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SMALLEY, David Allen

ART; Blend of Sculpture and Technology In the Abstract and Real World

By William Zimmer

DAVID SMALLEY has stuck close to New London during his career. Since 1995 he has taught sculpture at Connecticut College. But his work and its associations are exceptionally wide-ranging. His absorbing retrospective at the Lyman Allyn Museum, through Nov. 16, consists of 68 sculptures, opening with work from 1959. It clearly traces the path of his art ever since.

Mr. Smalley is abstractionist, but he deliberately incorporates references to the real world in his work. Outside events have often determined a piece. An early decorative work from the 50's is a fish whose scales are discrete squares of metal. But in 1965 he hit his stride with "Rolling Power" abstracted from a photograph of train wheels by Charles Sheeler. This gleaming work with its pronounced rivets owes much to Futurism.

Barbara Zabel, a professor of art history at Connecticut College whose specialty is technology in art, is able to establish in her catalogue essay that the optimism characteristically associated with technology in America was one of Mr. Smalley's earliest impulses. It may have receded in his work during the 1970's, but has now returned in an unexpected form.

The wood sculptures Mr. Smalley made in the late 1960's and early 70's have, in Ms. Zabel's words "fortress-like forms." Their all-over somberness is a reaction to the war in Vietnam.

In contrast to the metal pieces that reflect light, wood absorbs light. In Ms. Zabel's words, "the industrial esthetic has been turned inside out."

Good artists are always unpredictable. Rusted metal was the major material Mr. Smalley appropriated for his next series of works, which refer to his Jewish heritage. These pieces in numbered series called Hasid and Dybbuk play the free forms of the rusted scrap metal off against geometric forms. This contrast between fixed and free has

In Jewish lore a dybbuk is an evil spirit, and in Mr. Smalley's incarnation it has rather shapely goatlike legs as devils often do. These legs might be seen as leading into the next major phase, based on bodies of dancers. Mr. Smalley used direct methods of cutting and welding to realize their gestures and curves. In the history of art the undulating forms of the human body have been identified with landscape, so it is no surprise that landscape and natural elements became a lasting preoccupation.

Wind is one such element, and projecting parts of many sculptures are balanced so that they move. This is territory thoroughly mined by Alexander Calder and George Rickey, but most of Mr. Smalley's kinetic works have very recognizable natural associations. Spontaneously cut-out shapes become rippled clouds, but in "Shell Duo" of 1984, a pair of stainless steel projections become both racing skulls and the water on which they glide.

Mr. Smalley has always made large work, and for the retrospective many of these pieces have been reunited on the grounds of the museum. Abstract sculpture placed outdoors has become a commonplace sight in America, and often an abstract work is chosen for a site because it seems non-committal, neutral and therefore unlikely to offend

many people. After becoming acquainted with the range and depth of Mr. Smalley's art inside the museum, the work outside seems especially bold and full of personality.

Since the late 1980's Mr. Smalley has been working in an entirely new way, but has been able to integrate this departure into the body of work he has made up to now. He designs pieces entirely on a computer, which gives him greater flexibility and fluidity. Ms. Zabel observes, "What we sense in Smalley's new work is that an 'old' machine technology, which served as an analogue of the human body, has been replaced with a new technology, which functions as an extension of the human brain." And brains are given to dreaming.

Some of the most recent works are "lenticular transparencies," flat pictures like holograms, and in them Mr. Smalley creates a wide pictorial space for his forms, like the space of Surrealism. He doesn't entirely let go of his past history of industrial physicality, however. These transparencies have elaborate steel frames.

The drawings that sculptors make either when they are ruminating before building or after the fact, or even as work independent of a sculpture, can bear little surface resemblance to the their work in three-dimensions. In preparing for his series of pliant figures, for example, Mr. Smalley sketched the bodies of actual dancers. At the two galleries in the Cummings Art Center of Connecticut College in New London, through Friday, are several examples of tantalizing sculptors' drawings where the relationship to their major work might also at first seem tangential.