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DAVID SMITH: THE CULT OF THE SOLAR NUDE

David Smith Nudes: Drawing and Painting from 1927-1964, an exhibition held a few years ago at Knoedler & Company Gallery, New York, continues to produce strong, pleasurable memories. I was very surprised to note that since the artist's death these nude drawings had been suppressed on the pretext of a formalism that, in fact, was a barely disguised puritan hospitality. The exhibition was therefore a revelation: David Smith had dared to draw from a live female model. These nude drawings are free of fetishization, retention or any particular sexual obsessions. To the contrary, they present a surprising atmosphere of sensuality and relaxation, of full and ample pleasure. They are far from the violence, abjection and morbidity with which Smith's representations of sexuality have been associated. We discover both another man and another artist who is all the more intolerable for puritan ideology as he celebrates life and sexuality with "luxe, calme et volupté". Smith is frankly without guilt, perhaps secretly Francophile! He is concerned with a felicitous language, a clear, radiant light that recalls both the light of Matisse's drawings and Picasso's hedonist etchings on the theme of the artist and his model that the Museum of Modern Art exhibited in 1952 as "The Sculptor's Studio".

Smith drew these nudes at the same moment that he created his well-known series of "Cubi" sculptures in stainless steel. In fact, he wanted these nude drawings and the "Cubi" sculptures to be exhibited together at the Marlborough Gallery in October 1964, in the last show organized during his lifetime. Both the abstract sculptures and the nudes are reproduced in the catalogue. Yet since Smith's death a formal unity has often been imposed upon us. This uniformity should be seen as a betrayal of Smith, for like de Kooning he was that rare American artist who created a genuinely heterogeneous body of work. It is curious that this alternation between figuration and abstraction should be admitted in the case of de Kooning and yet censured in David Smith. The revelation of the intimacy of these nudes and the realization that they were executed during the same period as the heroic abstract sculptures allows us to reconstitute the immense complexity and breath of one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. Smith does not succumb to the obsessional effects of a repetitive, compact linear oeuvre.

It is indeed rare today to see an exhibition featuring paintings, drawings and sculptures that can be comprehended in terms of their idiosyncrasy and

diversity. Such diversity, of course, can be appropriated for diametrically opposite reasons, as in work animated by a critical desire to do away with the subjective and personal effects of creation. The mixture of genres and the negation of one practice by another often appear to be the strategy or derisive chatter of anti-art. It is refreshing, in contrast, to insist on the possible relations between such diversity and subjective unity, and Smith offers an oeuvre with great idiosyncratic force of precisely this sort. With the magnificent 1982 retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, curators Edward Fry and Miranda McClintic helped us discover an exceptionally protean, prolific talent. Like the greatly admired example of Picasso, paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, lithographs, jewelry and ceramics all find a place in Smith's universe. At a 1990 exhibition at the Joan T. Washburn Gallery, it was possible for the first time in New York to discover the painting-sculpture relation in Smith's works from the 1930s. The paintings are highly elaborate, emphasizing material effects, thickness and contrasting treatments in a manner found extremely accomplished painters. Whereas the sculpture of this period is well known, the paintings are wrongly neglected; only the sketches and preliminary studies have received close attention.

The transition from a particular painting to a sculpture is fascinating, sometimes taking place over several years, as in the case of charming *Bathers* (1934, posthumously titled) with its Picasso-like translation of outdoor games. This scene reveals a joyous, jovial spirit, an estival sexuality capable of freedom without guilt. A young woman located in the upper left of the painting is half-nude, with a face emerging from her vulva, suggesting the erotic charge of these summer times games. This painting has translated into several sculptures, such as the steel *Bathers* of 1940. Yet the autonomy of each work remains entire, and only parts of the painting find their way into this sculpture. Smith said of this process: "The painting developed into raised levels from canvas. Gradually, the canvas became the base and the painting was a sculpture." David Smith was able to offer a superb space of freedom what Baudelaire called "un espace de liberté".

One day there should be a comparison of the rapidity of execution in the nudes of David Smith and Rodin. Rodin's late nudes had an immense but little recognized influence on Klimt, Schiele, Picasso and Matisse. A clear link between these artists occurs through the tradition of the Cult of the Nude. Like Rodin, Smith created drawings glorifying women, offering a frieze of erotic nudes that constitutes an eternal defiance of prudish creation, of puritanical and asexual nudes, of boredom and indifference. This has nothing to do with sociology, but with a profound truth that is both sexual and religious. In effect, Smith overcomes his *Puritan Landscape*, the title of one of his sculptures that he describes as the universe of his origins. In an interview titled "The secret Letter" he told Thomas Hess that in reading Irish Catholic author James Joyce he was able to measure his difference from his own Calvinist background. "The idea of satisfaction", he said, "is like the idea of happiness – the great American

illusion... The American Protestant idea leads to revolt. A format is made to be changed

Smith's work is profoundly autobiographical. The drawings do nothing to conceal his pleasure in the presence of the live female model in the studio. He did not work from photographs, for like Matisse he transmitted this sensations in front of the model, but without revolt, and with a new maturity and an often tranquil energy. David Smith became an artist of happiness: this quite a revelation, especially in contrast to the image that has been imposed on us. For this is hardly the image of a tormented artist for whom sexuality was battlefield, a war of the sexes; in whose iconography woman appears as predator or victim, and the phallus as a cannon, a deadly weapon.

Jean Freas, Smith's second wife, provides this passage from a letter she received from him when she was 21 years old : Dream and demand of yourself all the power it takes, and make the jeano flower the biggest and most beautiful flower you have it in you to make."

Between Eros and Thanatos, David Smith ultimately chose what Andre Masson called the "Eros solaire". Like Rodin, he celebrates women in his maturity and rejoins the family of artists who choose Eros over Thanatos. At the end of his life, rapidly and in quantity, Rodin produced nudes that focus on the woman's genitalia. His pencil caresses the sheets of paper as if they were the model's flesh, and the line slows to a kind of palpitation at the place of the sex. The watercolors of the French sculptor serve less to color the intimacy of feminine sexuality, the liquid, humid quality of its pleasure. Smith shares this knowledge. He draws with an ear syringe, and the enamel pigment flows and wets the paper or canvas. Smith's emotion appears in splashes, through excesses of paint or ink. This produces effects linked to stains, to their mysterious illegibility, to sentiments and the drives they imply, and hence to the reign of the unconscious. *Jouissance* here is fluid, humid, lightness, depth. The space of the canvas is generally untouched (*vierge*) and transforms itself into living flesh through effects achieved by both line and drips.

My favorite example is the drawing 75-64.120. Grand, living, with hair in the armpits, heavy breasts, wet nipples, tights that are both scratched and immaculate, it evokes an entire register of excess, of secret, intimate vibrations. The model, moreover, hides her face before this overwhelming and streaming. This time, the book that appears in many of the other drawings is abandoned. For paradoxically the model is rarely, if ever, seduced. The artist is the one seduced, for he betrays his emotion in the execution of the drawing.

Actually, the model's poses do not evoke relations of seduction and complicity. There are not consenting gazes, or any poses of abandon. The model even appears to isolate herself through reading. Thanks to David Smith, the book takes on a symbolic function of talent sexuality, figuring as a kind of double of the female sex that he draws in the foreground. Many of the models are seen from very close up, as the artist line rejoins the arabesque of Matisse – the erotic and feminine line par excellence. Thus, with these drawings, Smith opens a

Matissian chapter in his oeuvre. His conviction that indecency is the secret source of his creation is what bursts forth here from beauty of these women. This basic truth is marvelously illustrated in a statement by Andre Masson, a statement that also reminds us of Smiths 1934 painting, *Bathers* "Artistic creation is first of all an act of desire. The inspired Utamaro knew it better than anyone, when he drew the fabulous self-portrait in which we see the artist's head springing out from the sex of a courtesan the moment she raises her skirt."

Translated from the French by Philip Barnard