

# Leon Polk Smith

*Big Form, Big Space*



The Contemporary Art Gallery presents the first solo exhibition of work by Leon Polk Smith (1906-1996) in a public gallery in Canada.

Leon Polk Smith was an American painter. His lifelong commitment to geometry, shape, brilliant colour and minimal, intense compositions predated, influenced and outlasted the heydays of hard-edge painting and minimalism. While his focus on geometric abstraction was initially influenced by Piet Mondrian and his style often associated with the hard-edge school of which he is considered one of the founders, it is only now that Smith's singular artistic vision has become more fully contextualized beyond formal analysis through a growing sequence of exhibitions surveying the artist's previously understudied background and identity.

Born near Chickasha, Oklahoma a year before it became a state, to parents of mixed Cherokee and settler heritage, Smith grew up in a farming community among the Choctaw and Chickasaw peoples. He graduated from East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma in 1934, before moving to New York City in 1936, where he attended Columbia University. He remained in New York for the rest of his life.

Early on in his time in New York, Smith began to work at the newly-founded Museum of Non-Objective Art (later the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) where he encountered the works of modernists such as Piet Mondrian, Constantin Brancusi and Jean Arp. Smith was captivated by these renderings of geometry and space, this focus on harnessing energy within two-dimensional surfaces would remain a principal concern throughout his career. Much of Smith's work was inspired by the interchangeability between flat, positive and negative space and in using as few elements as possible to create a convincing space, object or motion of optical tension.

Focusing primarily on paintings and works on paper from the 1950s, the exhibition identifies a pivotal moment in the development of Smith's visual language and heralds what was to come in his iconic works from the 1960s and 1970s, characterised by a series of compositions that furthered the move from rectilinear and single-panel works to the use of curvilinear form, shaped canvases and multi-part installations. Reflective both of prevalent trends of the time and an increasing engagement with the contexts of his upbringing and identity, the shift in Smith's practice during this decade evidences a move away from the geometry of his

formative years into works featuring curved, organic, anthropomorphic forms of two colours in dialogue, with a playful wit present in the juxtaposition of shapes and space, and into a use of canvases which were round or other non-standard shapes.

Smith neither downplayed nor foregrounded his cultural background or his identity as a gay man. Indeed, toward the end of his life he seemed more open to seeing his art through such lenses. These facts become interesting moments in which to establish a re-reading of the artist's work from a contemporary standpoint. For example, in the series of untitled collages and paintings on paper from 1955 onwards, we might recognise the fragmented shapes, arcs and interlocking forms as corporeal, arguably most overtly pictured in *Red Petals* (1960). Colours meet against curved edges, forcing us to imagine that which is not seen and complete the interrupted forms beyond the work itself while it simultaneously occupies space to become a thing in the world as both image and object.

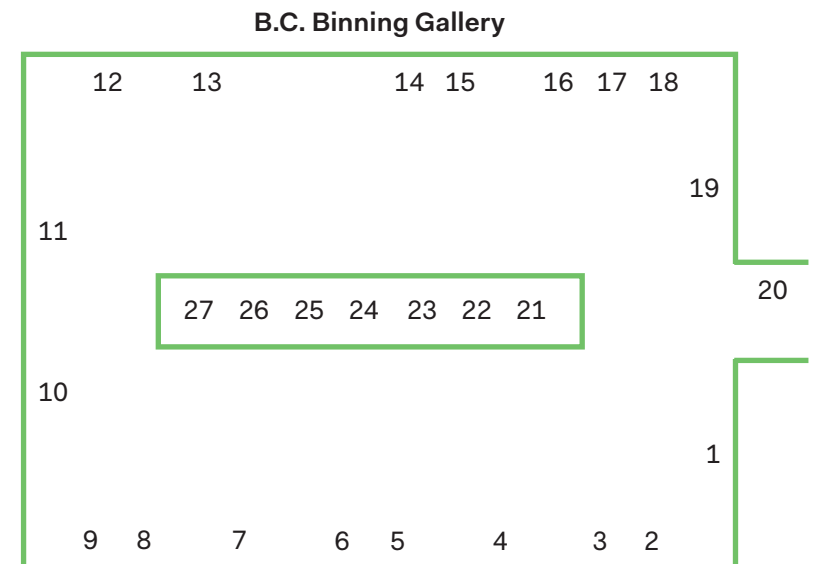
Canvases such as *Stretch of Black No.5* (1954) and *Untitled* (1953) make plain connections to his upbringing amid Indigenous cultures and peoples and how he applied this experience to apparently non-objective "modernist" paintings. Furthermore, the titles, form, palette and composition of paintings such as *Rowell* (1957), *Arizona Heat Wave* (1958) and *Pontotoc* (1958) also firmly place the work in connection to the land, sky and people of the part of the US where he grew up. Smith's refraction of Indigenous and Southwestern experience through these conventions however is not merely echoed in the titles of certain works, but can also be seen in his tondos such as *Black White Repeat with Red No. 2* (1953) which are not simply round canvases but also evocative of the designs and patterns of the Plains tribes.

Comprising around forty works, the exhibition charts the key moment of transformation in Smith's oeuvre and creates a timely opportunity to re-evaluate Smith's place not only within art history but within a contemporary moment. It could be argued the world has caught up with the potential inherent within Smith's work and its embrace of multi-layered meaning rooted in form and space, context and identity.

Nigel Prince,  
Guest Curator

- 1 *untitled*, 1953  
paint on canvas  
31 3/4 x 15 1/2 inches
- 2 *Black Wings*, 1953  
paint on canvas  
23 1/4 inches diameter
- 3 *Black White Repeat with Red No.2*, 1953  
paint on canvas  
11 3/4 inches diameter
- 4 *untitled*, 1955  
oil on paper  
13 x 10 1/2 inches
- 5 *untitled*, 1955  
paper (glossy artist paper) on paper  
29 5/8 x 22 inches
- 6 *untitled*, 1955  
paper on artist paper (embossed)  
29 5/8 x 21 3/4 inches
- 7 *untitled*, 1965  
paper on rice paper  
36 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches
- 8 *untitled*, 1955  
oil on paper  
13 1/4 x 10 1/2 inches
- 9 *untitled*, 1956  
paint on canvasette (paper canvas)  
19 1/2 x 15 1/2
- 10 *Rowell*, 1957  
paint on canvas  
57 inches diameter
- 11 *Stretch of Black No.5*, 1954  
paint on canvas  
40 inches diameter  
Courtesy of Gray, Chicago/New York
- 12 *Twin Forms #2*, 1958  
paint on metal  
18 x 24 1/2 inches

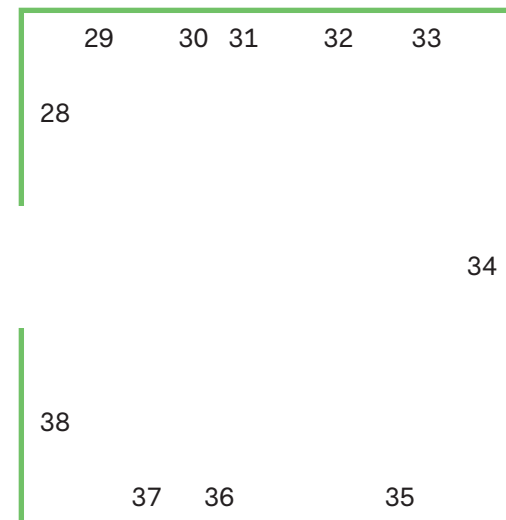
- 13 *Pontotoc*, 1958  
paint on canvas  
48 1/4 inches diameter
- 14 *untitled*, 1957  
paper on paper  
25 5/8 x 19 3/4 inches
- 15 *untitled*, 1957  
paper on paper (embossed)  
25 5/8 x 19 3/4 inches
- 16 *untitled*, 1959  
paper on paper (watermarked and embossed)  
25 1/2 x 19 5/8 inches
- 17 *untitled*, 1958  
heavy stock paper on paper  
25 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches
- 18 *untitled*, 1959  
paper on artist paper (embossed)  
25 5/8 x 19 3/4 inches
- 19 *Red Petals*, 1960  
oil on canvas  
12 inches diameter



- 20** *untitled*, 1956  
gouache on paper  
17 1/2 x 13 inches
- 21** *untitled*, 1945  
paint and pencil on paper  
16 1/4 x 11 1/4 inches
- 22** *untitled*, 1945  
pencil and paint on paper  
15 1/2 x 12 inches
- 23** *untitled*, 1946  
paint on paper  
20 x 15 inches
- 24** *untitled*, 1950  
paint on board  
10 1/8 x 7 7/8 inches
- 25** *untitled*, 1953  
paint on lightweight paper  
17 7/8 x 14 inches
- 26** *untitled*, 1957  
paper on cardboard  
11 1/2 x 10 3/8 inches
- 27** *untitled*, 1957  
recycled decorative paper on paper  
14 x 10 3/4 inches
- 28** *untitled*, 1956  
paper on paper (manilla)  
27 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches
- 29** *untitled*, 1961  
paint on canvasette (paper canvas)  
23 5/8 x 18 7/8 inches
- 30** *untitled*, 1961  
paint on canvasette (paper canvas)  
20 x 16 inches
- 31** *untitled*, 1960  
paint on canvasette (paper canvas)  
20 x 16 inches

- 32** *untitled*, 1960  
paint on canvasette (paper canvas)  
20 x 16 inches
- 33** *untitled*, 1960  
paper on paper  
20 1/2 x 13 3/8 inches
- 34** *Arizona Heat Wave*, 1958  
oil on canvas  
55 x 74 inches  
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, gift of Ian Davidson
- 35** *Red Blue Orange Ellipses*, 1961  
paint on canvas  
47 1/2 inches diameter
- 36** *untitled*, 1962  
paper on paper (watermarked and embossed)  
29 5/8 x 21 5/8 inches
- 37** *untitled*, 1958  
paper on paper  
25 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches
- 38** *untitled*, 1962  
paint on cardboard (from artist pad)  
23 7/8 x 19 inches

**Alvin Balkind Gallery**



May 14 – August 22, 2021

Cover image: Leon Polk Smith, *untitled*, 1959, paper on paper (watermarked and embossed), 25 1/2 x 19 5/8 inches.

All works courtesy of the Leon Polk Smith Foundation unless otherwise stated.