

the exhibition, discuss works in the show.

preparation by the Menil, and Chelsea Beck, curatorial assistant for director of the Jasper Johns catalogue raisonné of drawings in modernist architects (University of Texas at Austin), and is now project on postwar collaborations between abstract expressionist painters and Center. Dr. Eileen Costello, who recently completed her dissertation Bernice Rose, chief curator of the Menil Drawing Institute and Study

**Friday, February 18, 2011, 7:00 p.m.**

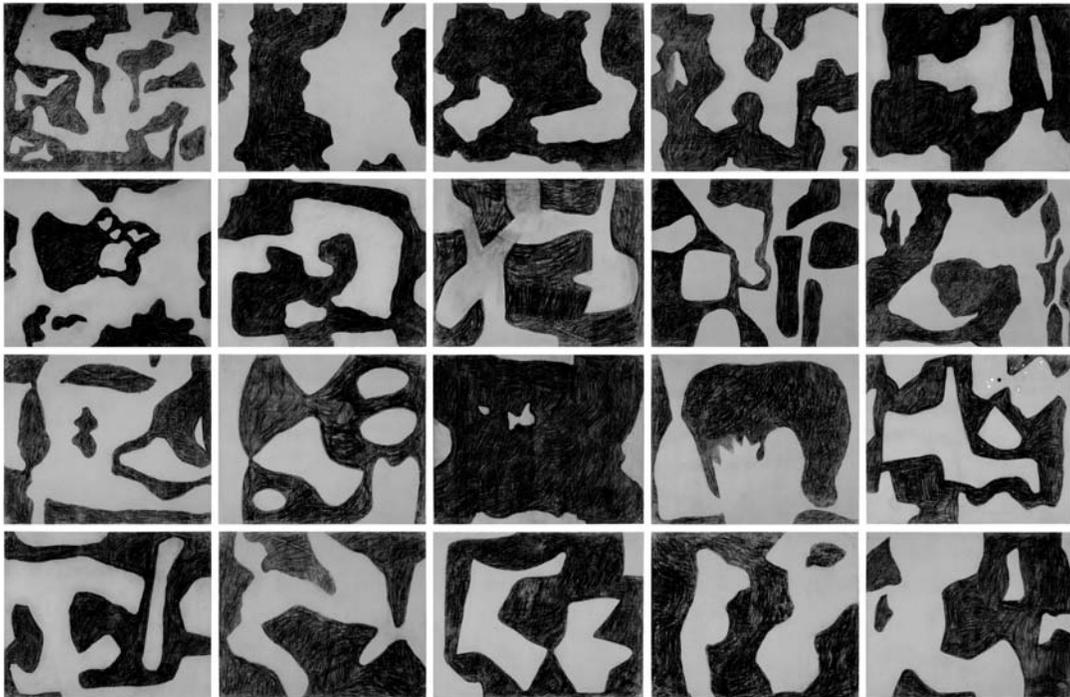
**A Conversation with Bernice Rose, Eileen Costello, and Chelsea Beck**

**PUBLIC PROGRAM**

Text by Chelsea Beck; exhibition curated by Bernice Rose,  
Chief Curator of the Menil Drawing Institute and Study Center

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# TONY SMITH DRAWINGS



THE MENIL COLLECTION

December 17, 2010–April 3, 2011

Cover: Tony Smith, *Untitled*, 1954. Charcoal on paper; 20 sheets, each 3 3/8 x 39 1/4 inches. Courtesy the Tony Smith Estate and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. Photo: Cathy Carver  
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THE MENIL COLLECTION

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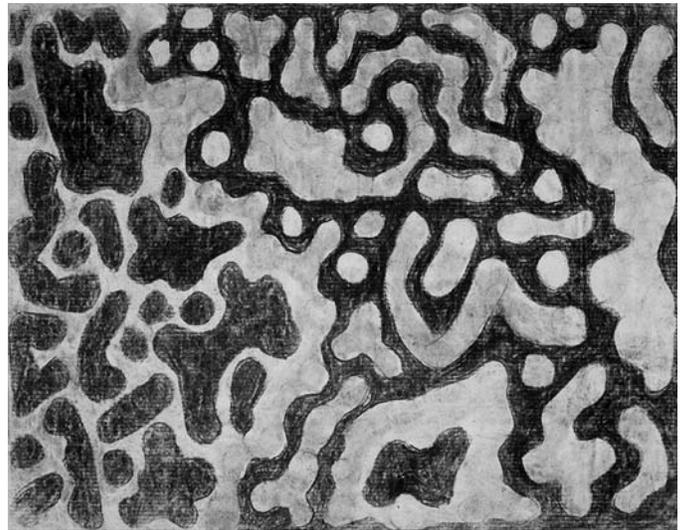
This exhibition brings together a group of rarely exhibited charcoal, pastel, pencil, and ink drawings on paper by the American artist Tony Smith (1912–80). While best known for his geometric sculptures in steel and bronze, Smith worked as an architect through his mid-forties before becoming a painter and then a sculptor. Throughout Smith's multi-faceted career, drawing was the common denominator, functioning as a platform for experimentation, problem solving, and artistic reinvention. He produced his first significant body of drawings between 1953 and 1955 while he was still practicing architecture and before he created his first titled sculpture, *Throne*, 1956–57. Focusing on this particularly fertile period of time as he was transitioning from architect to sculptor, "Tony Smith: Drawings" presents a selection of Smith's early works on paper that are not only artworks in their own right, but also provide insight into the ideas behind his sculptures.

Throughout his protean career, Smith searched for patterns in the physical and visual structure of the world. Studying art, mythology, biology, and mathematics, he looked for a unifying order. The even distribution of weight and tension and the all-over composition of the drawings in this exhibition echo his pursuit of balance. Through the use of biomorphic forms and irregular interlocking shapes produced by linear undulations, the units depicted in these works appear to build upon, suspend, and support one another, creating a sense of organic reproduction.

Later in his career, Smith's sculptures would internalize this sense of expansion and movement through patterns of angular geometric forms that have the potential to branch out and multiply endlessly.

An early example of the artist's interest in the growth of an abstract form through the repetition of geometric shapes is the large twenty-part charcoal drawing *Untitled*, 1954. Each drawing within the larger grid is a modular unit that could ostensibly be placed anywhere within the structure. The work is static, but its immersive scale, staccato rhythm, and swirling archipelagos of black charcoal evoke a sense of expansion. The perspective is similar to an architect's plan view, as if we are looking down onto the drawing from above. In this way, it serves as a map of the overall form and a record of each multi-directional mark. Smith's movement of and around the paper, traced through shifting patches of charcoal crenulations, generates a current that flows into each module of the grid. This implied pulse rhythmically animates the form, charging it with an energy that radiates well beyond the size of the paper.

As the critic and curator Robert Storr wrote about Smith, "He worked small but thought big." His use of rudimentary materials and the sometimes diminutive size of the papers, some only 2½ x 1¾ inches, may at first belie the scope of the drawings. However, it is ultimately a testament to Smith's power as an artist that he is able to create something much



Tony Smith, *Untitled*, 1953–55. Charcoal on paper, 31¾ x 39¼ inches. Collection of Chiara Smith, New York. Photo: Tom Powell

larger than the sum of its parts. His awareness of the physicality of space as defined by the forms within it, a skill honed during his career as an architect, can be seen in the fluid interplay of figure and ground. In some areas of the drawings, the unmarked paper is merely a background or neutral space used to support the lines and marks sitting on its surface. In others, the paper

support leaps to the foreground and the marks and lines appear to recede. Through the manipulation of interlocking shapes, Smith creates an internal structure for the two-dimensional space contained in a sheet of paper. Later, in his sculptures, he took this idea and made it three dimensional, literally creating monumental armatures for space itself. This application can be seen in the artist's three outdoor sculptures on the Menil campus.

The sculptures share a number of formal qualities with Minimalism, including their pristine surfaces, pared-down forms, and lack of color; yet their expansive, animate nature, the roots of which can so clearly be seen in this collection of drawings, mark them as fundamentally different. Smith's sculptures in the greenspace on Loretto Street, located just south of the Menil Collection, are in proximity to the Rothko Chapel, which houses Mark Rothko's expansive and ethereal paintings, and Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk*, 1963–67. The artistic philosophy behind these works and Smith's is closely aligned as well. Smith was friends with Newman as well as other artists associated with Abstract Expressionism, such as Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still. The ethos shared by all of these artists is undeniably present in the formal qualities of the drawings on view, as evidenced by their improvised all-over composition and gestural mark making. Reminiscent of Rothko's search for the sublime in painted color and in light, Smith sought to capture the human experience in geometric order.