

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Leon Polk Smith: Prints

June 15 - August 31, 2019

Opening reception: Saturday, June 15, 6-8pm

Lora Reynolds is pleased to announce a project-room exhibition of prints by Leon Polk Smith—the artist’s first presentation at the gallery.

Leon Polk Smith is perhaps best known for the paintings he began in the 1960s of curves spreading across constellations of rounded canvases. He usually used only two or three colors in a given work—bright, pure blues, greens, reds, oranges, and violets, either set against each other or rich, deep blacks—and the shapes he painted, softly curving contours arcing through and beyond the edges of his compositions, often appear to be just a small glimpse of a vast, unknowable form. He developed a geometric vocabulary that implies more than it depicts, evoking a sense of existence that lies beyond the limitations of physical borders. Smith’s work is formal, yes, but it is spiritual too, and connected to his experience of the American Southwest, where he grew up on a farm in Indian Territory, the eighth of nine children born to half-Cherokee parents.

Critics have long emphasized Smith’s relationship to geometric abstraction, minimalism, and the Western canon. Smith, himself, spoke frequently about admiring Mondrian’s ability to manipulate space and form to simultaneously suggest depth and flatness. His work is often contextualized alongside that of Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland, and Ellsworth Kelly (even though they are from a younger generation). But Smith’s relationship to these white artists and dominant art-historical traditions are only part of the story. “Critics have been slow to see past this one facet of his work,” Randolph Lewis wrote, “focusing on it to the exclusion of other avenues of investigation. ‘Many look to your work and say you come from Mondrian,’ began one interviewer, forgetting that Smith literally comes from Oklahoma and culturally from Native America, at least in part.”

Finding the influence of Smith’s upbringing in his work is not difficult. Many of the shapes in his compositions readily suggest the big skies, desert sun, and flat landscapes of the Southwest (landscapes that, despite appearing empty, are actually full of life—much like Smith’s work). The black-and-white pieces in this show are reminiscent of patterns found on Anasazi pottery, Navajo blankets, and Maidu baskets. His titles, too, point to his multicultural identity, referencing his adult life in New York and deep involvement with Modernism—*Arrangement in Black and Red, Homage to Victory Boogie-Woogie #1, NY City*—as well as his childhood on the Great Plains and indigenous roots—*Geronimo, Sun, Moon, Okemah, Midnight Pyramids (Midnight Teepees)*. Smith’s parents were both of mixed ancestry, his first language was Cherokee, and one of his older brothers married a Chickasaw woman—“I grew

up in a community where at least half the people were Indian...I had friends both red and paleface.” His relationships with his family, ancestors, and the land cannot be discounted:

I was born on the flat plains...and it seems that one could see 250 miles—in every direction. The sky seemed so big. There are no trees...the tallest thing you might see is a man or a fence post. And they’re so insignificantly small in this vast flat area that you’re really not aware of them. And it seems almost like an endless space. Now that’s the first space I saw...and that’s the first impression I had of my surroundings...and I think that’s influenced my paintings more than any other experience I’ve ever had.

Clearly, Smith acknowledged his personal history in presenting his work to the public, even if he avoided foregrounding it. Considering the racism in mid-century America—as well as the homogeneity of the art world—his intercultural identity could have easily led to bigoted assumptions about “primitive art” (a genre of supposedly intuitive, spontaneous, and uncivilized artifacts, compared to the daring, intellectual, innovative masterpieces from the Western world). “There is no such thing as primitive art,” Smith once protested. “Africa, pre-Columbia—these were highly developed aesthetics, not intuitive superstitions.”

Maybe emphasizing the whole story is not always necessary, literally or figuratively. Smith’s curving shapes that continue beyond the edge of his compositions, after all, leave quite a lot to the imagination—and have personally relevant precedent: “In the Indians’ philosophy, thinking, and way of talking or telling stories, so much detail was left out,” Smith once explained, “So much was abstract.”

Abstraction and implication—these formal strategies allowed Smith to approach some of mankind’s most timeless and unanswerable questions. In an interview with Konstanze Churwell-Doertenbach, Smith mused “I can’t imagine there is an end to space...If you say there is an end then it means there must be a wall. And there must be something, then, on the other side.”

Leon Polk Smith was born in 1906 in Chickasha, Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), and died in 1996 in New York City. His work is included in major institutional collections around the world, including the Albright-Knox Museum of Art (Buffalo), Art Institute of Chicago, Blanton Museum of Art (Austin), Brooklyn Museum, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (Arkansas), Dallas Museum of Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art (New York), Hirshhorn Museum (Washington DC), Israel Museum (Jerusalem), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Museum of Modern Art (New York), National Gallery of Art (Washington DC), Städel Museum (Frankfurt), University of Sydney Museum (Australia), Vancouver Art Gallery (Canada), and Whitney Museum of American Art (New York).