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DAVID SMITH

MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

David Smith's works on paper have incredible presence, dignity, and weight. They seem almost musical in the tense balance they strike between force and restraint, elegance and primitivism, the human and the monumental. The 50 works in this show, executed in oil, tempera, and "egg ink" (ink mixed with egg) date from 1952 to 1960; all but one are untitled. Calligraphic, hieroglyphic, ideographic, and highly gestural, they are as unparaphrasable as the best poetry. Some pieces bring to mind odd-headed stick figures; notation or diagrams for some contemporary tribal dance; curled metal; claws or branches; feathers, bones, and upright mummies; towers of Babel; or some newly composed written language of fire or iron.

The works are almost archetypal in their range of expressiveness. Although extremely controlled, they give the impression of great pent-up energy. They look both organic and machinelike; teeming alive and charred. Some of Smith's knotty figures that are constructed from fat, dark brushstrokes seem furious, coiled like thick springs, yet spiky and sharp. Some closely resemble Oriental characters. Others, while equally contemplative in tone, seem to stab at the pale taciturn space surrounding them. Nearly all the works have a strong verticality, a tendency to stand up or ascend, as though they had struggled to their feet and were now resolute. This verticality suggests aspiration, aggression, and longing.

A dialogue is established between the texture of the light colored paper or board and the condensed emphatic brushwork. The receptive surfaces, sometimes daubed with white or off-white paint, can be reminiscent



David Smith, *Untitled*, 1952, black egg ink and gray tempera, 29 1/4 x 30 1/4".

of skin. Like skin, some of these surfaces are quite flat, while others have a slightly hairy tooth to them. The brushstrokes, too, are studies in texture: feathery-edged and semitransparent or dense, each as idiosyncratic as a dirt path. The singular nature of the mark on paper is of primary concern here. Strokes have a smeary quality, appearing greasy or frayed; occasional drips appear. The paint or ink thins and bubbles visibly. Throughout, Smith employs a sizeable lexicon of brushstrokes.

The several pieces in the show that made use of spray paint seemed the least interesting of the lot, perhaps because Smith's dynamic gesture and brushstroke are all but removed from them. But this is a tiny reservation about a show composed of works of great intensity and integrity—works that seem to fuse or reunite the figurative and the abstract, placing them in a territory all their own.

—Amy Gerstler