



Print Article



The Guggenheim Museum, February 2006



**David Smith**  
*Fish*  
1950-51  
Fogg Art Museum



"David Smith: A Centennial" at the Guggenheim Museum



## WEEKEND UPDATE by Walter Robinson

The **Guggenheim Museum** always goes a little crazy with its architecture. At present the place looks like a replica of Madison Square Garden, transformed by scaffolds and netting into a truncated cylinder with a screw-lid top. The "exterior renovation in progress," as the sign says, involves stripping **Frank Lloyd Wright's** famed spiral down to the bare concrete. Fix those cracks!

Inside, for "David Smith: A Centennial," Feb. 3-May 14, 2006, Guggenheim adjunct curator **Carmen Gimenez** has nicely arranged over 120 sculptures by **David Smith** (1906-65) up and down the spiral ramp and in the adjoining tower galleries, ranging from *Saw Head* (1933) to *Cubi XXVII* (1965). Pioneering though it is, Smith's work gave up its mysteries long ago, making this show a study in classic modernism.

Many of the sculptures are elegantly proportioned abstractions from nature, like the **Fogg Art Museum's** *Fish* (1950-51), a Cézannesque "landscape" done in orange-painted steel. For most of his career, Smith favored pictorial sculpture, making freestanding pictures-in-space that resemble all manner of things, whether hieroglyphics in a cartouche (*The Letter*, 1950), Atom Age illustrations (*Star Cage*, 1950) or even a moon peeking through the clouds (*Voltri XV*, 1962).

Walking down the Guggenheim ramp, it becomes clear that Smith's old-fashioned formal perfection is based on nature, with its elegant syncopation and grace. More interesting now are the handful of works that represent not the ideal of the human figure but its collapse into age, sloth and disability -- like in the "Tanktotems" from the early 1950s, with their pot bellies, curved spines and spindly legs.

Also interesting is the "Voltri" series of sculptures, made in a masterly 30-day burst of creativity in 1962 in the eponymous small town in Italy, apparently from odds and ends of metal left behind in the welding factory that Smith was given as a studio. The Voltri sculptures have the spur-of-the-moment verve of Ab-Ex painting, and also reflect the economic reality -- emptied out industrial spaces in a shifting global workforce -- that would give birth to Minimalism, Post-minimalism and the rest of the SoHo-spawned art movements.

The show includes four shiny, stainless-steel works from the "Cubi" series, including *Cubi I* (1965), which holds pride of place on the floor in the center of the museum rotunda, and up in the tower gallery the Guggenheim's own *Cubi XXVII*, made two months before Smith's death in a car accident in 1965 and obtained by the museum in a trade only two years later. These icons of 20th-century art, Smith's "breakthrough" into a purer form of abstraction, have a lot of power. And, curiously, as with many such icons, they have a low-culture counterpart, notably, a child's tower of toy blocks.

With all this, I couldn't help but feel bad for having thought, while looking a couple of weeks ago at the David Smith sculpture out on the lawn by



**David Smith**  
*Voltri XV*  
 1962  
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

the skating rink at the **National Gallery of Art** -- a forlorn sight to be sure -- that if someone offered \$23.8 million for this sculpture, *Cubi XXVI* (1965) -- the way power-collector **Eli Broad** did for Smith's *Cubi XVIII* at Sotheby's last November -- I'd be inclined to sell!

At the same time, one thing about great art is that it transforms your mindset, so that you see the world under its influence. For the next couple of days, everything reminded me of *Cubi I*.

Like the Finnish-born artist **Pia Lindman's** spare line drawings of her own gesturing body at **Luxe** gallery down on 57th Street, for instance. Lindman's series of gestures are themselves imitations of a humanoid robot under development at M.I.T. (a figure that itself appears, amusingly enough, to be kin to *Cubi I*.)



**David Smith**  
*Cubi I*  
 1963  
 Detroit Institute of Arts

During a brief performance at the gallery, Lindman watched film clips of the robot, which is named Domo, interacting with **Aaron Edsinger**, its designer -- Domo can sense a moving spherical object, like a ball in a person's hand, and try to grasp it -- and then, standing behind a music stand holding a kind of "score" of her own drawings, she attempted to mirror the robot's movements. Her goal was a kind of bodily investigation, an effort to feel, emotionally and physically, the multiple thresholds between -- what? -- the natural and the scientific? The human and the cybernetic? The subject and the object?

In any case, Lindman's performance made me think of mimes, and **Dustin Hoffman** in *Rain Man*, and **Louis Althusser's** *Ideology and State Ideological Apparatuses*, an essay that suggests that subjective human consciousness is an illusory effect. Lindman was especially telling in her replication of those moments of pause, when the robot had more or less entered a catatonic state. When it comes to consciousness, there's something irresistible about the idea of an on-off switch.

Lindman's other projects have included the working sauna she installed in the **P.S.1** courtyard several summers ago, and a large DVD projection of Yankee Stadium that was included in "The New York Yankees and the American Dream" at the **Bronx Museum** in 2002. Her small figural drawings, done on vellum, start at \$900. Works from the DVD series of Yankee Stadium, done in editions of six, are \$3,000 (and have been acquired by the **Museum of Modern Art**).



**David Smith**  
*Cubi XXVII*  
 1965  
 National Gallery of Art

There's more welded and painted steel up on Madison Avenue at **Gagosian Gallery's** exhibition of works by **Pino Pascali** (1935-68), the Italian artist who made remarkably convincing, life-size replicas of U.S. military ordnance, notably wheeled canons. In addition to the 11-foot-tall *Cannone Semovente* (moving cannon, 1965) and two *Mitragliatrice* (machine guns, 1965), the show includes a large bridge made of steel wool and cartoon drawings that Pascali made for an ice cream company in 1961.

The show also features several *Pinne di Pescecan* (1966) -- "shark's fins," constructed of canvas on shaped stretchers, punningly installed on the wall or floor -- so it's no wonder that **Maurizio Cattelan** is an admirer, contributing an essay to the accompanying catalogue. It's hard to say what the prices are -- no one seems to know at the gallery, it's that kind of place -- but a cannon from 1965 recently sold at **Christie's London** for a remarkable \$2.4 million.

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Among other notable Manhattan exhibitions is "A True Story Based on Lies," a show of comic-book paintings by the irrepressible **David McDermott** and **Peter McGough** at **Cheim & Read** in Chelsea. The





Pia Lindman performing *The MIT Project* at Luxe, Feb. 10, 2006



Pia Lindman's sauna at P.S.1, 2002



Pino Pascali's *Mitragliatrice* (1965) and *Ponte* (1968), installed at Gagosian Gallery

paintings draw their subjects from 1960s-era cartoon images of masculinity, femininity and good design, and combine them into freeform collage-like narratives (add them perhaps to the wing of the Imaginary Museum that includes paintings by Rosenquist, Salle and Koons). They are very nicely painted, and have even more graphic punch than their source material, if that is possible. In the catalogue essay, **Robert Rosenblum** calls the artists the "Merchant & Ivory of painting" because of their mastery of historical detail.

So here's **Charles Atlas** and a diagram of wrestling holds, and there's a Photo Realist image of some basketball players and a suburban living room. As Rosenquist says, the mix of consumerism and violence is a classic Pop motif. But all those muscles in Eisenhower's America, were they really so riotously homosexual? Sure they were! All the works have been sold, at prices ranging from \$30,000 to \$100,000 -- except for one, the largest, which remains available. **Elton John** bought *Schlitz Beer, 1961* (2005), a small (4 x 5 ft.) scene of green suburbs with a tiny, magenta-toned inset of a naked boy, seen from behind with his cock and balls squeezed between his legs.

Downtown at **White Columns** are appealing Neo-Cubist photos by **Eileen Quinlan** (b. 1972) of simple planar constructions made from a few pieces of burlap and mirrors or -- perhaps more appropriately -- smoke and mirrors. The props are arrayed in shallow relief and photographed so that the edges of the mirrors make thin white lines of uncertain origin -- white lines like those used by Picasso and Braque in their analytic paintings. Very nice. The photos are \$1,800 each, in editions of five plus one proof.

On the bulletin board by the front door -- which White Columns director **Matthew Higgs** has turned into a peculiar exhibition space -- there's a suite of four photographs selected by **Douglas Blau**, showing people at the opera, in gilded boxes, looking through opera glasses, seated in front of the stage. The theme of operatic theatricality is great, especially in an art context, though that out to be true of almost any of Blau's curated collections of images. How does he do it?

Theatricality is also the theme of **William Kentridge's** new show at **Marian Goodman Gallery**, which features stage designs, animations and models for Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Not only did Kentridge design the production, but he directed it as well at its premiere last spring at the **Theatre Royal de la Monnaie** in Brussels. On view in the gallery is a working model of the opera, a kind of theater-in-miniature, complete with sound and front and rear-screen projections. Don't miss it.

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"Seeing David Smith: Photographs by Dan Budnik" opens in the downstairs space at **Knoedler & Company**, Mar. 18-May 26, 2006. . . . *Bomb* magazine celebrates its 25th anniversary with a gala at the Park Restaurant in Chelsea on Apr. 10, 2006. . . . **Geoffrey Young** organizes "MetLife," a group show at **Morgan Lehman Gallery** on Tenth Avenue in Chelsea, opening Feb. 23, 2006. . . . Word from Urbandale, Iowa -- check out [www.artsceneiowa.com](http://www.artsceneiowa.com). Also, for art in Des Moines, see [www.karolynsherwoodgallery.com](http://www.karolynsherwoodgallery.com).

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Now that the **Metropolitan Museum** has announced definite plans to send the Euphronios Krater back to Italy, I'm a little surprised at how strong my feelings are on the matter. I'm pissed off! Sure, the thing was illegally excavated and exported, and the cascade of "who, me?" lies from the museum was exceptionally annoying, but the repatriation still makes me mad. For one thing, the return has basically been effected via



David McDermott and Peter McGough's "A True Story Based on Lies," installation view at Cheim & Read

the mad. For one thing, the return has basically been effected via blackmail -- when it comes to cultural exchange, the Italian government has a pretty big stick -- and nobody likes that!

What's more, it's not like the vase was stolen from a real person. It was dug up by Italians and sold by Italians, people whose activities were, in all likelihood, not completely unknown to Italian authorities. Hell, the vase isn't really even Italian -- it's Greek. And don't we have enough Italians (or Greeks) here in the U.S. to rate a bit of ancient Roman (or Greek) patrimony in our local museums? Goddam, yes, we do. Word to the wise at the Met -- parade before the public some of the treasures that we can expect to get on loan in the future. That will make the loss of the krater much easier to take.



David McDermott and Peter McGough  
*Schlitz Beer, 1961*  
2005  
Cheim & Read

WALTER ROBINSON is editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



Eileen Quinlan's *Smoke and Mirrors*  
(2006) at White Columns



Douglas Blau's bulletin board installation  
at White Columns



William Kentridge's theater-in-miniature for *The Magic Flute* at Marian Goodman Gallery



The Euphronios Krater, ca. 515 BCE, at the Metropolitan Museum, for the time being