing this single curving line, Smith created two pictorial spaces, allowing for the interchangeability of positive and negative space. He developed this signature style over the following decade, beginning with creating a series of paintings in which he explores the circle by developing a curvilinear shape within it using two colours, and later experimenting with more colours in oval, rectangular and square shapes. While Minimalist peers of his during that time were shifting away from Modernism, Smith was wholeheartedly advancing the formal and rational elements of the Modernist tradition.

A 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.

ABOUT LISSON

Lisson is a global gallery dedicated to shaping the art of today. Creating meaningful dialogues and robust markets between artists and audiences across six venues in the UK, US and China, Lisson exhibits the most engaging and challenging work, adding value and narrative through decades of experience and innovation.

Building significance and reputation with our artists, Lisson nurtures and amplifies their vision at every turn, supporting opportunities to show beyond the gallery's walls in museums, the public realm and through international partnerships. The gallery's heritage and its foundational role in contemporary art since 1967, allows for a deeper perspective and more thoughtful relationships when furthering the career and voice of an artist.

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