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ART REVIEW

David Smith's *Anti-Medals*

By HOLLAND COTTER

The American artist David Smith (1906-1965) was a busy man in the 1930's. He not only worked hard to forge a major abstract sculptural style, but also produced one of the more intriguing examples of political figurative art to emerge from the prewar period.

"Medals for Dishonor" was the title he gave to a series of 15 small cast-metal narrative reliefs on antiwar themes that he completed between 1937 and 1940. Densely symbolic, bitterly satirical in tone, they were created in off hours, at night and on weekends, using such unorthodox media as dentist's drills and jeweler's tools. And the results may have been cast in part from melted-down family silver belonging to his wife, Dorothy Dehner.

All of the medallions are on view, for the first time since the early 1940's, in an in-depth, carefully researched show installed on two floors of the Matthew Marks Gallery on Madison Avenue. Organized by the Henry Moore Center for the Study of Sculpture at the City Art Galleries of Leeds, England, the exhibition includes both a wide array of sketchbook studies for the medals and news photos and medical textbook illustrations that Smith used as sources for his unsettling images.

The meanings of those images are not easy to grasp at a glance. Smith spent 1935-36 in Europe, where he saw the rise of Nazism and the approach of World War II. Like many American leftists who came of age in the Great Depression, he at

first viewed the war as a product of global corporate greed: it was a rich man's fight in which capitalist America, like fascist Germany, was already ideologically implicated and could redeem itself only by refraining from direct participation.

This political view helps to account for the seemingly incongruous jumble of themes — from Ku Klux Klan vigilantes to bombed European hospital boats — that make up Smith's antiwar, anti-fascist, often anti-American vision. It was only when the horrific realities of Soviet Communism under Stalin were revealed in the 1940's that Smith, like many of his colleagues in the art world, saw the war in a different light and retreated, chastened, from his Popular Front stance.

Whatever the details of their period politics, however, the visual impact and ethical urgency of the reliefs remain strong. In format, they were modeled on World War I French and German propaganda medals that the artist saw in the British Museum. Smith updated his images, however, to reflect more recent examples of germ warfare and genocide (Guernica, the Basque capital, was leveled the year he began the series), as well as the bellicose rumblings emerging from such interested parties as the American weapons industry.

Smith's didactic subjects take fire in his jam-packed compositions and his vivid expressionist style. His early training as a cartoonist comes through in the brisk, flippant sketches for the medal "War Exempt Sons of the Rich." His exposure to the Social Realism of W.P.A.-era painting is evident in "Death by Bacteria," with its smoothly modeled Big Brother hands holding test tubes. And apparent everywhere is his debt to Surrealism, the ubiquitous style during Smith's European sojourn.

All of these factors are at the service of highly charged images. "Munition Makers" is a danse macabre of gun-toting skeletons; "Death by Gas," a manic mélange of

plucked chickens and giant peach pits. "Reaction in Medicine" has a labyrinthine hospital operating room doubling as a morgue, and in the ghastly "Bombing Civilian Populations" a woman stands with her womb cut open to reveal a fetus.

Throughout, eroticism and violence are often interchangeable, and the world depicted has the hallucinatory squalor of a Bosch landscape.

In these bronzes, each of which is less than a foot wide, narrative details are often hard to make out. Smith provided short statements explaining each medal, but for sheer visual legibility the drawings included in the exhibition prove invaluable. In them, one sees not only compositions in progress, but also the final versions executed to the last detail in Smith's firm if stylistically changeable hand.

For the drawings and medals alike are unquestionably the work of an artist in transition, sifting through influences from Picasso to Grosz to popular illustration. As a result, the works vary in effectiveness, going from an ingeniously fluid emblem of press censorship to a clunky neo-classicizing indictment of prostitution. While there is much to admire, there is no point in claiming that this material represents Smith at his best. Had he stopped working at this point, his career would have earned barely a footnote in the history books.

But the medals are fascinating, nonetheless. They offer a retrospective lens on sinuous half-abstract and abstract forms Smith subsequently produced: he really was always a draftsman and painter who happened to have turned his attention decisively to sculpture. And the medals have an ethical intensity that corresponds to much art being produced today.



Matthew Marks Gallery

"Munition Makers," a bronze work from David Smith's "Medals for Dishonor" series.

The themes of "Medals for Dishonor" — racism, sexual violence, the mutilated body, disease and mortality, all shot through with a dark humor — are precisely those found in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial of two years ago, and the way they were dealt with by America's greatest postwar sculptor was as graphic and angry as anything in that controversial show. What goes around comes around, as the saying has it, and Smith's images of war as the symptom of deeper political disease still make sense.

"David Smith: Medals for Dishonor, 1937-1940" remains at Matthew Marks Gallery, 1018 Madison Avenue (near 79th Street), through Jan. 28.