

Smith's early work splendid

David Smith: The Formative Years
Edmonton Art Gallery
Jan. 16 - Mar. 1

Review by Julies Halliday

Last November, when the Edmonton Art Gallery presented the *Five Colours of the Universe* show, (an exhibition of clothes and fabrics of the Ch'ing Dynasty) they not only presented a show of exceptional merit, but they also established a precedent of high quality in exhibitions. It is gratifying to see that this level of quality has been maintained into the New Year with the exhibition *David Smith: The Formative Years*.

Rather than examining Smith's later, well known steel sculpture like the *Voltri* or *Zig* series of the 60's or the even more familiar *Cubi* series, the gallery has chosen to concentrate on Smith's work of the 30's and 40's - the drawings and sculpture (in bronze, steel and combinations of metals) of his formative years.

No better introduction to modern sculpture could be given to Edmontonians than this show by an artist whose influence has been so pervasive in the 20th century. In the early 30's Smith was influenced by the metal constructions of Picasso and Gonzalez. The influence of Miro and Giacometti is also evident from the work in this show. However, Smith's images tend to be more brutal or coarse than those of his European counterparts, and in fact Smith considered this crudeness to be one of the greatest virtues of his sculpture and of American sculpture in general.

Much of the work in this exhibition has a curious pictorial quality which is present even in Smith's later work. This creates a unique dichotomy between the front view of a sculpture, which is

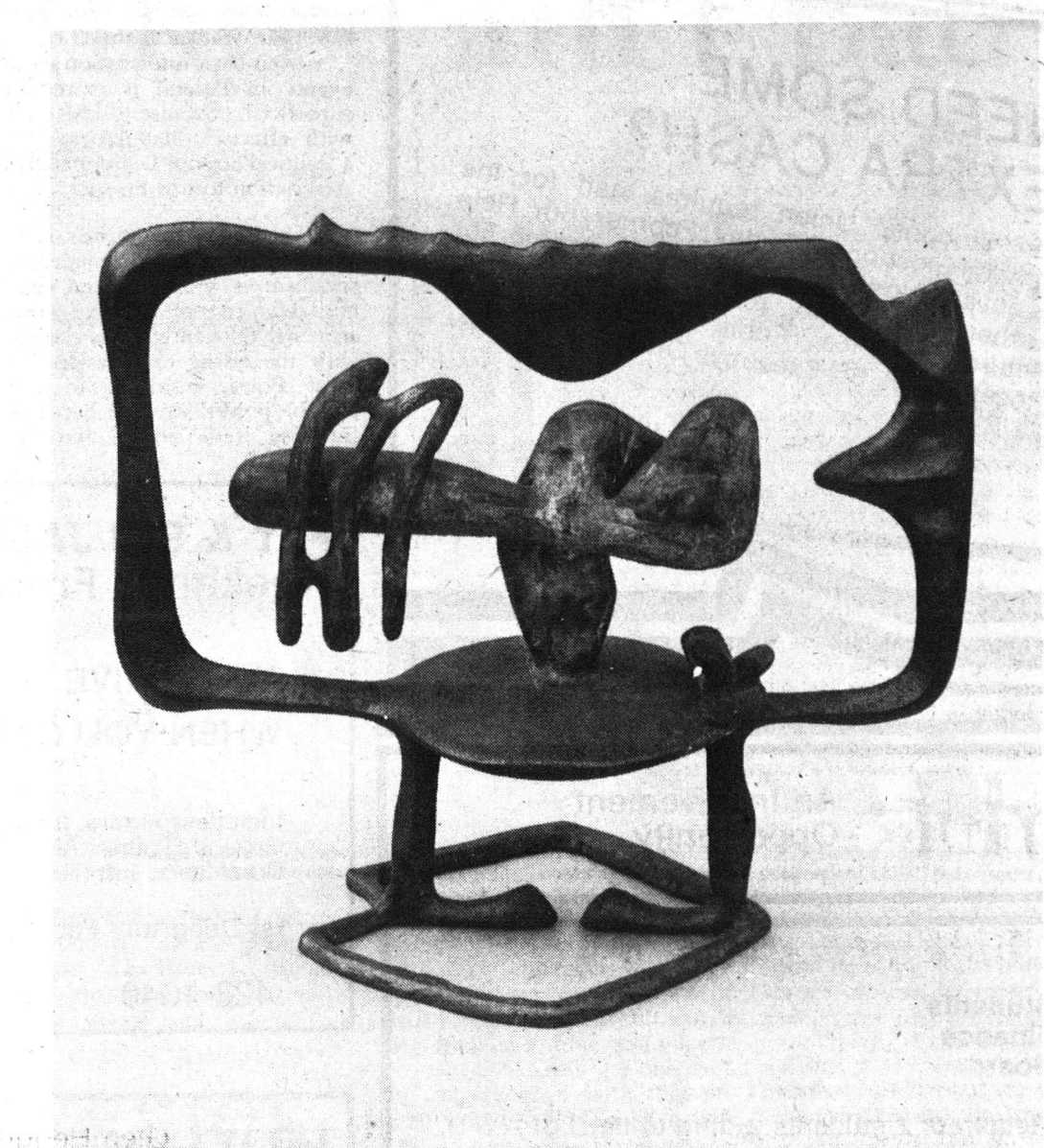
presented in much the same way as a painting, and the side view, which is so thin it almost disappears.

The exhibition presents a considerable amount of motifs which anticipate Smith's later, mature explorations; for example, the winged cannon/phallus image in *Head as a Still Life*, *Royal Incubator* and some smaller bronzes. Also familiar is the totem image exemplified by *Pillar of Sunday*. Despite the unparalleled sensitivity to the material which Smith's work display, these pieces of the 30's and 40's have none of the literalism of image with respect to scale, which is an integral and innovative part of Smith's mature work.

Anticipation of Smith's further efforts is not the exhibition's only merit. Sculptures like *Reliquary House* and *Portrait of the Eagle's Keeper* represent a unique combination of surrealist imagery and constructive sensitivity which manifests itself in the brilliant orchestration of elements which make up the sculpture.

In contrast, the drawings (especially those from Smith's sketch book) exist in a supplementary relationship to the sculpture. Rather than having much formal worth of their own, the drawings are more often only valuable for gaining additional understanding of Smith's realization of the images in his sculptures.

In conjunction with the exhibition we are fortunate to have a series of lectures on David Smith and his work. On Saturday, January 17, Karen Wilkin, the curator of the David Smith show, (she is also largely responsible for the success of the *Five Colours* show) gave a lecture on the sculpture and drawings included in this exhibition. Saturday, the 24th, at 2:00, Peter Hide, a local



David Smith's *Head as a Still Life*.

sculptor and instructor in the Fine Arts Department at the U of A will give a lecture entitled *David Smith and Sculpture of the 80's*. Saturday, the 31st at 2:00, the Director of the Edmonton Art

Gallery, Terry Fenton, will speak about the background and influences of David Smith.

A final coup in the lecture series will be the lecture by New York art critic, Phyllis Tuchman

entitled, *David Smith: Portrait of the Eagle's Keeper and Other Sculpture*, on Tuesday, February 24 at 8:00 PM. The lecture series, like the exhibition itself, is free to the public.

photo Donald Clinton

Notes on two American observers

by Jens Andersen

On Mencken
Ed. John Dorsey
Knopf 1980

It seems that the only noteworthy person who

remembered Mencken's 100th birthday was the cartoonist Aislin, who displayed a photo of the Sage of Baltimore prominently and reverently on the back cover of his most recent book *180 Caricatures*.

Some of the Menckenophiles assembled here to honor him are competent enough, but even the best of them, like Alfred Knopf, pale next to Mencken himself. Thus one finds oneself avidly

reading Carl Bode's selection of Mencken's letters and skimming past Bode's eulogy. Or revelling in William Manchester's selections from Mencken's *Days* autobiography, yet laughing at Manchester's sweeping and melodramatic theory that Mencken was fearful of change (Manchester probably forgot that it was Mencken who almost single-handedly pole-axed the genteel Victorian tradition in literature, and who wrote a fulsome hymn to the common thermostat which would be an eye-opener to anyone who has never manually operated a furnace.)

Also, it is disconcerting to note, in a supposedly introductory book, unexplained allusions to events unknown to the average reader, as when Alfred Knopf vaguely refers to Burton Rascoe's role in the controversy over the *Smart Set* anthology. Only someone already acquainted with the history of the case would understand the passage.

For anyone interested in having their intellectual virginity blown by Mencken, without help from a bunch of dull professors, the place to start is still *The Mencken Chrestomathy*. In fact, I wonder why the *Chrestomathy* wasn't reissued instead of the present mish-mash. Or why someone didn't dig into the

goldmine of newspaper clippings and unpublished materials that Mencken never got between book covers. A few such volumes have already been compiled (for example, *Mencken's Last Campaign* and *A Gang of Pecksniffs*) and the results make one hunger for more.

NO
PHOTO
AVAILABLE

We're Not Out of the Woods Yet
G.B. Trudeau
Bantam 1980

Is there anyone here who is unfamiliar with *Doonesbury*? Is there anyone who doesn't consider the cartoon strip to be a bright spot in the dreariness of daily existence?

If you answered yes to either question, help is available from Student Counseling, first door on the left.

Popeye sails rough seas

POPEYE

Paramount/Walt Disney Production
directed by Robert Altman

review by Wes Oginski

Popeye opens with the hero, Popeye, struggling through the ups and downs of a stormy high seas. Robert Altman's musical comedy is much the same for the audience, left struggling through the ups and downs.

A highlight of the film is Robin Williams' portrayal of Popeye. Williams vitalizes a character who has charmed children for fifty years. From the two dimensional drawing boards of King Features, Popeye is given depth in the movie. Accompanying Williams' performance is Shelly Duvall, who was born to play the part of Olive Oyl.

But the movie slumps from there. This is an original screen play by Jules Feiffer, a contributor to an original cartoon version *Popeye*.

The plot revolves around Popeye's search for his "Pappy", who left him as a child. While in Sweet Haven, the setting of the film, all of the comic characters are introduced, Bluto (Paul Smith), Poopdeck Pappy (Ray Walston), Wimpy (Paul Dooley) and Swee Pea.

Eventually the introduction of all these characters creates a mish-mash of sub-plots in the middle of the film, waiting to be tied together in the end.

Offsetting this is Altman's devotion to detail, in both setting and character. Details spring the world of Popeye to life. The costumes, the buildings, and the characters are straight from the comics. This is exemplified by Williams as Popeye; his forearms are bulgy, his eye is squinty, and he talks out of the side of his mouth.

But Altman's details can detract from his film. Since Williams does talk from the side of his mouth at all times, it takes the audience the first five minutes

of the film to adjust to his voice.

However, these errors are little annoyances compared to the real letdown of *Popeye*. A major fault is the music and lyrics by Harvey Nilsson. A musical based on the cartoon *Popeye* should try to maintain the buoyant spirit of the original.

Unfortunately Nilsson chooses to take a slow paced, two or three line ditty approach. This slow pace is dreary and creates a gloomy atmosphere. This is not the original *Popeye*.

Something is wrong when the most lively tune in the film is "I'm Popeye, the Sailorman", a left-over from the cartoon version.

Altman shows many of his strengths and weaknesses as a director in *Popeye*. Unfortunately for the audience, the weaknesses outweigh the strengths. *Popeye* is only for Altman fans or fans of the comic strip itself.