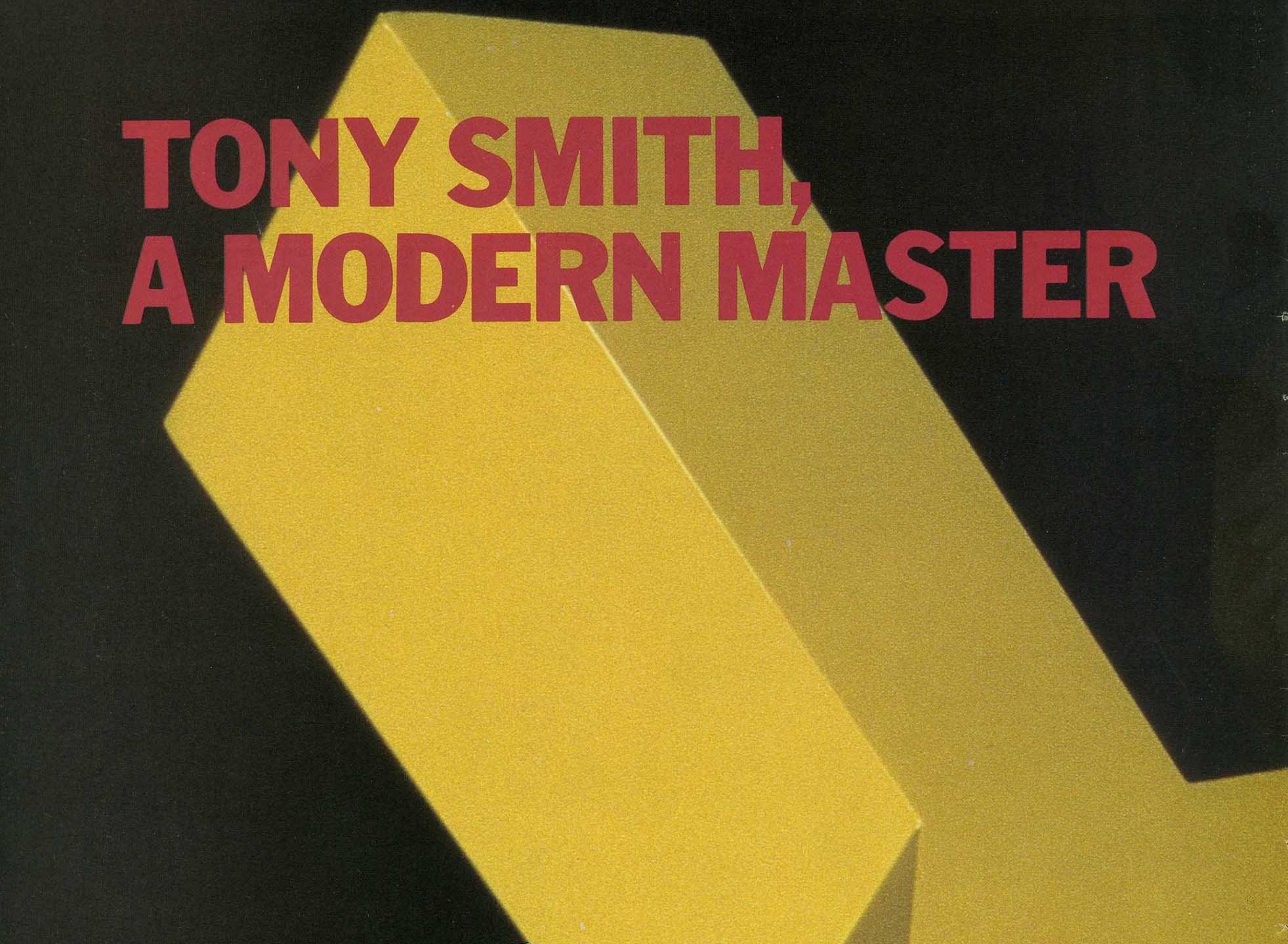
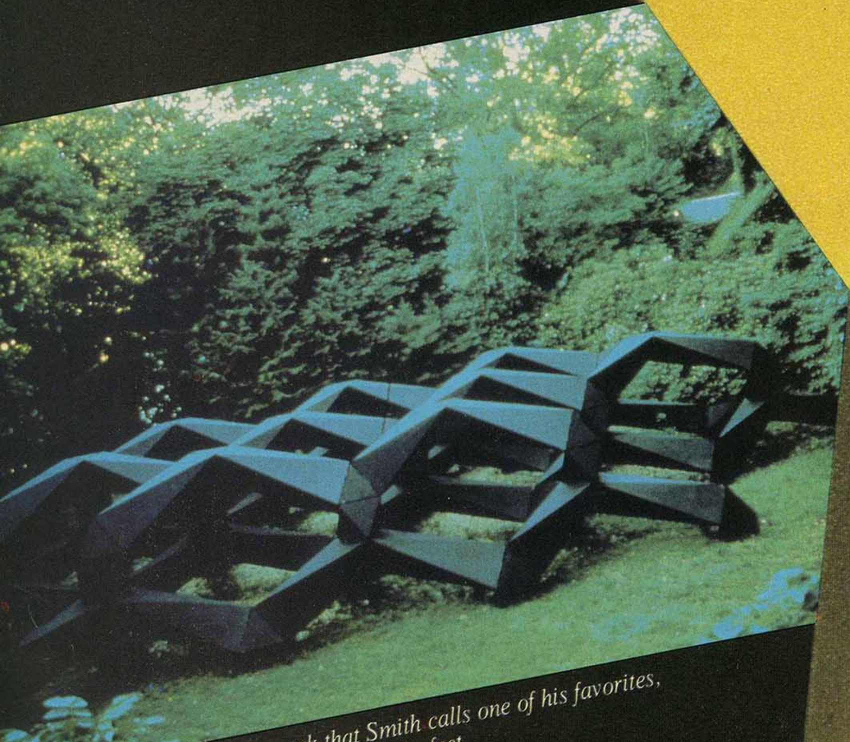
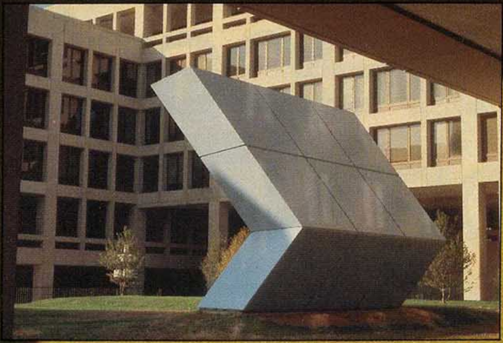
TONY SMITH, A MODERN MASTER



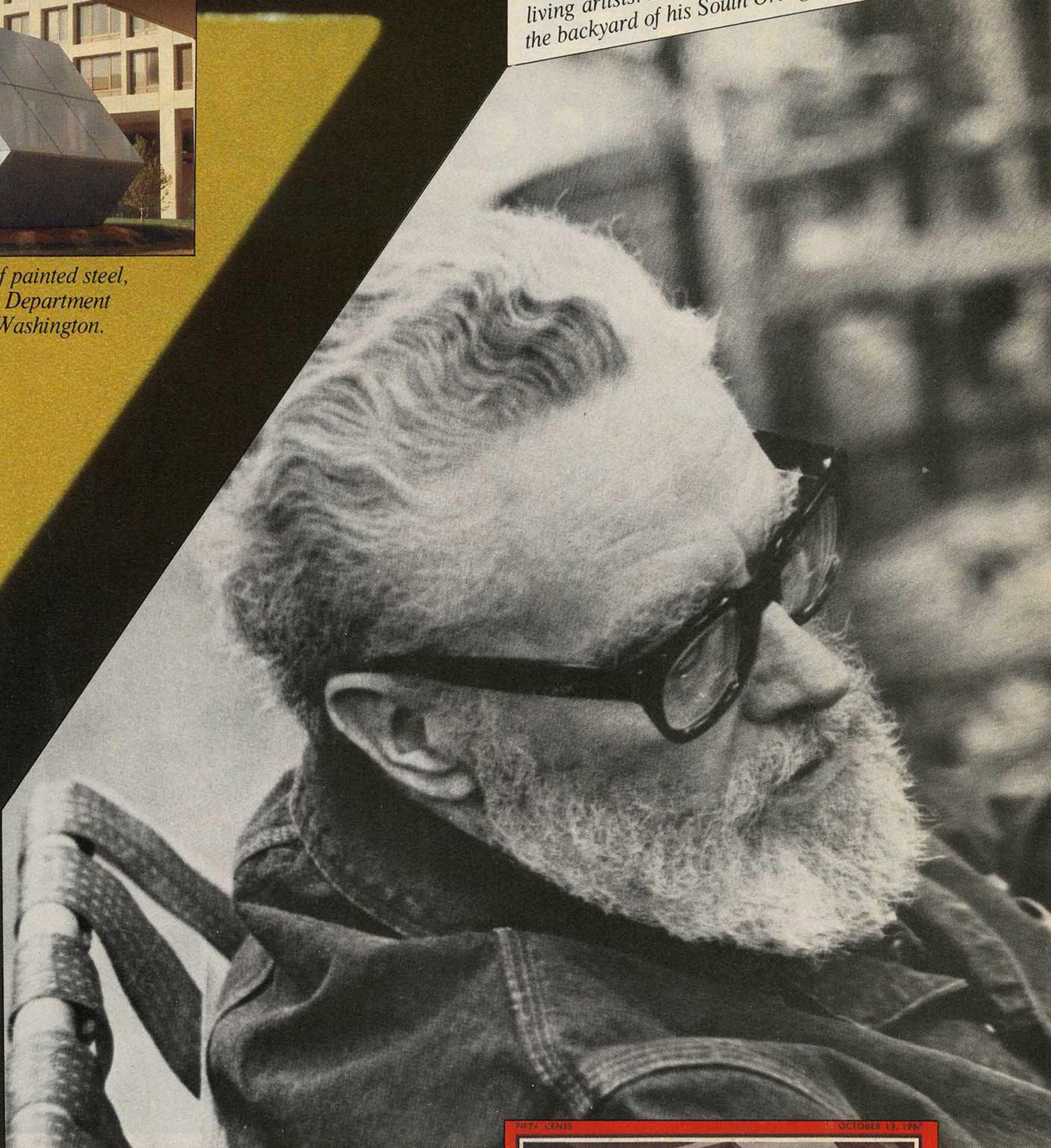


Smug, *a 1973 work that Smith calls one of his favorites, measures seventy feet by eighty feet.*

Light Up *spreads its shining wings in the plaza between two Pittsburgh skyscrapers.*



A two-toned sculpture of painted steel, She *stands outside the Department of Labor building in Washington.*



At 68, sculptor Tony Smith has attained the kind of recognition accorded few living artists. Here, he sits in his "workshop," the backyard of his South Orange home.

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SCULPTOR TONY SMITH
Art Outgrows the Museum

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Time *"covered" Smith in 1967.*

Pace Gallery

by Phyllis Tuchman

Tony Smith, a gaunt, bewhiskered, 68-year-old Irishman with an indefatigable spirit and a raconteurial manner, began barely two decades ago to populate his backyard in South Orange with person-sized, black-painted, wood, and, occasionally, steel forms with a geometric character. Today, he is much sought after for public commissions. His towering pieces command attention in major cities across the United States. *For Marjorie,* a thirty-one-foot high, Indian-red steel behemoth, whose aspects constantly change as one walks around and under it, is situated on the grounds of M.I.T., along the Cambridge bank of the Charles River. The yellow-covered *Light Up* literally brightens the plaza between two dark Pittsburgh skyscrapers. *Gracehoper,* named from a passage in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake,* is perched on four spindly appendages on the front lawn of the Detroit Institute of Arts. *She,* a two-toned, three-tiered, top-heavy production, beckons passersby at the Department of Labor in Washington, D.C. The most recent monumental urban structure, located in downtown Cleveland, is *Last,* a 35-foot-high, 75-foot-wide orange arch that weighs thirty-six tons.

Until the mid-60s, Smith had been known solely as a practicing architect and a much admired art teacher at such institutions as New York University, Cooper Union, Pratt, and Bennington College. Then, as now, he shied away from referring to his three-dimensional works as sculptures. ''I was just thinking about form,'' he explains. ''Nothing about it was related to what we would think of as Fine Art. I certainly don't think of myself in relation to the great virtuoso sculptors of the Western world.'' Others obviously feel differently. Smith, who has outlived such close friends and New York School painting pioneers as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, is in an exalted position. He is one of the few Americans executing large, outdoor art who has attained a stature and respect comparable to that accorded the Briton Henry Moore, who, until recently, was the first sculptor likely to be tapped for such costly ventures. Like Moore, who resides in a small English village and has repeatedly turned down offers to be knighted, the New Jersey native lives a humble life. His awesome creations are issued from a red brick, simply furnished house near Orange Park. He and his wife, opera singer Jane Lawrence (she debuted in the Salzburg production of Mozart's *Idomeneo*) live on a typical tree-lined and driveway-filled suburban street. Nothing about this neat, tidy environment suggests that an artist with an international reputation is based there.

The couple had returned to Smith's family home, after spending three years in West Germany, when their second child was due. A daughter, Kiki, had been born the year before. When the second child turned out to be twins, Bebe and Annie, the Smiths stayed put in South Orange. ''The girls,'' as their parents affectionately refer to them, are now in their twenties and pursuing careers in New York.

Smith was born in 1918 into a prominent and close-knit Essex County clan. Altogether, he had one sister and five brothers. Sibling Bill is currently chairman of the New Jersey Highway Authority, which also oversees the state's Arts Center. Grandfather A.E. Smith was a waterworks manufacturer. And the sculptor is still proud of his heritage. Recently he noted that after the family firm's hydrants were established as the standards for New York City, they were also adopted by most other large cities in America, including Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Seattle. Fondly, he points out: ''All the hydrants have my name, A.E. Smith, on top because I was named for my grandfather. I remember traveling all over the country as a very small child and always seeing these hydrants. They are the only things that look the same anywhere.''

> "'The first things I ever did that I think of as examples of sculpture were models of pueblo villages.'"

What might have been a privileged, silver-spoon existence was far from that, however. As an infant, Smith was stricken by tuberculosis and, along with a nurse, was moved into his own little quarters erected in the backyard of the South Orange home where his sculptures are now arrayed from time to time. Once during his childhood, he was taken to Taos, New Mexico, and today, when he talks about his goals as an artist, he frequently mentions the works he made when he was quarantined and which were influenced by what he had seen in the Southwest. ''Certain ancient cultures such as China and Egypt produced a kind of intuition toward form which colored the entire society. I don't think that we in America have ever achieved that,'' he says. Nevertheless, he feels the Southwest Indians came close to accomplishing it in the way they produced such items as pottery, basketwork, and blankets. ''The first things I ever did that I think of as examples of sculpture,'' he recollects, ''were models of pueblo villages.'' On trays made of papier-mache so they would not be too heavy for his lap—''I had to be in bed all the time''—the boy covered his medicine boxes with grey and mustard colored plasticine. After filling a tray with these desert adobes, he ''took kitchen matches, charred their ends, and stuck them along the sides to represent the rafters which projected from the buildings, and occasionally I made little ladders to the next level. Maybe I would twist a little piece of colored cloth in the characteristic position of Indians squatting with a blanket around them.'' Unknowingly, he was dealing with the kind of architecture Picasso painted in his budding Cubist paintings, the ones executed in Horta Del Ebro in 1909 and canvases which Smith once again admired when he saw the Museum of Modern Art's majestic Picasso retrospective this past summer. Smith also recalls being intrigued by the pot-bellied stove which warmed his small, bare, backyard quarters. ''If one spends a long time in a room with only one object, that object becomes a little god,'' he maintains.

Private tutors educated the lad until he recovered. Later on, four years were spent at a rigorous Jesuit high school in Manhattan. After his sophomore term at Georgetown University, Smith left college and returned to New Jersey, where his life was filled with activity. In the morning and afternoon, he operated his own bookstore on Broad Street in Newark. After hours, he commuted to New York to take drawing and painting classes at the Art Students' League on 57th Street. Jackson Pollock and sculptor David Smith, who initially started out as a painter the way Tony Smith did, were fellow students. Barnett Newman and Adolph Gottlieb, the late painter of *Pictographs, Imaginary Landscapes,* and *Bursts,* had just passed through the same program. With limited time at his disposal, Smith worked avidly and quickly. ''Sometimes I made quite a few things in one day,'' he says. He recently showed a visitor a small, circa-1932, black canvas with a few depicted shapes, including the silhouettes of a knife and a coffee pot; if hung today without a nameplate on the walls of Manhattan's Willard Gallery, which specializes in New Image painting, its artist would certainly be ''discovered.''

When the government began to support painting projects in the mid-thirties, Smith, unlike his more impoverished friends, was not eligible. So in 1937 he enrolled in Chicago's newly established New Bauhaus, studying architecture with European emigres Moholy-Nagy and Alexander Archipenko. A year later, when a new director with a new program was named, Smith withdrew. Among his vivid memories of the time, he says, is having lived next door to the Glessner House, a granite ''hut'' designed by the American master H. H. Richardson in 1886 at a cost of $74,000. Smith believes this is the quintessential building, the one in which the architect who initiated the Romanesque Revival in the States brought all of his ideas together. (Eight years ago, the South Prairie Avenue house was restored and reopened as the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation.)

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Smith (foreground) with two close friends and painters of the New York School — Jackson Pollock (middle) and Barnett Newman.

While he was in Chicago, Smith read and was impressed by the January 1938 issue of *Architectural Forum,* which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and devoted to Wright's work. Smith asked Wright for a job, and joined the Master Builder's team, first as a laborer and welder, then as a layout designer and cost estimator. Rapidly, he rose to become "clerk-of-the-works," or superintendent of construction.

After less than two years of working for Wright, Smith set out on his own. He established an architectural practice in New York, which he operated for more than twenty years. During this period, he designed more than two dozen private residences, many for art world clients such as dealer Betty Parsons and painter Theodoros Stamos. The Stamos studio-home remains his favorite because it has been left unaltered. The sculptor's pale blue eyes light up and his broad grin reveals a gleaming set of teeth as he talks about another house he built, which such artist friends as Willem de Kooning and Clyfford Still traveled up to Connecticut to see when it was completed. Smith, who is not given to bragging at all, feels that this structure was among the most sophisticated built in the United States at the time. His expression darkens as he reveals that the owner made changes which distorted the designer's intentions.

There were many other projects as well. In 1950, plans were drawn up for a church in East Hampton which, had it been built, would have housed windows by Jackson Pollock. (What these might have looked like are captured in Pollock's great black-and-white series of 1951.) Smith was also responsible for remodeling the former French and Company art gallery in the Parke-Bernet building where both David Smith and Barnett Newman held extremely influential shows in 1959. It was with this particular project, he says, that he "realized my sense of scale and monumentality for the first time."

The pages of Smith's life read like a "Who's Who" of American art. A studio he designed for a friend in Provincetown was also used for a short time by the legendary Hans Hofmann School as a headquarters. A roll call of his own student roster begins with Larry Rivers and Robert Goodnough at NYU and ranges on to such lionized contemporary artists as Robert Morris and Alice Aycock, who took classes with Smith at Hunter College after he joined its faculty in 1962. When Hunter colleagues took him out to lunch at a neighborhood restaurant two years ago, they realized that more than a dozen people at the table had studied with him. The studio he used at NYU had been turned over to him by Mark Rothko. He was so close with Pollock, he often watched him paint. "He moved like a tiger," Smith recalls. Barnett Newman's name frequently crops up in conversations. After his "extraordinary, colorful" comrade died in 1969, Smith designed for his grave an African black granite headstone. Years before seriously beginning to execute outdoor "presences" (when an interviewer once asked him what he considers his three-dimensional works if not sculptures, he replied, "They just exist; they are just present."), he took engraving classes in New York and one of his classmates was sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, with whom he regularly lunched.

In 1961, Smith had a car accident on a curving and precipitous road between Albany, New York, and Bennington, Vermont, which terminated his practice of architecture. He had already become disenchanted with the way his designs were being altered by unsupervised construction crews, and, having developed a rare blood disease in the wake of his accident, he could no longer safely drive to building sites without the fear of blacking out behind the wheel. He decided that henceforth he would teach. After many years at Hunter, Smith officially retired. Then he spent two years teaching studio classes at Princeton and briefly taught at Hunter again. He enjoys young people and they flock to him.

"'Smith asked Frank Lloyd Wright for a job and joined the Master Builder's team, first as a laborer and welder, then as a layout designer.'"

To fill the void previously spent designing buildings, Smith would putter around the house with design exercises he had always assigned his students. And if a chance automobile accident set his career off in another direction, it is not the only instance in which cars affected his consideration of three-dimensional form. An epiphany he had in the fifties during a car ride with three of his Cooper Union students along an unfinished portion of the New Jersey Turnpike (between the Meadowlands and New Brunswick) has become one of the most repeated anecdotes in the annals of contemporary art. As Smith tells it, the incident sounds much like an occurence in a Joan Didion novel, hardly the stuff one relates to Minimalism, an austere, wholly abstract, geometrically oriented style that emerged center stage during the waning days of Abstract Expressionism.

According to Smith: "It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art has never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had about art. It seemed that there was a reality there which had not had any expression in art.'' The industrial environment captivated him more that evening than many smaller sculptures and colorful paintings he had seen and previously admired in art galleries. The large looming unlit shapes combined mystery with power. Today Smith wants his three dimensional forms to operate the way the stacks, towers, fumes, and lights had that ''dark night.''

Once the brooding black work Smith was setting up at home was brought to the attention of a Hartford curator selecting an exhibition entitled *Black White and Grey,* in 1964, there was no turning back, even though the artist ''never thought of showing them—I did them for myself as a private thing.'' Two years later, when *Free Ride,* a steel piece with three, 6′8″pillar-like elements at right angles to one another, was featured in the Jewish Museum's fabled *Primary Structures* exhibition, his pieces were greeted as important examples of the new ''object-type'' work then sweeping the country. During the winter of 1966-'67 large exhibitions devoted to his work were held in museums in Connecticut and Philadelphia and in Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library. By October 1967, he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. Some critics went so far as to call Smith the father of Minimal Art. Yet he had been working independently, and the initiators of this exciting movement, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris, were unaware of what he was doing. Indeed, when Ph.D. dissertation writers now ask Smith for information about Minimalism, he is puzzled about his being contacted. ''Morris and Judd and all those guys really thought about what they were doing,'' Smith says. ''I never thought about anything that I did. I just did it.''

That is not the only way his intentions differ from those of the other, younger artists. While his open and multi-angled, darkly covered geometric structures, usually built to human scale, were initially discussed in the same breath with the sleek and refined things developed between 1964 and 1968 by the five pioneers of Minimalism, Smith not only conceives his art differently, but also executes it and wants it experienced differently. For inspiration he relies more on his own past then on currents within the art world or the writings of intellectual critics. He has his structures built simply and practically because he had his fill of welding as a young architect working for Wright. He does not want a viewer to spend time figuring out how something was fancifully concocted. ''I don't want it to be something where you have to think of something else that's going on,'' he says. Donald Judd once wrote, as a reviewer for *Arts,* that a Smith structure was ''mysterious,'' in part because it was painted black. But covering surfaces with matter devoid of color and incapable of reflecting light suggested itself to Smith initially only because some edges on his models were being attached to one another with scotch tape and the planes were not always as smooth as he would have liked. ''So, I just painted them black in order to camouflage all of those imperfections.'' Today, the treatment of color is still one of the last things Smith considers. He is first interested in achieving what he refers to as ''form/content''; only then does he deal with how a work will be fabricated in terms of material, size, and finish.

Smith's art, and the vocabulary he uses to describe it, is far from Minimalist in other ways. As a former architect, his conversation is peppered with talk about ''voids'' rather than ''negative spaces,'' and he uses the term ''lineal'' sooner than the more common ''linear.'' *New Piece, Die,* and *Smug* are three works which he singles out when asked which are his favorites. He likes *Smug,* he says, because the space is more ''palpable,'' it can be ''tangibly'' felt.

The Minimalists, who also refrain from designating their work as sculpture, are quick to discuss their object-oriented art in relation to the latest philosophy, erudite ideas concerning psychological perceptions, or chic political theory. When Smith talks about his art, he talks about art. That means that when visitors drop by his South Orange house they are likely to be treated to a wide range of subjects in addition to art, from now-famous people he knew way back when to former assistants who have gone off to monasteries in the Himalayas, from music (his wife still plays the grand piano in the yellow drawing room) to the Greek classics, which he has read in the original language. Dressed in a red shirt, disc-filled tie, pressed blue jeans, and an Irish knit white sweater, Smith is an engaging and generous host. He is particularly animated when talking about the theater. Currently he is rereading Shakespeare, but he can also debate the merits of different productions of Beckett. (The title of his sculpture *Willy* comes from the character in Beckett's *Happy Days*.) Last winter, the couple spent time with Tennessee Williams in Key West.

> "'I have always responded very much to 5:4 shapes. So I've always done paintings which were five units high and four units wide.'"

Minimalist works are frequently installed by their makers to gain maximum dramatic effect. Smith likes to see his forms, such as *Moses* on the grounds of Princeton University, ''against buildings or against trees and foliage so that you can feel the volume of the space within which the piece exists. That's a very different thing than looking at something visually and seeing silhouettes.'' His latest works, made while recovering at home from an accident last June in which he broke his hip in three places, he calls *Groves.* When executed, these will consist of large, geometric elements set up like ''an avenue of sphinxes or an avenue of horses or camels.'' Avenues of these sculptures could be erected, says Smith, in parks or squares ''across America in such a way that they would represent the kind of image that we associate with Egypt or China—you might say, a symbolic image of the form/content of our culture.''

Intuition, rather than theory, governs the choice of sizes for particular pieces. When he was in art school, Smith made many paintings measuring only 16″ × 20″. ''That shape just appeals to me,'' he says. ''I have always responded very much to 5:4 shapes. So I've always done paintings which were five units high and four units wide.'' As an architect, these feelings were heightened when he noticed how clients responded to particular dimensions. Much of his three-dimensional output of the last two decades has been based on the four-foot altitude of an equilateral triangle, a size, he maintains, ''that people tend to associate with plywood. Four feet is a size we feel very at home with in this country.''

Smith is now at the top of his powers, and he has been abundantly rewarded for his efforts. In 1979, he was inducted into the venerable American Institute of Arts and Letters. He has reaped the College Art Association's Distinguished Teaching of Art Award (he was the second recipient of this honor; Josef Albers was the first), the American Institute of Architects Fine Arts Medal, as well as the Brandeis Creative Artists Medal. While he hit his stride at a later time in life than his Abstract Expressionist friends—Smith was just turning 50—at this point he has outstripped their output. Though it takes him much longer to produce a sculpture, the body of work he has set forth is as plentiful as the *oeuvre* left behind by Barnett Newman. And he has maintained a level of quality on a par with Jackson Pollock.

Above all else, Tony Smith is an exemplar of what it means to be tenacious. He has spent much of his life in hospitals, or at least attended by nurses. But he has persevered and created a strong, individual style. Everything about him calls to mind the heroes of Frank Capra movies. Like James Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,* he is a man of the people; in this case, an artist who wants to enrich his country's landscape. He prefers a simple life away from the tumult of studios and galleries in Soho, the heart of the international art world. Yet his visions are grand. His most admired hero is the ancient Egyptian Imhotep, the designer of the Pyramid of Zoser and the first artist whose name has been recorded in history. Smith is creating similarly charged images, works possessing what he refers to as form/content. These he would like to have represent our society to future generations. ■