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Modernism Now: David Smith and David Hayes

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By Marcus Civin

Now on view at the BMA, Modernist sculptor David Smith's "Dida Gondola, 1964," completed a year before the artist died, is a painted steel freestanding sculpture, a brushy black-and-white. Undoubtedly heavy, but relatively thin-looking, the sculpture appears to balance on the strength of two base-welds. Two wheel feet at the bottom support a rectangle roughly nine times their size. Two C-shapes interlock to outline a large, sideways, empty eye at the center-top of the rectangle. Picture a misprinted, oversized club in a deck of huge playing cards; picture a tall toy car built from scraps. The car is flattened but somehow still poised, ready to float along.

In Annapolis, at St. Johns—a small liberal arts college 40 minutes south of Baltimore—there is a fine gem of a Modernist art gallery: the Mitchell Art Gallery, designed by California modernist architect Richard Neutra. It is a perfect gallery: one not-too-small room and one not-too-large room; floor-to-ceiling corner windows let in natural light; shiny wood floor and warm marble exterior walls are assured, precise but quiet.

Through February 17, the Mitchell hosts the exhibit David Hayes: A Sculptor of Space and Nature. Hayes, born in 1931, a Connecticut sculptor who studied with David Smith at Indiana University, still works in the tradition of his teacher. When Smith wasn't making his own sculptures, he taught his students that sculpture should emerge from a deep human rumbling indebted to nothing, reckoning with nothing except maybe Bible-age columns and grand, natural vistas.

Modernism is history. Likely, now we are postmodern or post-postmodern, some rising legion of google-ized gorgons. Perhaps the cultural froth we inhabit is yet to be aptly named. In Annapolis, Hayes exhibits sketchbooks, studies, forged steel, ceramics, stained glass and outdoor sculptures that demonstrate a box-of-crayons whimsy and a hard-scrabble compositional command of Modernist lessons. Lines and planes wrestle, jut and polyamorously squam-squiggle. Shapes appear to vibrate off of their neighbor shapes.

My favorite pieces are the maquettes—small-scale, paint-gloppy steel models for larger pieces. I'd be happy with just these small ones. But then, I didn't come up in a Modernist house, I came up outrunning ghosts in Ms. Pac-man. It's hard for me to acclimate to the rough goad of Modernism, to understand it from my peculiar post-postmodern position. For me, there is a comedy in these sort of heavy maquettes. Picture a clump of turtles on tippie-toes; picture a stocking full of flapping starfish.

Is it possible to rip some of these objects away from their history and bring them into the present? Perhaps it is possible to let the maquettes exist separately from their in-betweenness on the trajectory: drawing leads to model leads to large outdoor sculpture. On their own, neither here nor there, these small things would be provisional, more self-conscious, more everyday. They might eventually disperse; they might have to relate to less-than-ideal contexts.

The overlapped Smith-Hayes-Neutra aesthetic in Annapolis is troublesome. It is as if no time has passed at all since 1965. Not that there isn't still more to learn from different Modernisms, or that everyone feels a responsibility to interact with the tribulations of our time, but without scaring up some kind of relevant contemporary human pulse, these spatial constructions, evidence of fidelity to a past radical aesthetic, delightful as they may be... they are history pieces or homages to history pieces, playful mutes, retrograde.