

# LEON POLK SMITH: Back to Oklahoma

MAY 31 – SEPTEMBER 3, 2016

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Cover:

Leon Polk Smith, Untitled, 1954, opaque watercolor and metallic paint on cardboard, 8 1/2 inches x 8 1/2 inches. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Gift of Leon Polk Smith Foundation.

## Acknowledgments

The Museum is most grateful to the Board of the Leon Polk Smith Foundation who made this generous gift of works on paper possible. Special thanks go to Patterson Sims, President of the Foundation, and Maryanna Vermonte, Registrar, Leon Polk Smith Foundation Collection for their knowledge about the art and assistance with access to the online database of Leon Polk Smith's art. My deep gratitude to Senator Jonathan and Mrs. Nichols for the loan of their Leon Polk Smith painting to the exhibition. Thanks also to Dr. Taryn Chubb, Associate Professor of Art History and Director of the Pogue Art Gallery at East Central University, Ada, OK, for giving me access to University archival materials on Leon Polk Smith and for a very informative discussion about the artist. Thanks to OSU photographer Phil Shockley for coming to our assistance on very short notice to shoot the images used in this essay. Art history master's candidate Tiffany Sides assisted with the research, and OSU Museum of Art Director Victoria R. Berry provided me with a valuable sounding board for working out the exhibition and brochure content.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

*Leon Polk Smith: Back to Oklahoma*

Oklahoma State University Museum of Art

May 31 – September 3, 2016

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*Exhibitions and programs at the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art are supported by OSU/A&M Board of Regents, OSUMA Art Advocates, and the Oklahoma Arts Council.*

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Published by the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art  
720 South Husband Street, Stillwater, OK 74074, USA  
Tel. 405.744.2780 Fax 405.744.2800 [www.museum.okstate.edu](http://www.museum.okstate.edu)

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Late in 2015, the Leon Polk Smith Foundation in New York City brought the artist back home. The Foundation gifted more than 700 works on paper to the Oklahoma State University Art Museum, to be shared with art institutions across the State. Leon Polk Smith (1906 – 1996) gained national recognition in the 1960s in pioneering the Hard Edge painting movement, which favored abstract, clean-edged forms, flattened space, simple color schemes, and economic compositions.

*Leon Polk Smith: Back to Oklahoma* offers an introduction to his works on paper. Never widely exhibited or studied, these works offer a more nuanced picture of Smith's development and working habits. They represent the more familiar periods of his development from his early figurative work and his testing of different styles of European modernism to

the pared-down, hard-edge abstractions, which were refined over the remainder of his career. Drawings from the 1950s, however, reveal new insights about his development—a stepping stone to better understanding how this body of work relates to his paintings.

Smith's earliest work draws on his experiences growing up near Chickasha, Oklahoma. After finishing high school he worked seven years, first on ranches in Oklahoma and then on road and telephone systems construction in Arizona. He then enrolled in what is now East Central University in Ada and earned a degree in English in 1934. During his senior year he discovered art. After seeing a painting class in session, he persuaded the professor to let him sit in. So began his career. Between 1934 and 1940, Smith taught elementary and secondary education in Oklahoma. In 1936, he attended the first of three summer school sessions at Columbia University Teachers College in New York City to complete a master's degree in arts education and fine art.

Smith's rural life in Oklahoma frequently inspired paintings and drawings during these years: cowboys, cattle branding, the dustbowl, and college life. While these subjects reflect the preference of the Regionalist art movement for local scenes, his stylized treatment of figures and landscape anticipates his later turn to abstract form and economic compositions. Smith tested different approaches to simplifying his forms. In *Leo's Bay* (1939, Fig. 1) he used flattened forms encased in curvilinear black lines to describe a

cowboy on horseback riding through a hilly landscape. Unifying the background and figure, a dull red wash animates the image with drop and spray patterns. Looking backward with his chest full of hearts, the cowboy appears to be yearning for something lost or found.

Although Smith later described his technical training as limited, his early drawings suggest that he was inherently talented and a quick study. Within a six-year period he had leap frogged over any interest in naturalistic rendering to increasingly abstracted forms. His summer stays in New York accelerated his progress. While taking courses at Columbia University Teachers College, the artist was also exploring modern art outside the classroom. An advanced course in painting with artist Ryah Ludins the first summer was a significant turning point in his education and artistic path. Along with adopting her exercises in free drawing to liberate himself from conscious thought processes, he followed her advice to look at modern art in New York. In 1936, accompanied by Ludins, Smith visited Albert E. Gallatin's Museum of Living Art, the first public collection of modern art in the country. The novice artist subsequently worked in a range of different styles in the later 1930s, responding to a



Fig. 1

Leon Polk Smith,  
*Leo's Bay*, 1939,  
watercolor on paper,  
19 3/4 x 24 5/8 inches.  
Collection of Oklahoma  
State University  
Museum of Art. Gift  
of Leon Polk Smith  
Foundation.



Fig. 2

Leon Polk Smith, *Untitled*,  
1940, opaque watercolor  
on paper, 26 x 20 inches.  
Collection of Oklahoma  
State University Museum  
of Art. Gift of Leon Polk  
Smith Foundation.

variety of examples he had viewed in the Museum of Living Art and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

A cornerstone of the Museum of Living Art collection, Cubism shaped Smith's *Untitled* of 1940, a geometricized composition suggestive of male and female figures (Fig. 2). The artist adapted the collage-like compositions, solid color forms, and linear patterns of the later phase of Cubism known as Synthetic. He may well have been inspired by Picasso's *Still Life with a Glass and a Package of Tobacco [Composition]* (1922), which Gallatin had purchased in June 1936.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 3

Leon Polk Smith, *Pipets*, 1940, ink and opaque watercolor on paper, 19 x 24 1/4 inches. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Gift of Leon Polk Smith Foundation.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Surrealism, with its emphasis on a stream-of-consciousness process, also commanded Smith's attention. *Pipets* (1940, Fig. 3) shows his close study of Joan Miró. Smith had

the opportunity to see four superb examples of the Spanish artist's work once again at the Museum of Living Art, in particular, *Painting* of 1933. A series of biomorphic forms merging animal and human anatomy plus a guitar populate the multicolored atmospheric space of *Pipets*, echoing Miró's hybrid images and variegated backgrounds of the 1930s. This array of strange creatures conforms to Surrealism's

arbitrary juxtapositions of invented images emerging from the human subconscious.

While it is easy enough to identify the artists and styles that Smith “tried on” during these years, his outcomes demonstrate the artist’s independent and selective adaptations of European modernism. Whether by imagery and/or style Smith imprinted these works with elements of the singular vision that shapes his mature work.

Smith’s first viewing of a painting by Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian in 1936, once again at the Museum of Living Art, was a turning point for his art a decade later. A major memorial retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in the spring of 1945 offered another opportunity for him to revisit the Dutch artist’s work. Living in New York between 1945 and 1949, Smith set the abstract direction of his art with a group of works inspired by Mondrian’s minimalist geometry, two being tributes to Mondrian’s New York-inspired Boogie Woogie paintings. The American artist focused on the formal implications of Mondrian’s art, leaving behind its utopian social theories. In particular, he embraced the Dutch artist’s idea of “the interchangeability of form and space,” as Smith termed it, wherein “space and form were complimentary to each other as well as interchangeable.”

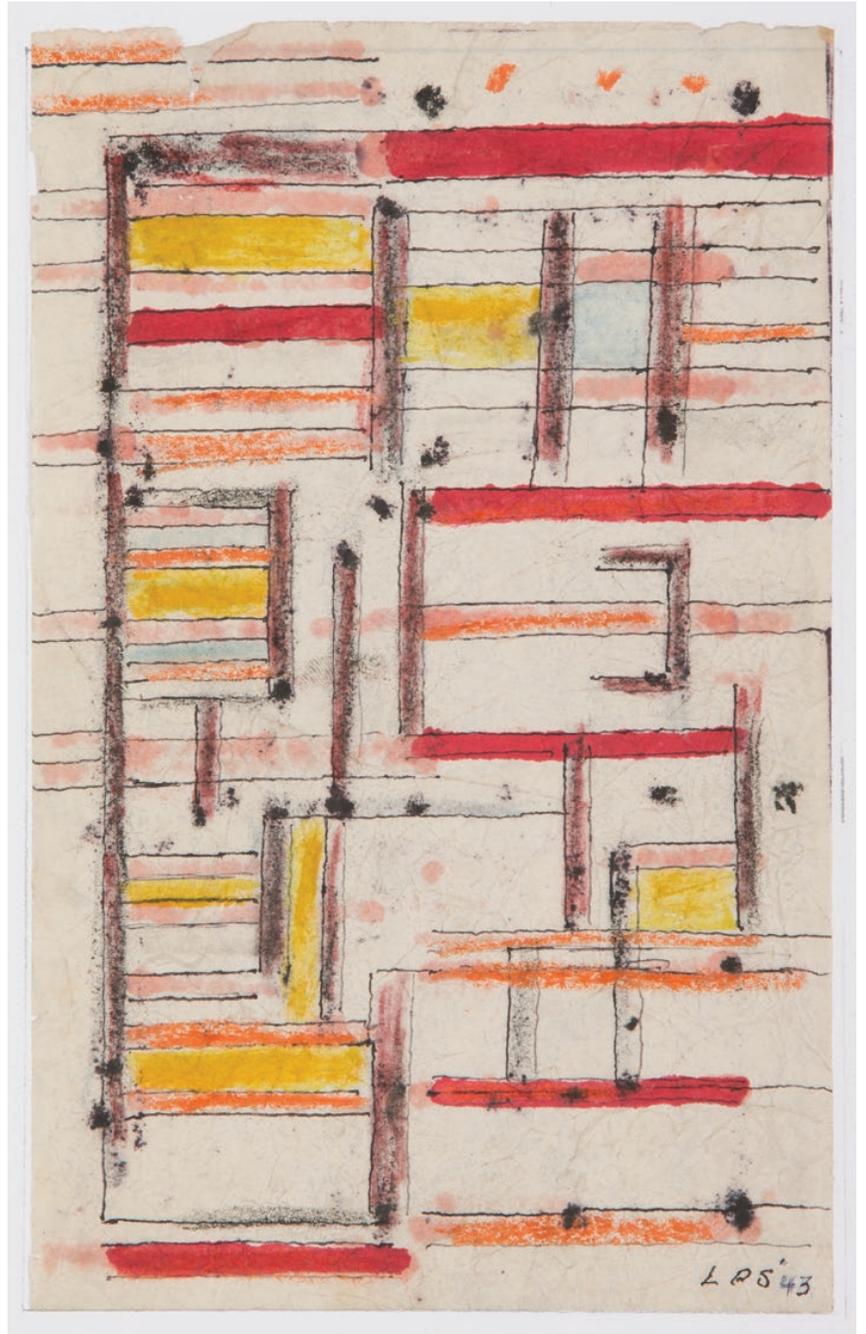


Fig. 4

Leon Polk Smith,  
Untitled, 1943, crayon,  
ink, and marker on  
paper, 14 3/4 x 11  
inches. Collection of  
Oklahoma State  
University Museum of  
Art. Gift of Leon Polk  
Smith Foundation.

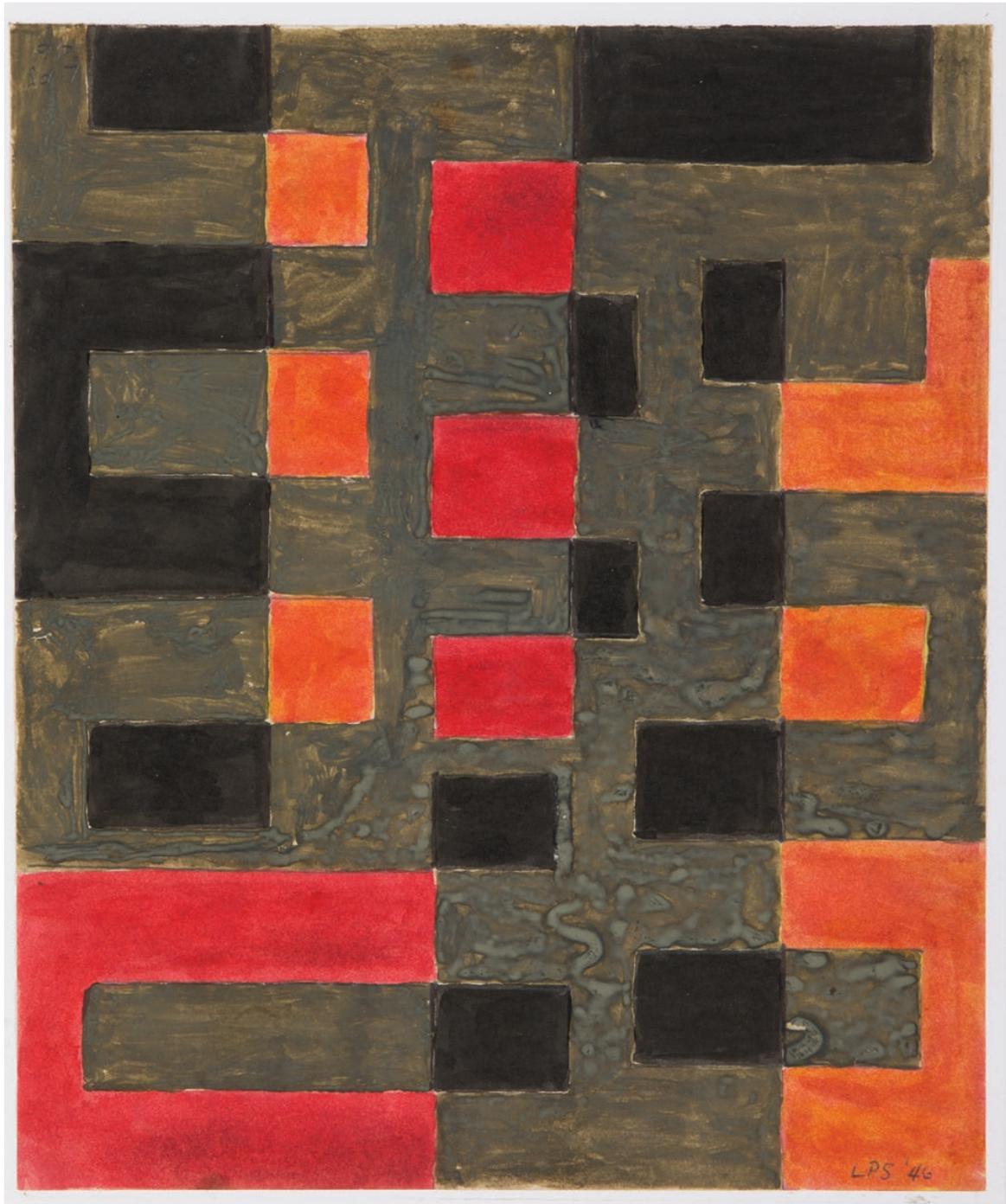


Fig. 5

Leon Polk Smith,  
Untitled, 1946, pencil  
and opaque watercolor  
on paper, 14 3/4 x  
11 inches. Collection  
of Oklahoma State  
University Museum of  
Art. Gift of Leon Polk  
Smith Foundation.

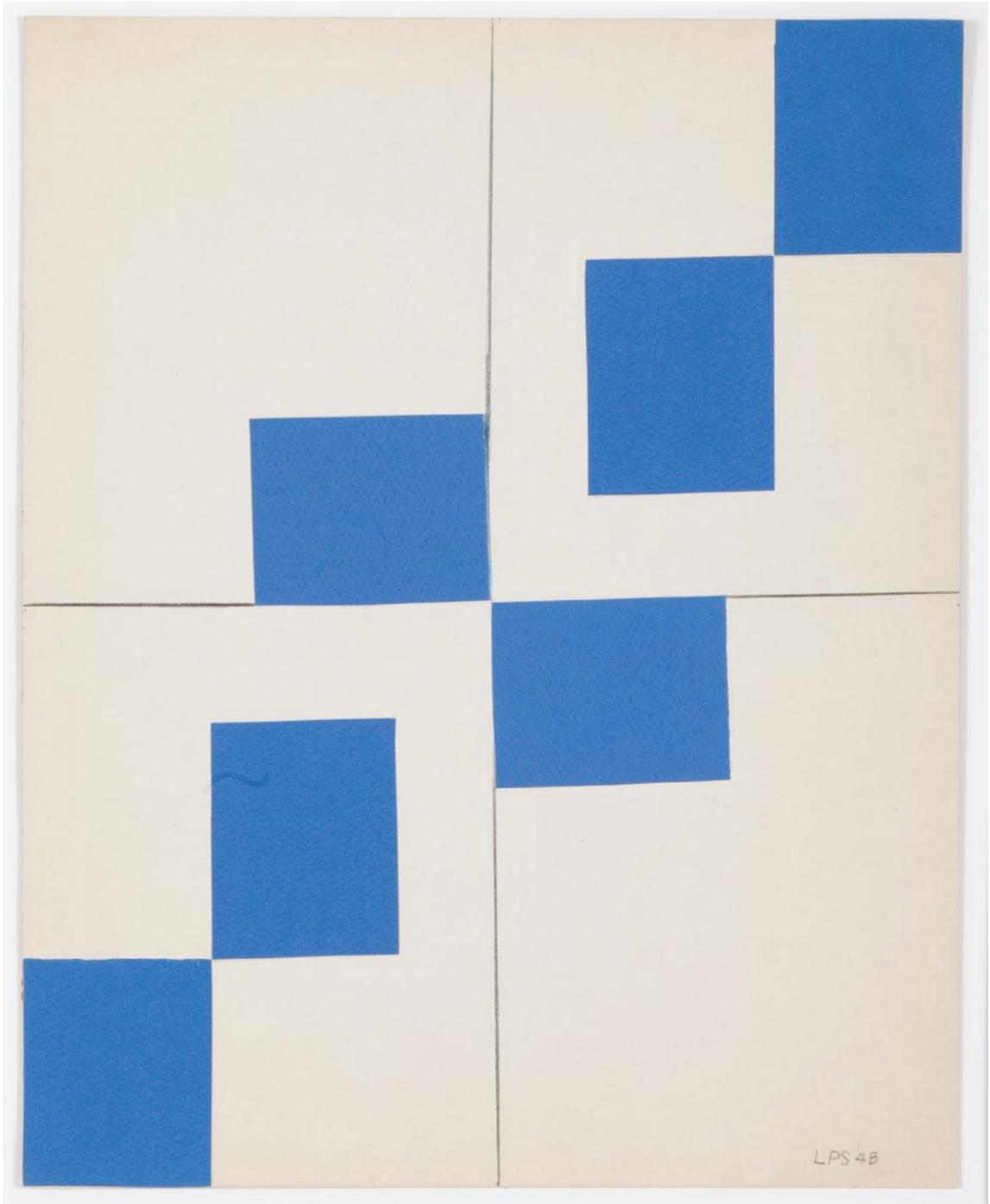


Fig. 6 (opposite page)

Leon Polk Smith,  
Untitled, 1948, pencil  
and colored paper on  
cardboard, 17 x 13  
5/8 inches. Collection  
of Oklahoma State  
University Museum of  
Art. Gift of Leon Polk  
Smith Foundation.



Fig. 7

Leon Polk Smith,  
*NUSH'KA*, 1949, oil  
on board, diameter:  
12 inches. Jonathan  
and Talitha Nichols  
Collection.

He added to this goal the challenge of using Mondrian's idea "in a curvilinear manner, in curved lines, free forms."<sup>3</sup>

Smith's drawings track his transition from Cubism to Mondrian. In a 1943 example, Smith abandoned the quasi-figurative imagery of the 1940 Cubist-inspired drawing (Fig. 2) for a grid composition (Fig. 4). Though the work moves a step closer, Smith's freely drawn rectangular forms and striping have yet to comply with Mondrian's ruled grid. Smith adopts a more restricted but less regimented palette than the Dutch artist's, which was limited to black, white, and the primary colors—red, yellow, and blue.

Another drawing from 1946 shows Smith improvising to create his own distinctive configurations (Fig 5). It represents a more simplified version of the 1943 grid with closed rectilinear forms. Their overlapping creates an interplay between the solid and void references, with the gray becoming a contrasting painterly plane. Once again, Smith departs from the Dutch artist's strict formal vocabulary in introducing C and L shapes to his grid composition, eliminating line, and varying his color scheme with a combination of black, gray, red, and orange.

The 1948 work on paper and *NUSH'KA* are the most direct adaptations of Mondrian's style, conforming to his palette and rectangular forms (Figs. 6, 7). The similarities stop there, as Smith sets up some alternative formal problems to investigate.



Smith broke with Mondrian's strict grid composition by introducing diagonal axes. Further, in the work on paper, not all the blue blocks are contained by lines or paper edges but rather anchored at corners (Fig. 6). These blocks read as solid forms suspended in space, again sidestepping Mondrian's notion of interchangeability.

*NUSH'KA* exemplifies Smith's early efforts to implement his concept of interchangeable form and space based on curves, here through a shaped canvas (Fig. 7). This painting combines closed and open-ended rectilinear forms of the earlier 1940s drawings. The textured white areas give the painting a physicality that transforms background into surface. As a result, the lines and rectangles sink into a space behind the white plane, another spinoff on the Mondrian interchangeability of form and space concept.

In the 1950s, Smith continued working in an exploratory vein. He pursued two alternative models that advanced his art to its maturity and recognition as Hard Edge, one of which has not been previously recognized. Representing a significant body of work, studies of plant forms suggest that Smith returned to the lessons of art educator Arthur Wesley Dow that he had studied at Columbia University Teachers College. First appearing in 1899 and last published in 1940, Dow's text *Composition* was an early prototype for teaching what today is known as design—principles of line, form, space, color, and composition in the abstract (Fig. 8). Smith

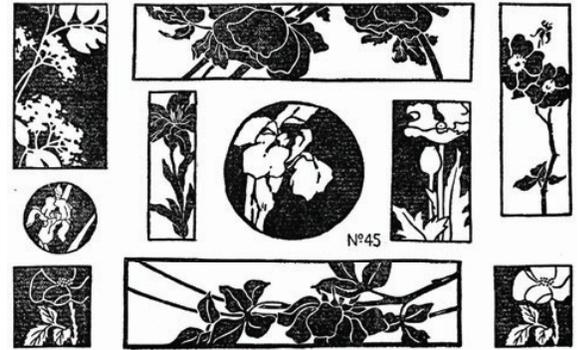


Fig. 8

"Notan. IX. Flower Compositions. Two Values—Variations—Design," in Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition. A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*, ninth edition, revised and enlarged. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1914, p. 85.

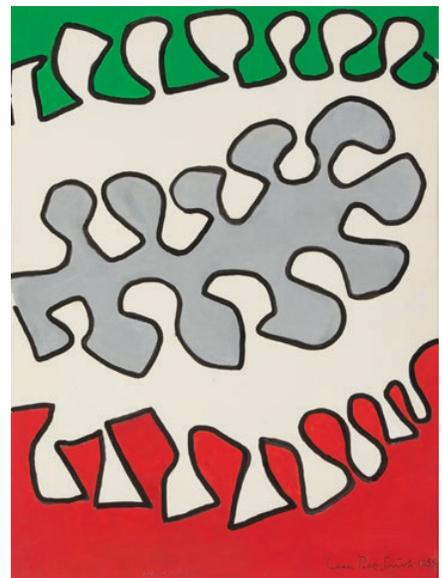


Fig. 9

Leon Polk Smith, *Dusty Miller*, 1955, opaque watercolor on paper, 23 3/4 x 17 7/8 inches. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Gift of Leon Polk Smith Foundation.

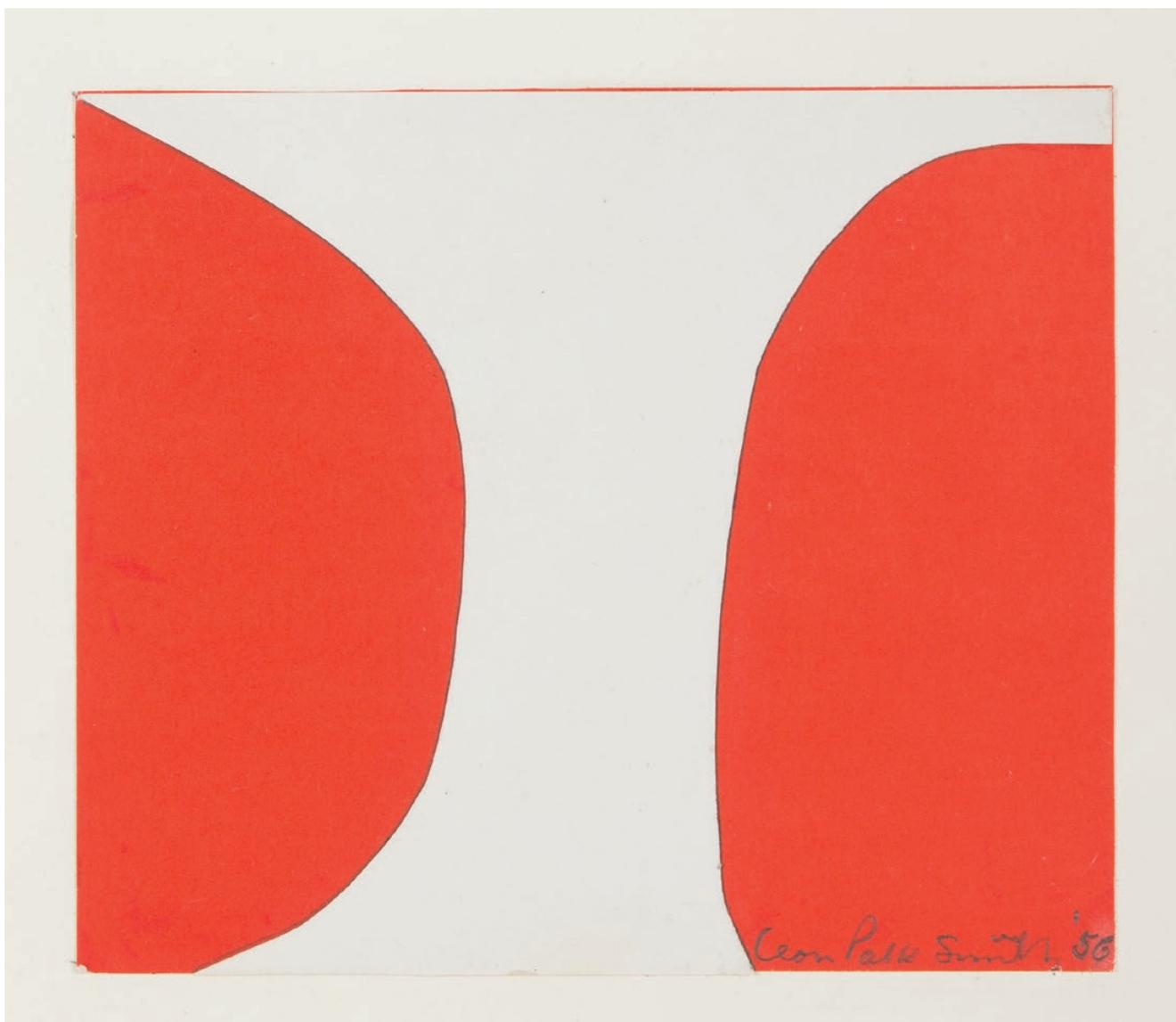
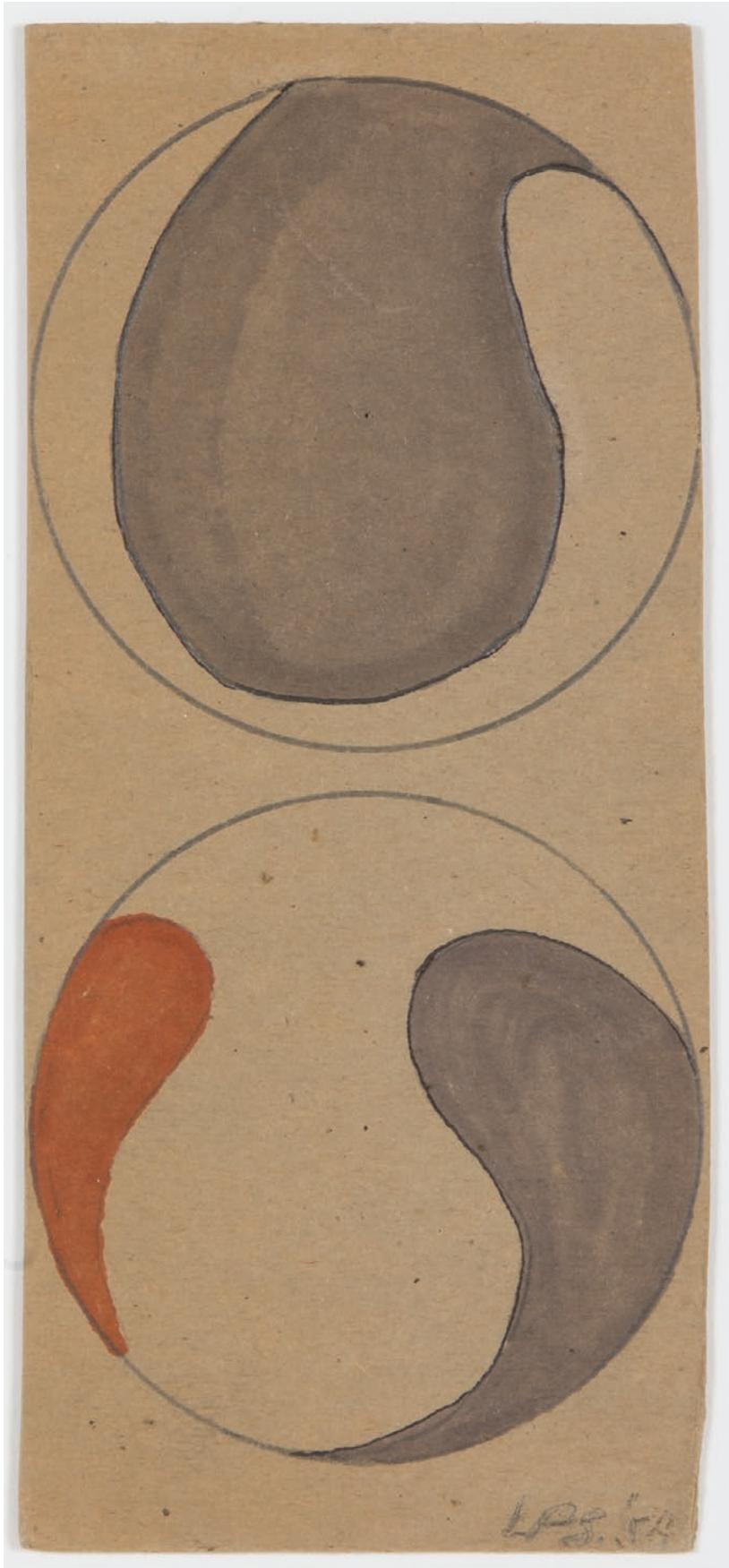


Fig. 10

Leon Polk Smith,  
Untitled, 1956, paper  
on paper, 11 x 14  
inches. Collection  
of Oklahoma State  
University Museum of  
Art. Gift of Leon Polk  
Smith Foundation.



*Fig. 11*

Leon Polk Smith, *Untitled*, 1954, pencil, ink, and opaque watercolor on cardboard, 8 1/2 x 3 3/4 inches. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Gift of Leon Polk Smith Foundation.



Fig. 12

Leon Polk Smith, *Untitled*, 1954, opaque watercolor and metallic paint on cardboard, 8 1/2 inches x 8 1/2 inches. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Gift of Leon Polk Smith Foundation.

followed Dow’s strategies of “arranging lines in space,” with attention to the distribution of form, color, and values to create an all-over patterned space—what Dow termed *Notan*.<sup>4</sup>

A series of studies of dusty miller illustrate how Dow’s exercises of framing and cropping guided an avenue of organic abstraction. More naturalistic descriptions from the early 1950s evolve into more economic, stylized forms and colors seen in *Dusty Miller* (1956, Fig. 9). Smith’s plant studies are logical outcomes of Dow-inspired strategies of closing in on an image, simplifying and cropping the form, and reducing composition and color to a two-color surface pattern fundamental to the breakthrough painting series *Correspondences* (Fig. 10).

In 1954, Smith discovered another of his visual models, which is well known. A chance viewing of a sporting goods catalogue enabled him to resolve his other Mondrian-inspired formal challenge. Illustrations of tennis balls and baseballs showed him “how to use the curvilinear form within an inner circle” and advanced his abstraction.<sup>5</sup> He quickly progressed from images closely resembling baseballs in the orange-and-beige study (1954, Fig. 11) to the frontal composition of the gold-and-white drawing (1954, Fig. 12), which takes on an iconic presence. Smith then applied this curvilinear model to rectangular and square formats; and, in tandem with the Dowian insights, the *Correspondences* series was born.



Fig. 13

Leon Polk Smith, *Untitled*, 1958, opaque watercolor on paper, 16 1/8 x 13 inches. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Gift of Leon Polk Smith Foundation.

In 1958, Leon Polk Smith left teaching and turned to art full time. His 1940s and 1950s experimentations crystallized into a set of formal goals that guided his mature abstractions. The *Correspondences* series created in the late 1950s established Smith's reputation as a major artist. An example from 1958 confirms his account of beginning with "three shapes, three forms, but I reduced it to two. I would paint this one colour and that one colour" (Figs. 10, 12)<sup>6</sup> The forms in this series vary from free form to angular, rendered in two colors. Seen as early as 1955 in his drawings, this economy also involved eliminating line. The interfaces of color fields and the support edges replace line as boundaries. With these reductive measures the scale of forms increases, amplified through their cropping and framing.

Smith's overarching goal was visual "equilibrium" as he termed it, starting with line. For him drawing a line created "two worlds in direct opposition to each other and yet so well related that they fit into each other as a jigsaw puzzle must."<sup>7</sup> The color choices, their intensity, proportions, and solidity, made equally important contributions to this balance. Smith thereby eliminated the spatial hierarchy of foreground and background in

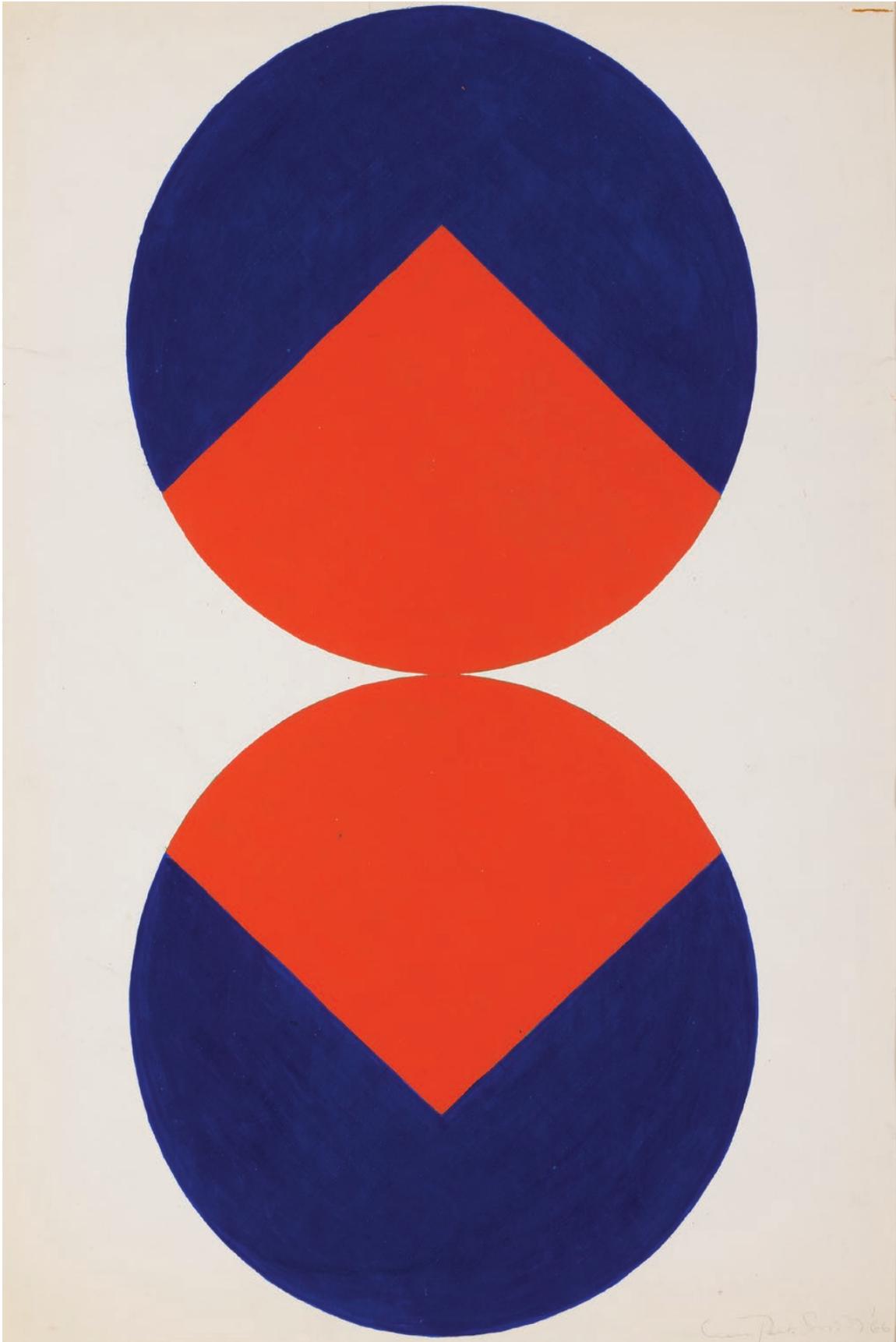
favor of adjoining fields of equal substance. Collectively these formal decisions impart a monumentality that gives the drawings a heightened presence and importance. The impact is all the more so with his paintings on canvas, which had increased in size to mural scale.

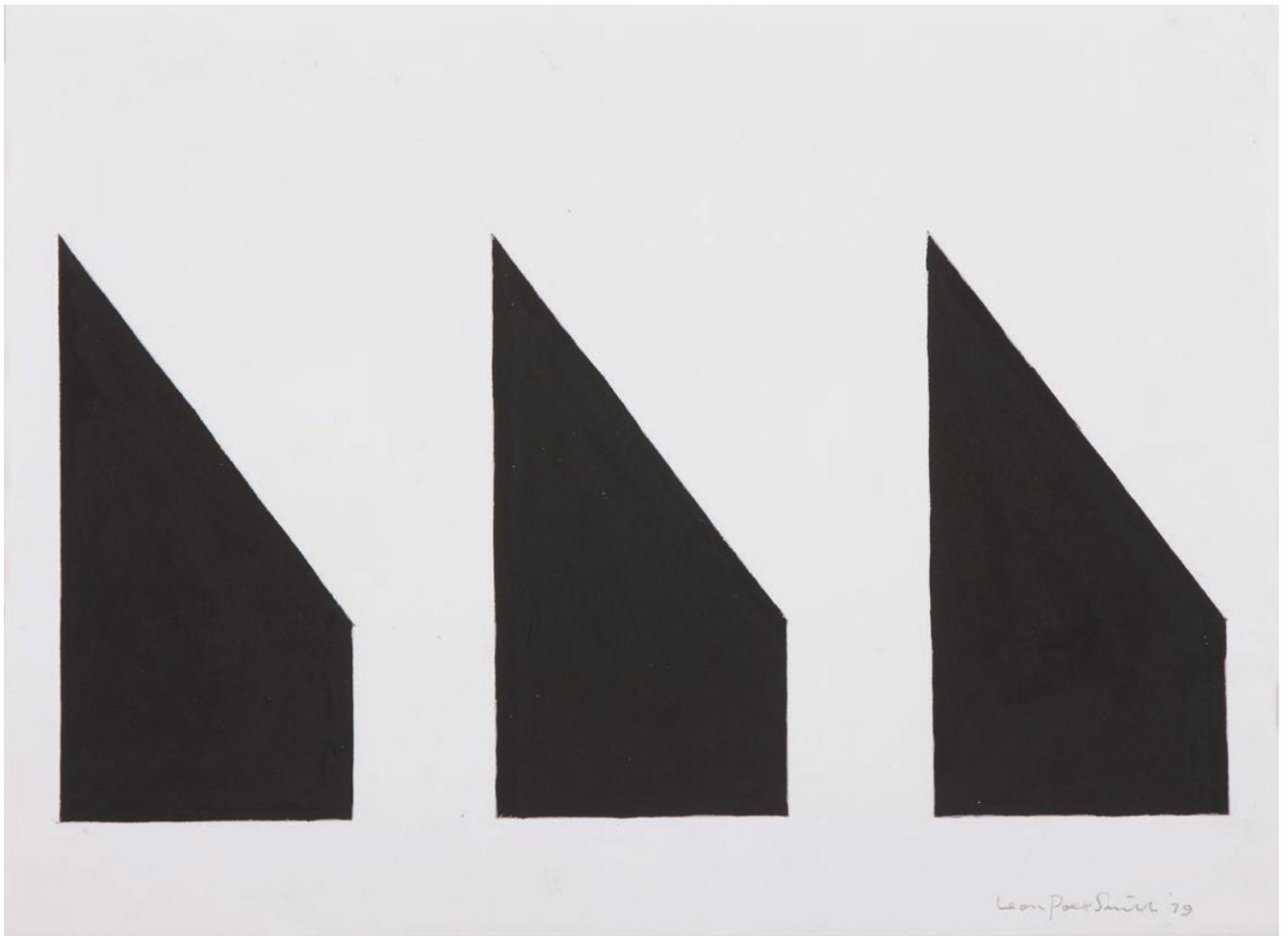
The artist evoked a still greater sense of space with the *Constellations* series begun around 1967 (Fig. 14). Instead of increasing the size of individual paintings, he introduced multiple units as single compositions. Smith returned to geometric forms—curved and rectilinear—and vivid hues plus black. These components are arranged in tangential sequences that imply their unlimited expansion. The alignment and partitioning of the components suggest fragmented large-scale forms. With this new format, his paintings break out of their canvas boundaries and expand across the walls, integrating them into the compositions.

Smith simplified his compositions still further beginning in the 1970s while continuing to incorporate wall space into the artworks. He repeatedly explored formal issues through black-and-white compositions, as he had throughout his career. The deceptively austere composition of this 1979 work on paper integrates

Fig. 14 (opposite page)

Leon Polk Smith, Untitled, 1966, acrylic paint on paper, 24 3/4 x 17 3/4 inches. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Gift of Leon Polk Smith Foundation.





*Fig. 15*

Leon Polk Smith, *Untitled*,  
1979, acrylic paint on  
paper, 14 3/4 x 20 inches.  
Collection of Oklahoma  
State University Museum  
of Art. Gift of Leon Polk  
Smith Foundation.

a white field with black modules to set up provocative perceptual experiences (Fig. 15). The sequence of forms moves the eyes simultaneously in two directions, upward and to the left, over the support surface and beyond. Designating shaped canvases, the black forms become, as Smith explained, “the nucleus for a much larger area [of wall].”<sup>8</sup>

**V**iewed in hindsight, Leon Polk Smith’s career shows the very self-contained character of his art in the best sense. As the artist repeatedly stated, beyond Mondrian’s art very little outside his vision shaped his development. Like

other movements from the 1960s and 1970s such as Minimalism, Smith’s Hard Edge compositions reduced art to its most basic elements. He sought to identify the essential components of art and to resolve related formal problems. In effect, Smith’s work is art about art. From the audience’s perspective, the viewing of his art combines perceptual and intellectual experiences to understand what makes art art.

*Arlette Klaric, Ph.D., Associate Chief Curator / Curator of Collections*

1 For further information on A. E. Gallatin and his museum, see Gail Stavitsky, “The A. E. Gallatin Collection: An Early Adventure in Modern Art,” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, 89, No. 379/380 (Winter – Spring, 1994): 1, 4-47.

2 A. E. Gallatin donated his collection the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1943. To learn more about the specific artworks discussed in this essay, go to <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/search.html> and search the museum’s online collections database.

3 Artist Statement, c. 1961, typescript, Galerie Chalette, New York, NY, 1968; and “A Conversation between Konstanze Chrüwell-Doertenbach and Leon Polk Smith,” *Nike*, No. 19 (July/August/September, 1987); reprinted in *Leon Polk Smith*, exhibition catalogue, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, and Musée Grenoble, 1989, p. 105.

4 Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition; A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*, seventh edition, revised, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913, p. 53.

5 “A Conversation between Konstanze Chrüwell-Doertenbach and Leon Polk Smith,” p.105.

6 Ibid.

7 “The Paintings of Leon Polk Smith. A Conversation between Leon Polk Smith and d’Arcy Hayman,” in *Leon Polk Smith im Arithmeum*, exhibition catalogue, Arithmeum im Forschungsinstitute für diskrete Mathematik, University of Bonn, Germany, 2001, p. 19.

8 Brooke Kamin Rapaport, “An Interview with Leon Polk Smith,” in *Leon Polk Smith: American Painter*, 1996, exhibition catalogue, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, p. 23.

