



Standing in Rebecca Smith's studio on Watts Street, a block below Canal Street and two blocks from the Hudson River, I consider the parameters of order, equilibrium, and expression. A wooden dresser is being disassembled. A cardboard model is held together with tape. Taut sculptures rest on the floor; others are secured to the wall.

Smith mentions that she's reading David Lewis-Williams's *The Mind in the Cave*, and that this study of Paleolithic art and shamanistic practices is challenging her sense of how consciousness relates to creativity. It is not a stretch to make the cave = studio connection, and as I move around in this space where she has worked for 25 years, I look through the windows at neighboring buildings in various scales and states of modernity. Ornamental brickwork across the way, glass facades, stone embrasures, metal casings, wrought-iron railings, and commercial shutters open or closed to varying degrees are all visible. The artist suggests, "The grid permeates everything. It is a city thing. You walk in it, discuss it; you are guided by it. And you have a place in the order it creates." As her Cage sculptures might imply, this city-ness is perhaps experienced as a pleasurable prison.

In a 2009 interview, Smith discussed what she called "traveling lines," characteristic imagery from Australian aboriginal art in which "lines traversing major areas of a cave drawing or even body painting are commonly found."<sup>1</sup> These lines, with their connections to human agency and marking the landscape, animate much of her work, which falls into two distinct modes of production: woven and welded metal structures and site-specific temporary murals at galleries and museums.

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"The cage works all deal in the same language as the architectural and functional structures that shadow human affairs.....[They] play between the worlds of two- and three-dimensional objects, suggesting the metaphorical nature of painting and the concrete reality of sculpture."<sup>2</sup>

Smith's sculptures are generally constructed using lengths of steel stock, 1 ½-inch bands that she alters with precise gestures of cutting, twisting, and bending. These pieces are restrained and refined in a way that much contemporary sculpture is not. While Smith shares an un-heroic worldview with many of her peers, her work is considerably cooler in tone when compared to the vogue of assemblage that unites disparate, abject elements in ad hoc ways.

"Sculpture can be so stagy," Smith says in conversation. "How it exists in your space is what makes it worthwhile." The space of contemplation is key in her thinking, and what is "worthwhile" is connected to utilizing a few essential elements and charging them with a quiet and curious power to engage their surroundings and the viewer. Her sculptures often empty out the mass associated with the medium, and concentrate instead on working incremental shifts between 2-D and 3-D. Paraphrasing Ad Reinhardt, if you did bump into one of her floor sculptures while stepping back to look at a painting, you'd likely send it careening across the room. "At the most they weigh about 12 lbs," she says, a surprising fact given their volume. Bower, along with Orange Animal, Pink House, are low slung works that hug the floor and activate the air that meets their grillwork. Like basketry caught mid-weave (either being formed or in the process of unraveling), they present a porousness that transposes figure and ground. Their size and proportion suggest shelters for smallish mammals or designs for attenuated furniture; associations confirmed by their titles. Painted in saturated colors, they operate as traps for inquisitive viewers.

Green Insect, Fairy Nightgown , Reprise, and Concealer are frontal sculptures that play in the realm of Painting, fastened to or hanging from the wall at depths of three to thirteen to inches. Smith joins numerous doer/thinkers, including Piet Mondrian, Frank Stella, members of the French Supports/Surfaces group, Ralph Humphrey, Jo Baer, Peter Halley, and Dan Walsh, whose investigations have been essential in the appreciation and analyses of flatness and the picture plane, shape and structural support, touch and materiality. Smith's constructions frame space and chart the flow of vertical and horizontal elements that change directions surprisingly or end abruptly. Smith is masterful with these rhythms and repetitions, and alert to the placement of drilled holes, fasteners, and finalizing brushstrokes of opalescent acrylic, which makes light an important player in how her works operate.

One of the aspects of making tape drawings that I really like is that rather than creating a moveable object, a work is created that exists for a discreet period of time. I like the process of making it over a concentrated working period, and leaving it. Then later, it disappears. 3

In December of 2008, I invited Smith to participate in an exhibition called Mergers & Acquisitions at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, challenging her to respond to a framed spray paint drawing (Untitled, enamel on paper, 17 ½ x 11 ½ inches) by David Smith (1906-1965), the eminent American sculptor who was her father. She created Birthday, an oddly minimal yet baroque wall installation measuring 20 x 36.5 feet that incorporated a palette of colored tape, ribbon, paint, paper, and the historical work borrowed from an Atlanta collection.

Over the course of two and a half days, Smith added and subtracted elements as she executed the piece. It was clear that she was not only paying attention to the intricacies of the gallery architecture but to the compelling presence of her father's work. Select matte and glossy materials stretched, drooped, overlapped, and crumbled along the length and height of the wall. A lavender strip of vinyl provided a decorative flair; short dashes of blue and white tape

punctuated the expanse of wall, and yellow and black caution tape articulated the meeting of wall and floor. Silhouettes of the artist's left and right hands were made with spray paint, suggestive of early cave markings and perhaps a childlike signature of sorts. This combination of gestures pulsed with the musicality and clarity of Morse code, and like that specific language, it relied on space and silence for a successful transmission.

Birthday also included two sheets of unmarked drawing paper, one manila and other white, placed high on the wall. Their emptiness offered space for actions not yet taken. These two rectangles were shadowed by a third—the ghost image of long-ago ductwork that lingered from the building's previous life as a truck repair facility. Smith notes, "The two blank pieces of paper were like absences, the general sparseness of marks and events suggested a kind of absence. My father was more an absence than a presence for most of my life. Although I have very strong memories of him, I lived far away for most of the time growing up, and when he died I was only 11." 4

Smith continues to hone her pictorial vocabulary and philosophical principles by cultivating aspects of mapping, compression, permanence, and ephemerality. She is willing to take on unique collaborative opportunities and idiosyncratic gallery conditions, using them to learn and grow. Perhaps she has internalized the words from a speech given by David Smith in 1959:

The artist's language is the memory from sight. Art is made from dreams, and visions, and things not known, and least of all from things that can be said. It comes from the inside of who you are when you face yourself. It is an inner declaration of purpose. 5

For her exhibition at The New York Studio School, Smith has combined several sculptures with new tape drawings. She is aware of the building's notable history as the original home of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the site of the first one-man shows for John Sloan and Edward Hopper, and important presentations of art by numerous 20th century masters. To this legacy she adds her own experience with the school, having attended for one semester at the recommendation of Clement Greenberg, an advocate of the Hans Hoffman-based instruction taught there.

With thrifty geometry and calculated tension, Smith energizes and converses with the windowless galleries, plaster walls, Art Deco chrome trim and traditional molding. Her latest efforts continue a fascination with the spaces of art, from prehistoric stone caverns to the "white cube" to this current venue. To this, she brings a deep understanding of push-pull dynamics and modest means. This gathering of sophisticated artworks and actions presents Rebecca Smith as a generous orchestrator of visual pleasure and physical presence.

#### Notes

1 April 2009 interview with Michael Coffey, April 2009.

2 Artist's statement, "Blue Cage Sculpture," June 2006.

3 April 2009 interview.

4 April 2009 interview.

5 David Smith, "Tradition and Identity," a speech given on April 17, 1959, at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio.

Additional quotes by the artist are from a conversation with the author on March 9, 2010.