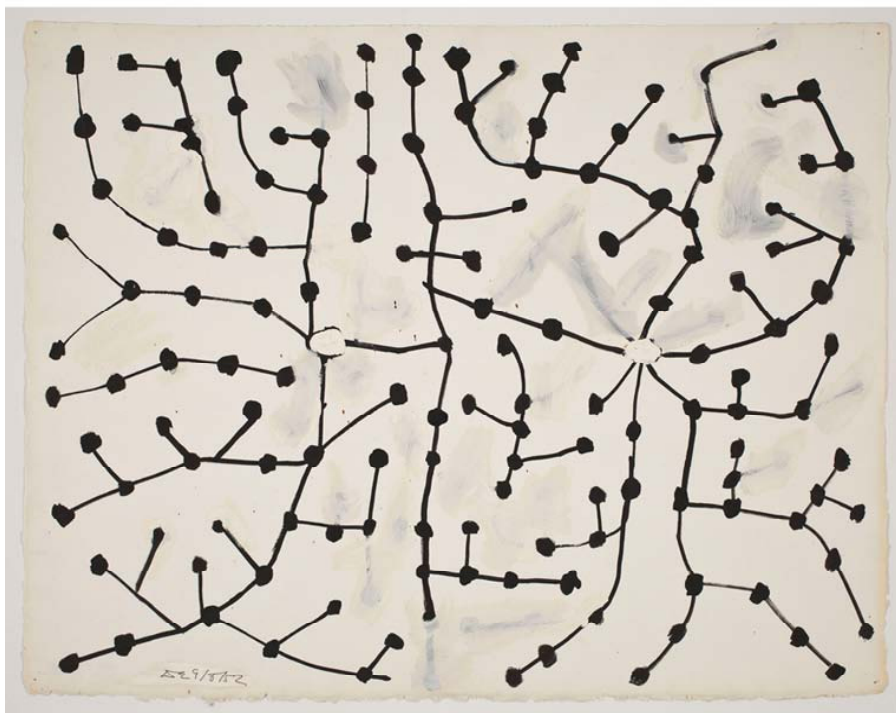


Knight, Christopher. "Lines without boundary." *Los Angeles Times*, 15 April 2011, p. D20.



BRIAN FORRETT

**DELTA FORCE:** One of David Smith's drawings from the critically important years 1952 to 1955 is in the 41-work show at Margo Leavin Gallery. A concurrent survey of his sculptures is at LACMA.

#### AROUND THE GALLERIES

## Lines without boundary

**CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT**  
ART CRITIC

In the grim wake of World War II, David Smith usually signed his drawings with the ancient Greek letters delta and sigma, meant to stand for his initials. Using Greek wasn't empty pretension. A widespread American cultural movement sought to figure out how the shining promises of modernity could have gone so horribly wrong, allowing the fascist cataclysm. Returning to ancient, sometimes even prehistoric origins, almost as if to start over and try again from scratch, became a common artistic practice.

A Smith line-drawing in black ink in a large and lovely exhibition at Margo Leavin Gallery is emblematic. Made when he was 27 and struggling to find his way, it features a vaguely Doric column standing in the lower right corner of the page. A line sprouts from the abacus, the flat square stone at the column's top, and goes for a wild ride around the sheet.

The line zigs, loops, zags, swings, arcs and squiggles. Sometimes where it crosses

itself, it defines a shape. Smith occasionally filled in those shapes with solid ink, parallel lines or crosshatch marks. Overall, the meandering line is bounded by the edges of the sheet, framing the space within.

It's as if the classical column is redefining the rules of harmony for the modern age, holding up the drawing's unexpected spatial volumes. Smith made it in March 1933, years before the war. But the nation was deep in the darkness of the Great Depression, and it coincided with the month of FDR's inauguration, with the new president's famous warning that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

No direct connection between the drawing and those events should be inferred, of course, but indirectly they resonate. Smith's effort at rejuvenation would not mature until the postwar years. The show, whose 41 drawings include a few from the early 1930s and the rest from the early 1950s, ranges through a variety of stylistic experiments. But it most abundantly represents the critically important years 1952 to 1955, a period kicked off by Guggenheim Founda-

tion grants that, for the first time, gave Smith the freedom to work without financial constraints.

Perhaps the most surprising drawings are three highly abstracted profile views of a seated woman, made over the course of several days in 1952. Introducing colored washes in red and green, these wonderfully animated, even playful drawings record a cigarette-wielding figure who seems to be engaged in spirited conversation with the artist as he works (and, by extension, with a viewer as he looks).

A fourth drawing splits the figure apart into thick, jagged black lines of force that push through a sea of Pepto-Bismol pink. A concurrent survey of Smith's sculptures now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art demonstrates how he transformed line into an operating principle for sculpture. These marvelous drawings show how that line evolved — often in wholly unpredictable ways.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood, (310) 273-0603, through May 14. Closed Sunday and Monday. [www.margoleavingallery.com](http://www.margoleavingallery.com)

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### Expectations go upside down

A dozen glazed ceramics are the standouts among recent works by Swiss artist Mal-Thu Perret. At least since Kenneth Price in the 1960s, ceramics have been a sculptural metaphor for painting, with the clay body as a three-dimensional support for two-dimensional surface applications of color. Perret continues the tradition, complete with its bracing confusion between utilitarian and imaginative functions, but in her best works it gets turned inside out.

One thick, square slab of fired clay hangs on the wall like a painting. Its witty title — "The rabbit conceives and gives birth to a tiger" — alludes to impossibly inverted expectations. The upper two-thirds of the slab have been scrunched, pummeled and roughed up by clawing hands and fingers to create a lumpy, roiling surface, as if the object had been the focus of assault. A thick, slick,

[See Galleries, D21]