

LEON POLK SMITH LARGE PAINTINGS 1979-1981

OCTOBER 28-DECEMBER 15, 1981



THE FINE ARTS CENTER
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

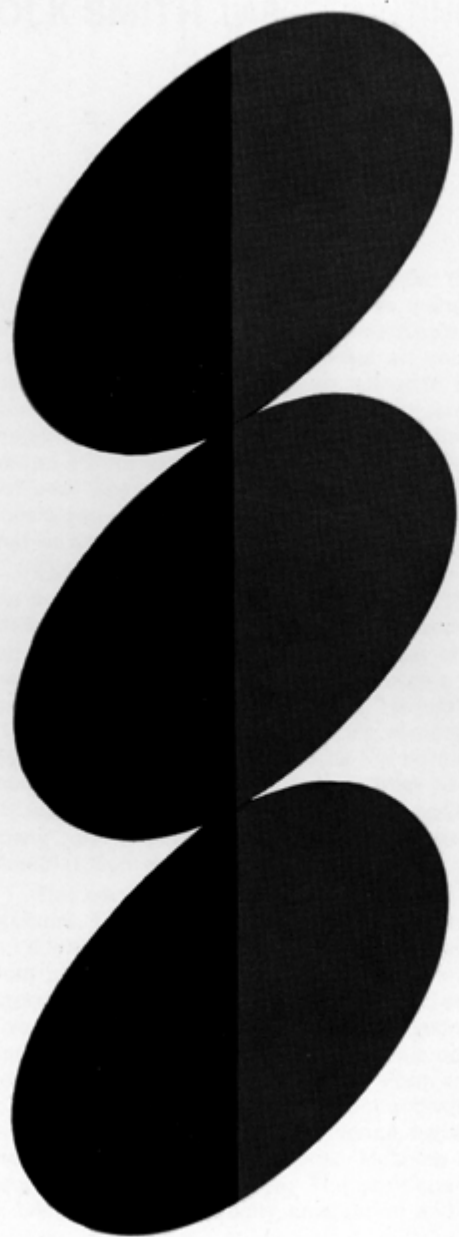
LEON POLK SMITH LARGE PAINTINGS 1979-1981

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art gallery



THE POLK SMITH CENTER
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BINGHAMTON



Constellation: Violet-Red, 1969.

Photographs by D. James Dee.

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Early 20th century abstract art tended to be at the scale of compact easel paintings, smaller than many of the representational works of the time, such as Matisse's *Joy of Life* or *The Dance*. The ways in which abstract art could expand were by identification with decorative art, either in the form of sets of panels, like Kandinsky's *Seasons* or in terms of architectural projects. It is a fact that big paintings often have a clarity as well as a clout sometimes missing from smaller canvases. It was not until Abstract Expressionism that abstract art achieved a consistently large scale, while retaining the personal initiatives that we associate with easel painting.

Leon Polk Smith's new paintings are on an heroic scale: in the present exhibition four of them are in the neighborhood of fifteen feet long, one reaching eighteen, and several are around ten feet high. His scale is close to that of Jackson Pollock's large paintings, but the incisive contours and the evenness of surface are more like geometric art. He has revered the master of that mode for many years, Piet Mondrian. We associate Mondrian with the right angle and the primary colors, of which there are no traces in Smith's art. What he saw in Mondrian's art was the "discovery of the interchangeability of form and space", as he put it. (At the same time he aimed to "release Mondrian from the rectangle".)

This corresponds in Smith's work to the seamless interface of colors. The boundaries are exactly placed and clearly rendered, but subtle decisions about hue and value prevent the boundaries from disrupting the surface. Hence there are no foreground/background exchanges to break the holistic structure of the work. Five of the paintings in this exhibition belong to Smith's Form-Space series, a term that emphasizes his desire for an art that generates interchangeable elements. Form and space are similar to foreground and background, object and void. An earlier group of paintings was called Correspondence, a word that also stresses the painting as a unified surface. Meaning is embedded in the equivalence of paired colors. The paintings act as emblems of convergence and reciprocity, celebration and order.

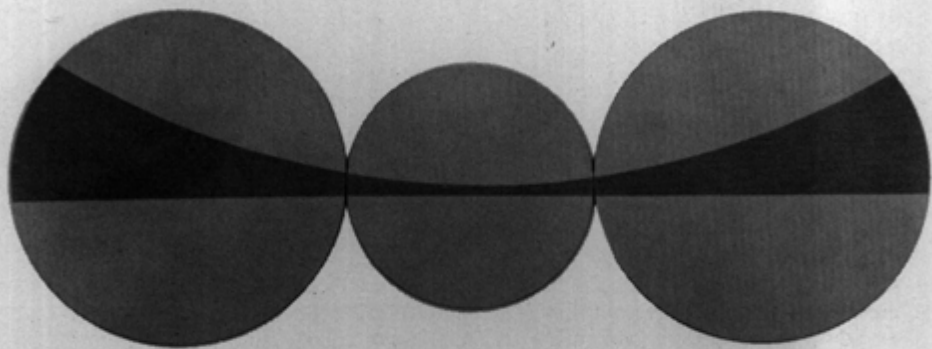
There are two earlier paintings in the exhibition. *Constellation: Violet-Red*, 1969, which consists of three tilted ellipses, touching, one above the other, carries a continuous line, with the division between the two colors along the center. It is an image of three as one or one in three. Constellation is the name Smith

gave a group of works in which large color-forms are shared between several canvases. In *Constellation, 7*, 1973, there are six ellipses, the smallest at the top, the largest at the bottom arranged in a curve dictated by the partial outline of a great circle that unites the gradated canvases. Again we have an image of the one and many. In the later *George Washington Bridge, 2*, 1979, great arcs sweep across three circular canvases that contain them only partially, implying forms that continue beyond the canvases. Here is another aspect of Smith's fascination with Mondrian. The wish to imply such extensions is central to Mondrian who considered that the lines in his pictures were, so to say, sections of a universal longitude and latitude. In Smith there is a brilliant interplay between the forms as vectors, sampled in the work of art, and the finite composure of each work as an object. In the only traditionally-proportioned rectangular painting here, *Open White*, 1980, the implication of extensions beyond the picture-edge is strong. A large white form tilted at an angle implies continuation out to one side, even as we admire the equivalencies of the two colors contained in the painting.

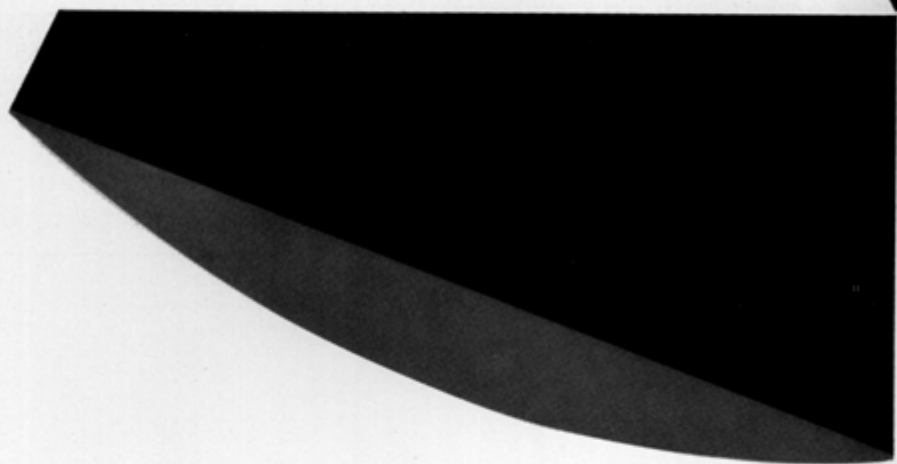
In addition to *Open White* there is one other canvas with four equal corners, the *Red-Violet Diamond*, 1980, ten by ten feet: it is the painted internal square, the violet one, which is parallel to the floor; the canvas is turned to make a diamond. This is a form that Mondrian used, though not in terms of pure color relationships as Smith does. (There is a justly celebrated article on these tipped Mondrians by the distinguished Swiss abstract artist Max Bill, incidentally.) All the other paintings constitute a brilliant array of the resources of the shaped canvas, a form of which Smith was a pioneer in the 1950's. The shaped canvas, as the term implies, is essentially a painting but not in the customary rectangular format.

Smith recently has used tondos and ellipses as well as forms newly invented for specific works. The all-black *Form Space, 3*, 1980, for instance has a great central notch, the sides of which just touch at the base. In *Form Space, 4*, there are two blue green forms separated by a central channel. In another work in the series, *Beyond the Blue*, two canvases, subtly different from one another, share one point of contact in their fifteen running feet. The wall is activated by such lively parameters and by the shapely contouring; the outer edge of a shaped canvas is often the equivalent of drawing. Thus a shaped canvas occupies space with something of the literal mass of sculpture despite the painterly color that it carries. This appropriation of sculptural space, combined with the fusion and illusion of color, turns out to be an exhilarating extension of painting, as Smith proves in his new work.

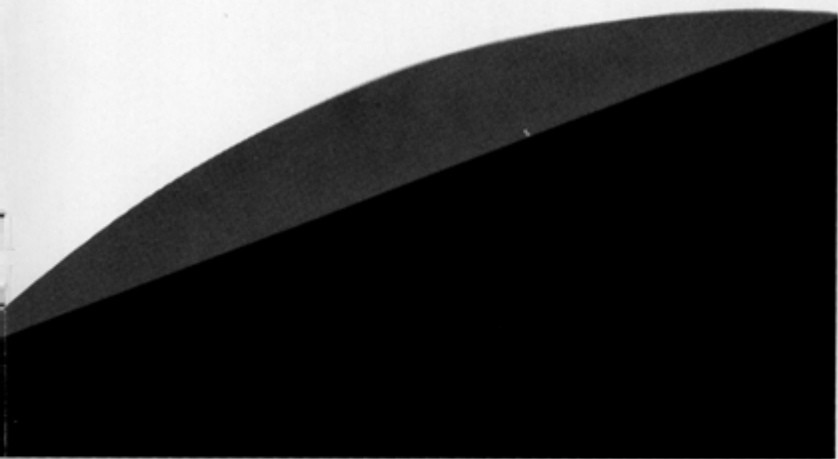
Artists are continually exceeding or diverging from what



George Washington Bridge #2, 1979.

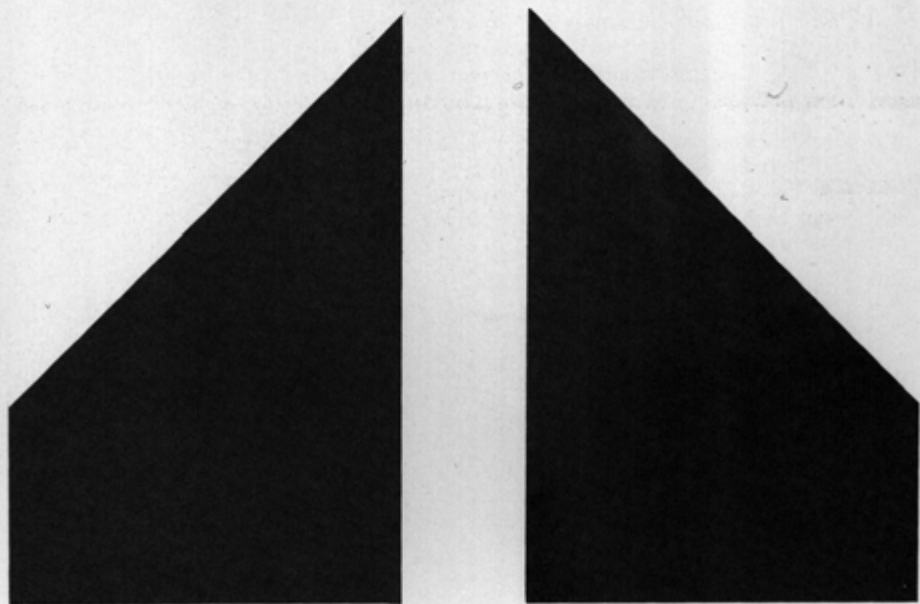


Beyond the Blue, 1981.



critics write about them. In 1968 I made a great point of the fact that Smith used oil paint rather than acrylics: "Smith prizes the density of oil paint which he builds up solidly until it is 'like a wall' as he says. Acrylic paint, though very neat when used flat, results in a dematerialized image of color." This was true of Smith at the time, but all the new paintings are in fact acrylic on canvas. The paint is more even than it used to be, but Smith applies it with a solidity that is not dematerialized at all. *Form Space, 4*, 1980, has a strongly declared skin, as do the solemn hues in *Blue Green Horizontal*, 1979. What I wrote was not wrong at the time, but it is important when discussing work-in-progress to keep up with an artist's shifts in practice. As Smith's scale increased it was logical to use acrylic rather than oil paint, given the fact that his works are mostly two-color without tonal variation. However he retains a solidity of paint area in the new works that is continued from the preceding medium. At any rate he is an extraordinary colorist, using two colors or sometimes a single color, but innundating the spectator's eye.

LAWRENCE ALLOWAY



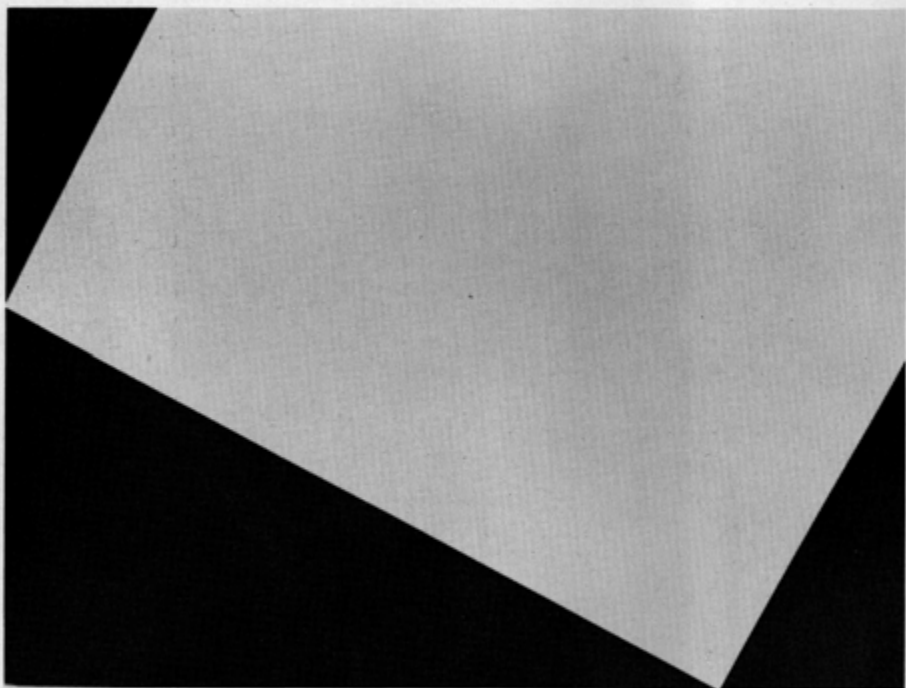
From the Form Space Series "Form Space #4", 1980.

CHECKLIST

1. Constellation: Violet-Red	1969	157 x 55
2. Constellation: #7	1973	107 3/4 x 60
3. George Washington Bridge #2	1979	80 x 220
4. Blue-Green Horizontal	1979	25 x 180
5. Open White	1980	90 x 120
6. Red-Violet Diamond	1980	120 x 120
7. From the Form Space Series "Form Space #3"	1980	90 x 180
8. From the Form Space Series "Form Space #4"	1980	73 x 118
9. From the Form Space Series "Arrangement in Black and Red"	1980	120 x 180
10. From the Form Space Series "Arrangement in Black and Grey #2"	1981	100 x 180
11. Beyond the Blue	1981	96 x 185

All works are acrylic on canvas.

Dimension in inches: height precedes width.



Open White, 1980.



Blue-Green Horizontal, 1979.

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART GALLERY

- 1975** FACULTY EXHIBITION
1976 MICHELLE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
SALVATORE ROMANO
1977 MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
HERBERT BAYER (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
1978 LEON GOLUB
WOMEN ARTISTS FROM NEW YORK
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL
1979 SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONFIST
HOWARDENA PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN
1980 BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTO PIENE
STONY BROOK 11, THE STUDIO FACULTY
1981 ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER

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