

LISSON GALLERY

NEW YORK

LONDON

504 West 24th Street
NY 10011 USA

27 Bell Street
NWI 5BU UK

138 10th Avenue
NY 10011 USA

67 Lisson Street
NWI 5DA UK

+1 212 505 6431

+44 (0)20 7724 2739

Press Release

Leon Polk Smith

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504 W 24th Street, New York

Considered one of the founders of the hard-edge style of abstract art, Leon Polk Smith rose to prominence in the 1960s with his distinctive shaped canvas series — the “Correspondences” and the “Constellations.” Lisson Gallery is pleased to present the first exhibition dedicated to the work of Leon Polk Smith since having announced the co-representation of the Leon Polk Smith Foundation earlier this year. The exhibition will feature a selection of paintings from the 1960s and early 1970s, many of which have never before been displayed. To accompany the exhibition, Lisson Gallery has published a catalogue featuring an essay by the poet and critic John Yau, as well as previously unpublished archival material.

Smith established his key motif 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 hard-edge 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 colors, and later experimenting with more colors in oval, rectangular and square shapes. By the early 1960s Smith has developed his distinctive “Correspondence” series, which typically consist of two vibrantly-colored 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. Lisson Gallery’s exhibition will focus on paintings created during these pivotal years in the experimentation of the “Constellation” paintings.

About Leon Polk Smith

Leon Polk Smith was born in 1906 in Indian Territory, the eighth of nine children to parents who were each part Cherokee and had migrated to the region from Tennessee in the wake of the great land rush in the late 1880s. One year after Smith’s birth, Indian Territory was absorbed into the state of Oklahoma. After a childhood raised farming and ranching amongst large populations of Choctaws and Cherokees, and an adolescence spent building roads in Arizona during the Great Depression, Smith studied English at Oklahoma State College (now East Central University) and received a degree from Teacher’s College at Columbia University.

Smith admired the work of Fernand Léger, Jean Arp, and Constantin Brancusi, but found the ultimate importance in the influence of Piet Mondrian and his interchangeability of form and space. In 1936, while studying at Teacher's College in New York, he first encountered the work of Piet Mondrian during a visit to the Albert Eugene Gallatin Collection in the Museum of Living Art, then at the University of New York. Seeing these works first-hand had a profound impact on the course of his own journey to abstraction.

Smith developed a core group of friends and fellow painters during his lifetime, including Carmen Herrera and Barnett Newman. Herrera and Smith were close neighbors, both experimenting with bold color and a straightforward style after the war in relative obscurity in downtown Manhattan. Smith remained supportive of Herrera's work as he became recognized and exhibited within New York galleries, and they would remain close until his death in 1996.

In addition to his impact on his peers, a budding generation of painters, including Ellsworth Kelly, Al Held, John McLaughlin, and Jack Youngerman, had all visited Smith's studio in the mid-1950s. By the 1960s critics such as Lawrence Alloway and Nicolas Calas were touting Smith's role as their precursor, noting his influence on younger hardedge painting practitioners.

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. The Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin announced its acquisition of three paintings and four works on paper by Leon Polk Smith in August 2017. The three paintings will go on view at the museum in Fall 2017. A solo exhibition of Smith's drawings and collages will also be on view at Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, New York this Fall. *Geometry in Motion: Leon Polk Smith Works on Paper* opens October 7 and marks the first-ever museum exhibition of Smith's work in the medium.

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 develops 54 international artists across two exhibition spaces in London and two in New York. 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, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie, to the public for the first time. In addition to a number of renowned artist estates, including Roy Colmer, the Leon Polk Smith Foundation and the John Latham Foundation, the gallery represents leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller and Tatsuo Miyajima. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

For press enquiries, please contact

Shawna Gallancy, SUTTON

Tel: +1 212 202 3402

Email: Shawna@suttonpr.com

Mackie Healy, Lisson Gallery

Tel: +1 212 505 6431

Email: mackie@lissongallery.com

i: [@lisson_gallery](https://www.instagram.com/lisson_gallery)

t: [@Lisson_Gallery](https://www.facebook.com/Lisson_Gallery)

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