

Art in Review

Leon Polk Smith

'Forms and Functions'

Washburn

20 West 57th Street, Manhattan
Through March 5

Spaces and their boundaries fascinated the hard-edge abstractionist Leon Polk Smith (1906-1996), and in this show of his biomorphic paintings from the 1950's his elegantly calculated contrivance of one space impinging on another pleasingly asks the eye to tease out figure-ground relationships.

In the small painting "Blue Black 'S,'" a curvaceous Yin of blue and a twin Yang of black divide the canvas, or is it a Yang of blue and a Yin of black? "Expanse" can be read as two black curves, squared off at sides and bottom, thrust apart by a fat white circular form that bleeds off the canvas at top and bottom; or as two black curved forms muscling in on the fat white one.

In "Over Easy," part of a big, roughly heart-shaped figure of mauve thrusts onto a black ground at an angle; or is it the curvy black space that cuts into the aggressor?

In a nice ploy on the gallery's part, these clean, flat surfaces, each restricted to two colors, are shown with examples of sleek, minimal, contoured furniture by front-line designers of the period: Arne Jacobsen (Denmark), Bruno Mathsson (Sweden), and the Americans George Nelson, Charles and Ray Eames and Isamu Noguchi.

While not derived from Smith's canvases (nor was his work derived from theirs), the biomorphic shapes of the furniture and in the paintings are remarkably similar. Noguchi's coffee table has a rounded glass triangle as a top supported by two irregular curves, one at right angles to the other.

Colors relate, too. Jacobsen's "Egg Chair," upholstered in deep orange over foam, cradles the body in a supportive nest made by deep hard-edged curves. The saucy curves of the Eames "LCW," the feisty little all-purpose black chair, circa 1950, would not be ill at ease in a Smith painting. And his "After 'First One'" of 1954, a silver circle partly bounded by a black ring (or a part circle resting on a full one), looks quite at home with the familiar Eames "Kik-Step Stool," introduced in 1957 and here shown in silver and black.

GRACE GLUECK