

## Polychrome in the Sixties: David Smith and Anthony Caro

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IN THE WINTER OF 1960–61, DAVID SMITH MADE A SERIES OF COLOR slide transparencies in the snow-filled landscape surrounding his upstate New York studio. The setup was casual; sculptures were situated directly on the gravel and snow just outside the sculptor's workshop. However informal their composition—however indifferent to the conventions of sculptural display—Smith's photographs stage an interchange between sculpture and landscape in which paint acts as the deciding term. A photograph of *Doorway on Wheels* (1960) (fig. 1), for instance, juxtaposes the sculpture's interplay of black lines against the white snow, presenting it in stark relief. Other colors appear in parcels: the burst of red in the sculpture's wheel, the lone green pine to the right, and the subdued brown corner of barren deciduous trees. Smith's photograph of *Doorway on Wheels* forges equivalences and connections. Tone and hue structure a process of differentiation, a process that, in turn, offers a complex picture of what the sculptor imagined color's role to be. Using photography, a medium that Smith had made central to his sculptural project since the 1940s, the artist structured a specifically pictorial encounter with his painted objects.<sup>1</sup> The photograph organizes the shifting effects of color into a pictorial plane. In so doing, it stages a collision between the media of sculpture, painting, and photography, and offers a rejoinder to Greenbergian modernism.

In his winter photograph, Smith construes an alternate response to the age-old question of color's role in sculpture—a question that took on new urgency in the early 1960s for Smith and a group of painters and sculptors working in and around Bennington, Vermont; the group included Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler, Jules Olitski, and Anthony Caro. Historically, polychrome sculpture had inhabited the aesthetic sidelines of sculpture, a situation Smith himself described in a 1940 essay, noting a legacy of “the dead dark [of bronzes], and marble, dead white.”<sup>2</sup> Rather than the traditions of art, Smith drew from the technological fabric of modern life, finding a model for color sculpture in the vitreous enamels of “gasoline stations, hamburger stands, and stew pans.”<sup>3</sup> In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the sculptor had explored paint as a visual element of a sculptural encounter in different ways. In the early 1960s, he returned to color with a newfound urgency and produced an expansive and studied body of painted sculpture. He also photographed them in relationship

Figure 1  
 David Smith (American, 1906–1965), *Doorway on Wheels*, 1960, in Snow, Bolton Landing, New York. Color transparency, 5.7 × 5.7 cm (2¼ × 2¼ in.). © Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: David Smith



to the landscape, capturing the contingent effects of viewing color in film. His return to color coincided with a series of paintings by his friend Kenneth Noland, titled *Circles* (1956–63). Smith's sculpture *Noland's Blues* (1961) was a debt to the painter; other sculptures directly cited Noland's canvases. Anthony Caro, whose turn to welding was influenced by Smith, visited Bennington in the early 1960s and later taught at Bennington College, a women's college in the Vermont town. During these years, Caro was similarly invested in merging color and steel sculpture, in conversation with Noland, Olitski, and others.

Smith's and Caro's separate investigations of painted sculpture did not sit well with Clement Greenberg, whose essays critiqued the role of color in their sculptures. Greenberg remained an advocate of both Smith's and Caro's work, and, as he reminded Smith in a 1961 letter, he had promoted the sculptor from the start, having "discover[ed]" him.<sup>4</sup> However much the critic championed their modernist steel sculpture, he was nevertheless critical of color; painted sculpture challenged his dictum of medium purity. "It seems to be a law of modernism," Greenberg wrote in 1958, "that the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized."<sup>5</sup> Paint was a nonessential aspect of the medium of sculpture; it interrupted the "raw, discolored surfaces"<sup>6</sup> of welded steel.

Greenberg's judgments were not limited to the written page. A letter that he sent Smith in 1951 requested permission to paint over the multicolored surface of a sculpture given to him by the artist. "It should be black," Greenberg emphasized, adding, "We can always scrape it off again."<sup>7</sup> The critic's 1951 letter foreshadowed actions he would take after the sculptor's accidental death in 1965, when Greenberg served as one of three executors of Smith's estate. In that capacity, he stripped the paint from five of Smith's sculptures, which had been painted white. He had them rusted and sealed, giving them the appearance of having been painted brown.<sup>8</sup> Other sculptures the critic let deteriorate or fade as a result of weather.<sup>9</sup> In 1974, Rosalind Krauss published an essay that documented these changes with the aid of photographs taken by Dan Budnik. She concluded that Greenberg had committed "an aggressive act against the sprawling, contradictory vitality of his work as Smith himself conceived it—and left it."<sup>10</sup>

Krauss's essay provoked an outpouring of letters that raised questions about Smith's intentions and the ethics of Greenberg's intervention. Critics, scholars, dealers, and artists sided with or against Greenberg. The subsequent debate hinged on the question of primer. According to those involved, white paint—the color of the works subsequently stripped—was taken to be a sign of incompleteness, even though, as Krauss herself noted elsewhere, Smith had explored white as an end color in sculptures such as *Untitled* (1955) or in the *Menands* series.<sup>11</sup> The debates also did not linger on Smith's process as he himself described it, in which white was not a primer coat, but a vital step toward polychrome.<sup>12</sup> Applied over a yellow-green zinc primer, white acted as an exploratory canvas that, as Smith emphasized, might be in place for several years while he worked toward a final color.<sup>13</sup>

In the discussions surrounding Greenberg's actions, which took place in the pages of *Art in America* and *The New York Times*, white was mobilized to different ends. For some, it was a mistaken endpoint, and Greenberg was simply carrying out Smith's wishes by removing a temporary coat of paint. For others, however, incompleteness mattered in itself; the white color of the sculptures was part of Smith's working process. It was an intermediary step toward polychrome. In light of all this, Greenberg's "restoration" was a bombastic statement that occluded Smith's working process. As Beverly Pepper framed the question, "Should we not value phases of the artist's research as much as the conclusions he came to?"<sup>14</sup> For Greenberg, the answer was no.

Forty years later, however, the question of what Smith aimed for in his painted sculpture remains unanswered. Comprehending the sculptor's ambitions for color means deciphering a particular historical moment in which Smith and other artists were each exploring color as shaping a uniquely visual encounter. The dialogue surrounding their efforts sheds new light on the issue of polychrome sculpture and offers a glimpse at how two modernist artists were challenging commands for medium purity by moving between media. Seen in Smith's photographs, moreover, sculpture is tied not only to painting but also to the medium of photography. Employing a pictorial framework to analyze and display his painted objects, Smith insisted on color's vitality for his sculptural optic. His images structure a visual, nonlinguistic retort to Greenberg's narrow delimitation of medium.

The sculptor's death in 1965 would abruptly conclude his robust experiments with paint. By the end of the decade, Caro would term his use of color

something of a failure. Still, in spite of these endpoints, color became significant for sculpture in the late 1960s. Donald Judd, John Chamberlain, and Anne Truitt would each make applied color a key component of their projects for sculpture. Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman would explore the bodily and spatial aspects of color in videos. These investigations stressed the industrial and fabricated elements of color, as well as color's role in a phenomenological encounter. Returning to Smith's and Caro's painted surfaces, this essay offers a prehistory to such explorations—which took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s—by showing how color operated as a spatial element of sculpture. Their experiments with color emphasize how the medium of welded sculpture was tied to, and reliant upon, the media of painting and photography.

### The Problem of Color

In the discussions surrounding the controversy of Greenberg's paint stripping, few have paused to consider just what was wrong with color, according to the critic. One need not look far to find Greenberg's judgments of color's failure when declarations such as these abound: "The question of color in Smith's art (as in all recent sculpture along the same lines), remains a vexed one. I don't think he has ever used applied color with real success."<sup>15</sup> But what was, more precisely, wrong with color? What led the critic to judge it a failure? Greenberg's writings provide few clues to answer this important question. He does not elaborate on his claim for color's incompatibility with sculpture, or on how paint offended his conviction for medium purity. Instead, its successful use is discussed as a possibility rarely achieved. In the rare instance when, according to Greenberg, color was applied successfully, it was because paint did not detract from sculptural form. In *Helmholtzian Landscape* (1946), for instance, the one Smith sculpture in which color "worked,"<sup>16</sup> color was "as much pictorial as it is sculptural. [It] emphasizes at the same time that it controls the in and out movement of these elements in relation to the plane of the frame."<sup>17</sup>

When applied correctly, color would act as a means to control and transcend the effects of matter, to transform metal into plane and frame. Color, then, was aligned with other sculptural matter in the space of Greenberg's argument—with tactility, impermeability, weight, or bodily associations. For Greenberg, the qualities associated with matter would be transcended by an aesthetic of "sheer visibility" or opticality.<sup>18</sup> "The human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space," he wrote in 1958, "now it is eyesight alone."<sup>19</sup> This emphasis on opticality, Greenberg adds, "allows sculpture to be as pictorial as it pleases."<sup>20</sup> "Sculpture," he writes, "can confine itself to virtually two dimensions (as some of David Smith's pieces do) without being felt to violate the limitations of its medium, because the eye recognizes that what offers itself in two dimensions is actually (not palpably) fashioned in three."<sup>21</sup> Sculpture's weight and material—its literal aspects—would be translated into two dimensions. And if color was to work in this modernist aesthetic, it would need to be pictorial, not tactile—optical, not material.

Color's problems did not end there. Writing of the (unsatisfactory) role of color in Caro's sculpture, such as the "superb" *Sculpture Two* (1962) (fig. 2), Greenberg complains of its provisional status:

Applied color is another of the means to weightlessness in Caro's art, as Michael Fried, again, points out. It acts—especially in the high-

**Figure 2**

Anthony Caro (British, b. 1924), *Sculpture Two*, 1962. Steel painted green, 208.5 × 361 × 259 cm (82 × 142 × 102 in.). London, Tate. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Donald Gomme, 1992. © Barford Sculptures/Anthony Caro. Photo: Tate, London/Art Resource, NY



keyed off-shades that Caro favors—to deprive metal surfaces of their tactile connotations and render them more “optical.” I grant the essential importance to Caro’s art of color in this role, but this is not to say that I, for one, find his color satisfactory. I know of no piece of his, not even an unsuccessful one, that does not transcend its color, or whose *specific* color or combination of colors does not detract from the quality of the whole (especially when there is more than one color). In every case I have the impression that the color is aesthetically (as well as literally) provisional—that it can be changed at will without decisively affecting quality. Here, as almost everywhere else in Western sculpture, color remains truly the “secondary” property that philosophers used to think color in general was.<sup>22</sup>

For Greenberg, however close color came to achieving weightlessness, its role was always minor. It was not an end in itself. Rather, it was a changing, provisional effect that, in most instances, was unconnected to the work itself. Worse, it would distract the eye from a direct visual encounter—an experience that the critic had found in the “raw, discolored surfaces”<sup>23</sup> of Smith’s *Voltri-Bolton Landing* series. Comparing these sculptures to the “polished or painted surfaces” of other works, he noted differences in their attendant visual processes. Painted surfaces, he wrote, might “attract the eye too much, and the attracted eye lingers, while the unattracted eye hastens towards the essential.”<sup>24</sup> Rawness meant directness or immediacy.

When painted sculpture “failed,” we might suspect it was because the colored surfaces invoked the “substantial” and “textured,” characteristics that stood in the way of purity, immateriality, essence, and, thus, the very effacement of texture and substance.<sup>25</sup> Inessential and superfluous, changing and unreliable, color was a mere distraction to a greater visual encounter. It would link sculpture to decoration, or the “matter-of-fact ornamental object,” Greenberg’s phrase for an ineffectual sculpture.<sup>26</sup> With these phrases, we are not far from

the critic's 1939 writings on kitsch. With its "faked sensations" and "vicarious experience," kitsch was unreliable and spurious; it "changes according to style," he wrote, "but remains always the same."<sup>27</sup> Excessive, textured, secondary—the language of Greenberg's 1960s critique of color alludes to kitsch as its unspoken term. Paint was an unnecessary detour on the road to opticality.

The restorative paint has long since dried on the sculptures that Greenberg stripped. Biographies have accounted for the wider issues at stake in this controversy—and we might note here the break between Greenberg and Krauss or call up his late-in-life remorse.<sup>28</sup> Using x-rays, conservators' studies have sought to resolve some of the details of Smith's painting process.<sup>29</sup> And exhibitions have attended to color in his 1960s works.<sup>30</sup> Yet this recent emphasis on the primacy of color ignores one central question: how was color explored as relating to a wider visual encounter? What did Smith and Caro each expect color to achieve? These questions seem necessary—even urgent—if we are to comprehend how color was a key term for modernist sculpture, apart from Greenberg's closely inscribed vision.

### The Materiality of Color

For both Caro and Smith, color operated as a material for sculpture. Not subsumed into an optical experience, it was a key component of the physical aspects of the work. Their separate emphases on painted sculpture were tied in part to discussions surrounding color that took place among a group of color field artists and modernist sculptors living near Bennington College, in the early 1960s. Noland lived nearby. Smith, who gave lectures and advised students, lived and worked not far away, in Bolton Landing, New York. Greenberg visited regularly, and artists Jules Olitski and Paul Feeley both taught at the college. In 1963, Noland had secured a short-term teaching position for Caro at Bennington. Caro would return to Bennington in 1965; he was there when Smith died in a car accident, not far from Noland's home.

In 1960, Caro had met Greenberg in London, where the critic had persuaded him to "change his habits" and learn to weld. Caro was prompted in part by a 1960 issue of *Arts Magazine*, illustrated with Smith's own photographs, that Greenberg had shown him.<sup>31</sup> Soon thereafter Caro traveled to the United States, where he was introduced to artists Smith, Noland, Robert Motherwell, Frankenthaler, and others. In New York, the young sculptor saw Noland's recent *Circles* show "three times," he later recounted.<sup>32</sup> In Caro's conversations with Greenberg, the critic had imparted his advice about habits. The results were dramatic. On his return to England, the sculptor set to work. His processes shifted from modeling to welding, moving from a bodily and figural sculpture to a constructed and abstracted one. He destroyed *Woman's Body*, made that previous year—a teeming, substantive body, in which plaster has been molded and scraped away in a laborious process. The resulting form was composed of protrusions and hollows, scratches and indentations, to say nothing of its amputated limbs. With *Twenty Four Hours*, however—the first work in his new idiom—scraps and planes of metal were conjoined in an arrangement of shapes. The sculptural base was jettisoned as a framework for sculpture, and the work was positioned directly on the ground.

With Caro's new method came a shift in "father figures,"<sup>33</sup> as the sculptor termed them. That year he published an article attacking Moore, in whose

studio he had worked in 1951 and 1952, and attempted to align himself with Smith, though he was cautious of seeming too much of a follower. He cited his sculptures' horizontal alignments as evidence of the two sculptors' differences, yet the similarities in material and practice are hard to miss. At Bennington, Caro's work intensified and expanded. He learned new welding techniques from Smith. In conversation with Noland, he adopted the method of working in a series and of "not standing back."<sup>34</sup> And color—or "the color problem," as Noland termed it—was also under intense review.<sup>35</sup> The questions structuring letters and informing discussions were numerous: How would paint be applied? Would it juxtapose sculptural planes or emphasize a unified whole? How would it frame a visual response? Looking back, these artists engaged the problem of a painted sculpture with a newfound urgency, asking how color might be made to structure a uniquely visual encounter. While the questions were shared, however, their responses diverged.

For Caro, color worked to designate shape. In sculptures such as *Shaftsbury* (1965), all-over color highlights the form as an integral, spatial whole. In *Smoulder* (1965) (fig. 3), form is economical, a purple line drawn against gravel. Its color is bold and abstract, nonnatural. In these two works from 1965, applied color does not invoke tactility—paint strokes are not visible. Nor are we asked to consider color's everyday associations, as in the early 1960s sculptures of John Chamberlain. Taking their colors from the faded hues of crushed cars and appliances, these works invoked, in Donald Judd's words, the pastels "of Detroit's imitation elegance for the poor—coupled, Rooseveltianly, with reds

Figure 3  
Anthony Caro (British, b. 1924), *Smoulder*,  
1965. Steel painted purple, 106.5 × 46.5 × 84 cm  
(42 × 18.3 × 33 in.). UK, private collection.  
© Barford Sculptures/Anthony Caro



and blues.”<sup>36</sup> Referencing color’s messy class associations—its larger social and industrial landscape—was not part of Caro’s interest. Rather, paint would structure an optical encounter, denoting shape and form, as if a sculpture’s lines constituted a figure set on a canvas. With this model for color, Caro seems to owe everything to Noland’s circle paintings of these years, with their planar orientation and flattened shapes. For Caro, ground and shape are entwined. Together, they amount to a larger abstracted plane. As artist William Tucker described these Bennington sculptures, they “seem to be much more like painting—in that the ground is like a canvas, and these are like elements in a canvas.”<sup>37</sup> If the sculptures form a figure—seen against a ground—color is vital to that total pictorial structure.

Smith, however, was at work on another model for color, and Noland was a key influence, just as he was for Caro. Smith experimented with concentric rings of color in *Circles Intercepted* (1961), a work that explores how the flattened planes of color reminiscent of Noland’s canvases might be made three-dimensional. Smith also used circle shapes in his *Primo Piano*, *Zig*, and *Circle* series, working them into the larger sculptural form. In the *Circles*, paint designates the sculpture’s separate parts, but the surfaces are also complex and tactile in their own right. Like many of Smith’s *Zig* sculptures, including *Zig IV* and *Zig V*, color is nonprimary and nonnatural; it is black shot through with brown; yellow, with orange; or blue, with black. Each surface in these early 1960s sculptures is composed of layers of interweaving brushstrokes so that the effect is of a translucent, vibrating plane. *Circle I* (1962), for instance, is composed of a large apricot-red circle and a lavender rectangle. These colors are interwoven with others. Patches of green appear in parts of the apricot circle, operating as subtle highlights to the overall color of the shape. As the sculptor described his use of color, it is nonprimary and raw, or what does “not have a previous acceptance.”<sup>38</sup> His painted surfaces do not use ready-made colors, but rather materialize and individualize color into complex, dynamic layers. Smith’s sculptures particularize paint, stressing the visual response that paint would create.

However, for Smith color was not only a material property. It was also defined through his photographs, which tested out a definition of color as contingent and unstable. Seen in the sculptor’s photographs, color was part of a series of shifting connections and associations; it framed a particularly material response—one that did not fit comfortably within Greenberg’s restricted definition of color’s opticality. Smith’s winter photographs also offer an alternate response to the colored shapes that Caro envisioned. Unlike Caro, who did not make a practice of photographing his work,<sup>39</sup> and whose use of color was to emphasize the overall shape or plane, Smith used the camera to explore color’s contingent associations.

This tactic was hardly new for Smith. Since 1946, the sculptor’s own images had been published in countless magazines, journals, and books, influencing readings of his sculpture. After purchasing photographic equipment with funding from his Guggenheim Fellowship in 1950, the sculptor put to use a photographic style for documenting his sculptures, which he would continue to use until his death. He situated his camera at a low vantage point, beneath the sculpture, and cropped the contact print at the object’s base. Such tactics had the effect of projecting the object against the sky, so that it appeared to be a flat, two-dimensional plane. His works also appeared weightless, as if suspended above—and dissociated from—a mountainous setting, which served as a foil for



the modernist object. In a photograph of *Voltron XIII*, for instance—published alongside Greenberg’s 1964 essay, “David Smith’s New Sculpture”—the sculptural object, flattened to a plane, looms above the landscape. The image asserts his sculpture’s self-sufficiency and independence. In a photograph of *Hudson River Landscape*, frequently published in Smith’s lifetime, the sculptor has flattened his work into a linear form that hovers, immaterially, over the distant landscape. Sculpture is envisioned as a two-dimensional plane that is abstracted from its surroundings.

Smith’s photographs structure a visual response not unlike the one Frank O’Hara described in 1961, on seeing the artist’s sculptures in the fields outside his upstate New York studio. In a passage published in *Art News* in 1961 the poet-critic recounts a trip made to Bolton Landing, New York, emphasizing the contrast between steel sculpture and landscape setting:

Outside the studio, huge piles of steel lay waiting to be used, and along the road up to the house a procession of new works, in various stages of painting, stood in the attitudes of some of Smith’s characteristic titles: they stood there like a *Sentinel* or *Totem* or *Ziggurat*, not all menacing, but very aware. The contrast between the sculptures and this rural scene is striking: to see a cow or pony in the same perspective as one of the *Ziggurats*, with the trees and mountains behind, is to find nature soft and art harsh; nature looks intimate and vulnerable, the sculptures powerful, indomitable.<sup>40</sup>

Not a documentary report, O’Hara’s passage sketches a modernist fantasy of viewing in which sculpture is both within and apart from its mountainous surroundings. Seen in the landscape, Smith’s sculpture emerges as some sovereign, authoritative power, separate from tree, mountain, pony, or cow. For O’Hara, Smith’s display relayed an image of his works as insistent things, self-enclosed and self-referential.

In his photographs, the sculptor repeatedly devised the kind of visual encounter O’Hara describes, one in which sculpture and landscape are at odds. His photographs mark a departure from other photographs by modern sculptors, including those by Caro’s former mentor, Henry Moore. Frequently, Moore dramatized his sculptures by deploying the camera’s abilities to shift scale. His photographs capitalize on photography’s misinformation about size, to monumentalize his sculpture, and imagine them to be part of or innate to the landscape setting. While Moore used photography to envisage the encounter between sculpture and landscape as one of community, for Smith the relationship had to be one of difference and alienation. Smith’s disjunctive views summon notions of sculpture’s belonging and nonbelonging, qualities that are present in Smith’s color photographs.

While the sculptor’s black-and-white photographs were made from low vantage points in order to create contrasts between dark sculpture and light sky, Smith’s color slides structure their differences through color. Abandoning the low points of view, the sculptor instead organized a process of differentiation that was based on tone and ambient light. We have already seen how Smith’s photograph of *Doorway on Wheels* (1960) uses color differences to structure the work’s abstraction, to denote the work’s situatedness within a landscape and simultaneous separation from it. A photograph of *Tanktotem X* (1960) analogously uses color as a means of differentiation. Smith also photographed

this sculpture just outside his studio. The work was placed directly on the snow-covered gravel, without an intermediary pedestal. Smith's pale-colored truck and carryall are viewed in the distance, as is *Tanktotem IX*, also completed that year. Against the muted tones of the scene—variations of white and light brown—the sculpture appears as an interruption. Its constructed colors—bright red, blue, orange, and black—are juxtaposed against the ambient and serene colors of snow-filled space.

Other images construe a more dynamic approach. In a slide of *Tanktotem IX* (1960) (fig. 4), Smith pursues color as a complex set of tonal variations. There is no confusing this sculpture—its gold-tinged totem head, crisp linear torso, or dark tripodlike legs—with its surroundings. Yet the photograph structures a comparison of a range of differences. Even the work itself tabulates white as a set of shifting signs. Look, for instance, at the white plane, the sculpture's central rectangular shape; its lower edge is mixed with grey, the purity of flat-white mixed with vertical streaks. Or consider the sculpture's head, itself a meditation on color variation. Here, white is interspersed with a gold-toned yellow, the tactility of its application clearly visible. These versions of white are compared with others: the gray white of snow mixed with gravel; the bright, yellow white of snow reflecting sun; the blue white of snow seen in shadow; the pale, blue-tinged white hovering just above the horizon; the creamy

**Figure 4**  
David Smith (American, 1906–1965),  
*Tanktotem IX*, 1960, in Snow, Bolton Landing,  
New York. Color transparency, 5.7 × 5.7 cm  
(2¼ × 2¼ in.). © Estate of David Smith/Licensed  
by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: David Smith



white of birch bark. Each of these versions of a single color is made to appear in the image's frame, showing white to be multiple and dispersed. Here, color is not posed as a stable and absolute term. Instead, it is fragmented and unknown, subject to a range of shifting and contingent factors. We cannot point to one object or surface and name it *white*. Whiteness is instead composed from localized reflections and illuminated surfaces.

In the photograph of *Tanktotem IX*, Smith stages a phenomenology of color that he had pursued in writing. In 1953, he analogized what it meant to visually encounter his sculpture in a description of perceiving the color black. Both experiences provoke a process of abstract association:

Let me pose a question to black. Is it white? Is it day or night? Good or evil? Positive or negative? Is it life or death? Is it the superficial scientific explanation about the absence of light? Is it a solid wall or is it space? Is it pain, a man, a father? Or does black mean nothing? Did it come out blank having been censored out by some unknown or unrecognizable association? There is no one answer. Black is no one thing. It is many things. The answer depends upon individual reaction. The importance of black depends upon the conviction and the artistic projection of black, the mythopoetic view, the myth of black, not the scientific theory or dictionary explanation or the philosopher's account of black. Black, as a word, or as an image recall, flashed in the mind as a dream, too fast for any rational word record.<sup>41</sup>

Smith enlists the concept of black only to break it down into a set of unstable, conflicting associations. As a color and a term, it cannot be pinned down to any single linguistic, scientific, or philosophical identity. Rather, it subsists through cultural imagery—what Smith termed the “mythopoetic view” of black—and through individual projection, through conscious and unconscious meanings. Color here is not universal or absolute. It is not the prefabricated color of a chart or grid. Instead, it is constituted locally and phenomenally, through Smith's individual handmade act of painting and through specific acts of viewing.

In the *Tanktotem IX* photograph, Smith pictorializes color, which is to say he envisions it as part of a contingent field of relative associations. In his 1961 account, O'Hara described a similar process of viewing color in Smith's sculptures, involving an aesthetic of culmination and not examination: “The eye travel[s] over the complicated surface exhaustively, rather than . . . settl[ing] on the whole first and then explor[ing] details.”<sup>42</sup> O'Hara's account seeks to differentiate Smith's painted sculptures from their constructivist predecessors, but his terms also apply to the sculptor's photographs. In them, Smith staged a slow, exhaustive comparison between hues resulting in color's destabilization. The process involves a thorough layering of terms, not allowing any single, relative color to stand in for the whole.

In a view of *Tanktotem X* (fig. 5), taken during the summer, Smith positioned the sculpture in a garden patch. His photograph did not use a low vantage point, but framed the sculpture from a frontal vantage point, so that it appears nestled within its setting. The sculpture, however, seems oddly located, and the contrast between the sculpture and its surroundings is striking. As the eye moves between registers of space, color works to connect and juxtapose the sculpture and its garden scene. Compare, for instance, the textured, red crescent shape of *Tanktotem X* with the red and pink gladiolas in the background, or the dark blue

**Figure 5**  
 David Smith (American, 1906–1965),  
*Tanktotem X*, 1960, Bolton Landing, New  
 York. Color transparency, 5.7 × 5.7 cm (2¼ ×  
 2¼ in.). © Estate of David Smith/Licensed by  
 VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: David Smith



and white central shape with the green swell of vegetables. The image envisioned here is one of connection and disconnection, belonging and nonbelonging. Sculpture is proposed as an organic extension of the garden, but that connection is ultimately refused. These painted abstract shapes—with their rough and tactile surfaces—cannot be made to comply with sprawling vines and arching gladiolas. In the photograph, such fantasies of sculpture’s abstraction from landscape depend upon the search for, and comparison of, colors.

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In 1967 Caro wrote to Greenberg to relay his turn away from polychrome: “I have not quite got the color thing right and I’m leaving a lot of them in polished steel uncolored.”<sup>43</sup> In the subsequent years, Greenberg would alter five of Smith’s sculptures, returning them to the raw, uncolored state the critic preferred. But Smith’s photographs offer an alternative story for color’s supposed failure. Color, in Smith’s pictorial model, was not transcendent of matter, but deeply tied to it. It does not render form weightless, but rather mobilizes it as contingent and changing, shifting and unstable. To invoke Smith’s phrase, it is “no one thing.” Seen in a photograph, color is reflective of light and space. It connects sculpture to and distances it from the phenomenal world, sparking an unsettling, searching response.

## Notes

- 1** For an assessment of Smith's photography as it relates to his sculpture, see my *David Smith in Two Dimensions: Sculpture, Photography and Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming). This essay is excerpted from the book's third chapter.
- 2** David Smith, "Sculpture; Art Forms in Architecture," in *David Smith*, ed. Garnett McCoy (New York: Praeger, 1973), p. 46.
- 3** *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.
- 4** Clement Greenberg, "Letter to David Smith" (May 17, 1961), David Smith Papers, Estate of David Smith, New York.
- 5** Greenberg, "American-Type' Painting" (1955 and 1958), in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 208.
- 6** Greenberg, "David Smith's New Sculpture" (1964), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. J. O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–93), vol. 4, p. 191.
- 7** Greenberg, "Letter to David Smith" (November 4, 1951), in Sketchbook 40, David Smith Papers, Estate of David Smith, New York.
- 8** All five have been restored to Smith's original brushed-white enamel surface.
- 9** According to Rosalind Krauss's "Changing the Work of David Smith," these sculptures were altered as follows: *Circle and Box* (1963), *Untitled* (1963), *Oval Node I* (1963), *Lunar Arc* (1961), and *Primo Piano III* (1962) had been sandblasted or ground and their newly rust-colored steel surfaces then varnished glossily; *Rebecca Circle* (1961) had been allowed to weather so that its paint deteriorated and uneven streaks of rust took over; and *Wagon II* (1962) and *Voltri 18* (1962) had been stripped and repainted rust brown. See Rosalind Krauss, "Changing the Work of David Smith," *Art in America* 62, no. 5 (September–October 1974), pp. 30–33.
- 10** *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 11** In a 1978 reply to Clement Greenberg, Krauss wrote, "At the time of Smith's death, eight of his large-scale sculptures were left in a condition that is assumed to be unfinished, since they were covered with a solid coat of white paint. Had the artist lived, this condition might have been modified in some way now impossible to determine. Judging, however, from finished examples of Smith's sculpture, the options range from one solid color, to black planes contrasted with white ones, to a more elaborate kind of polychromy." See Rosalind Krauss, "Rosalind Krauss Replies," *Art in America* 66, no. 2 (March–April 1978), p. 5. According to Peter Stevens, Director, Estate of David Smith, Smith painted several works white with the intention of leaving them white. These include *Untitled*, 1955, where the final coat of white was an oxide primer. Interview with Peter Stevens by the author, November 27, 2007. Irving Sandler also remembered Smith finishing his works in white paint. In 1999, Sandler wrote, "[Smith] pointed to an all-white piece and remarked that he had put seventeen coats of white on it before he got the color right." Irving Sandler, "David Smith, A Memoir," in Candida Smith, *The Fields of David Smith* (Mountainville, N.Y., 1999), p. 50.
- 12** In a 1965 description of his painting process, Smith said, "First the iron is ground down so that it is raw, and it is primed with about fifteen coats of epoxy primer, and then a few coats of zinc . . . and then a few coats of white—and then the color is put on—after that; so it runs about twenty-five or thirty coats. . . ." Smith, in Gene Baro, "Some Late Words from David Smith," *Art International* 9, no. 7 (October 1965), p. 49.
- 13** Smith himself addressed the role of white in his *Primo Piano* series in a May 12, 1965, Bennington College lecture: "Here is a sculpture—this group is called *Primo Piano*, only because on the first floor nothing happens—whatever takes place is on the second floor—and this has been primed and is painted white, and I put it out three years ago, and I should have painted it with colors before this, but I have been doing other things, and I hope to finish it this summer." Smith, in Baro, "Some Late Words from David Smith," p. 49. For further discussion of the role of white as a blank slate for color in the *Primo Piano* series, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Sculpture of David Smith: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Garland, 1977), p. 100. For a report on the layers of primer and top coats used in Smith's *Zig V* (1961) see Albert Marshall, "A Study of the Surfaces of David Smith's Sculpture," *Conservation Research 1995* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery, 1995), pp. 97–99. According to Peter Stevens, Director, Estate of David Smith, Smith also used red primer (interview with Peter Stevens by the author, November 27, 2007).
- 14** Beverly Pepper, "Letter," *Art in America* 63, no. 2 (March–April, 1975), p. 136.
- 15** Greenberg, "David Smith's New Sculpture" (1964), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 192.
- 16** Greenberg wrote of *Helmholtzian Landscape*, "This is one sculpture of Smith's in which applied color is completely successful." Greenberg, "Draft of David Smith Comments 1966," Clement Greenberg Papers, Getty Research Institute [unpaginated]. In an unpublished 1991 interview with Rubenfeld, Greenberg repeated this claim, "Smith did one good color piece, the Helmholtz one. It was always provisional, his color." See Florence Rubenfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 30.

- 17 Greenberg, "Draft of David Smith Comments 1966," Clement Greenberg Papers, Getty Research Institute [unpaginated].
- 18 Greenberg, "Sculpture in Our Time" (1958), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 60.
- 19 Ibid, p. 59.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Greenberg, "Contemporary Sculpture: Anthony Caro" (1965), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 207.
- 23 Greenberg, "David Smith's New Sculpture" (1964), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 191.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Greenberg, "The New Sculpture" (1949), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, p. 319.
- 27 Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, p. 12.
- 28 See Florence Rubinfeld, "Icarus in the Art World," in *Clement Greenberg: A Life*, pp. 19–30.
- 29 See Albert Marshall, "A Study of the Surfaces of David Smith's Sculpture" in *Conservation Research 1995*.
- 30 A 1998 Gagosian Gallery exhibition foregrounded Smith's painted sculpture in *Painted Steel: The Late Work of David Smith* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1998). The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's 2006 retrospective of Smith's sculpture presented a large percentage of works from the 1940s, many of which were painted. However, the show did not display Smith's 1960s painted sculptures.
- 31 According to Caro, Greenberg told him, "If you want to change your art, change your habits." See Ian Barker, *Anthony Caro: Quest for the New Sculpture* (Aldershot, Hampshire, U.K.: Lund Humphries, 2004), p. 84.
- 32 Ibid., p. 88.
- 33 This is Caro's phrase. See "Manuscript of Caro's tribute to Smith," reproduced in Barker, *Anthony Caro*, p. 145.
- 34 Barker, *Anthony Caro*, p. 97.
- 35 Kenneth Noland, "Letter to Anthony Caro July 1964" in Barker, *Anthony Caro*, p. 132.
- 36 "Chamberlain is the only sculptor really using color, the full range, not just metallic shades; his color is as particular, complex and structural as any good painter's." Donald Judd, "In the Galleries," in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959-1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), p. 46.
- 37 "Anthony Caro's Work: A Symposium by Four Sculptors," *Studio International* 177, no. 4 (January 1969), p. 14.
- 38 Smith, "Interview with Marian Horosko" (October 25, 1964), unpaginated transcript, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
- 39 According to Michael Fried, Caro did not photograph his own work, but relied on other photographers. Conversation with the author, October 10, 2010.
- 40 Frank O'Hara, "David Smith: The Color of Steel," *Art News* 60 (December 1961), pp. 32–34.
- 41 Smith, "Lecture, Fayetteville, Arkansas" (April 1953), Manuscript Archives, The Estate of David Smith, New York.
- 42 O'Hara, "David Smith: The Color of Steel," p. 69.
- 43 Anthony Caro, "Letter to Clement Greenberg," (January 10, 1967), in Barker, *Anthony Caro*, p. 167.