

WILLIAM F. JEFFETT

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11 May 1985

Mr. Leon Polk Smith
31 Union Square West
New York 10003

Dear Mr. Smith,

Enclosed is a copy of the transcript of the interview as I have edited it. I have sent a copy of this to Howard Smith, the editor of Issue.

I trust that you will find it to your liking; however, if there are any changes you would like to make please get in touch with Howard Smith.

I will be leaving the East Coast in the next week and will be able to be reached through the above address, although I will be in Europe by the end of the month. If there are any problems or questions please communicate them with Howard Smith.

He would like to get a reproduction of one of your paintings to use with the interview. In addition I will send on the photographs I took and leave it up to him to choose which are best.

I enjoyed meeting you and seeing your beautiful studio. Thank you for taking the time for the interview. I trust everything is to your liking. Best wishes. Yours Sincerely,

William F. Jeffett
William F. Jeffett

called May 20 - He will call early in June after a few weeks of vacation.
Howard Smith or: Rd. 3, Box 405G
110 Read Street Pine Bush, NY 12566
NYC 10013 (914)647-8693
(212)964-0268

I called June 24 - 9:45A.

wife(?) said she would leave message for him to call back.

*maybe Monday
to call June 30*

LEON POLK SMITH BORN 1906

WJ HOW HAS YOUR ATTITUDE CHANGED OVER YOUR CAREER?

LPS I THINK MY ATTITUDE CONCERNING MY ART, CONCERNING CREATIVITY, HAS NOT CHANGED. I ALWAYS FELT THAT I WAS PAINTING FOR MYSELF. I'M NOT SO UNIQUE THAT OTHER PEOPLE CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M DOING. IF I UNDERSTAND AND LIKE IT, THERE MUST BE OTHER PEOPLE WHO WILL. I HAVE ALWAYS HAD COMPLETE FAITH IN MY INTUITION AND UNCONSCIOUS TO FEED MY MIND AND GIVE ME IDEAS-- I'VE NEVER QUESTIONED THAT. THAT HAS BEEN THE SAME ALL THE WAY THROUGH. THE LAST PERSON WHO GAVE ME AN IDEA ABOUT ART WAS MONDRIAN, WHOSE WORK I WAS INTRODUCED TO IN 1936. THE THINGS I THOUGHT WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT IN MONDRIAN'S WORK WERE HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE INTERCHANGABILITY OF FORM AND SPACE, FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND. BUT I NEVER WANTED TO BE A PAINTER A LA MONDRIAN. I WAS MERELY STARTING THERE. ONE MUST START SOMEWHERE. AN ARTIST DOESN'T START IN A VACUUM? WHICH VACUUM? WHO KNOWS?

WJ HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR CURRENT ART AND THE ART OVER THE PERIOD OF YOUR CAREER RELATING TO CONTEMPORARY ART?

LPS THERE HAS BEEN A WIDE INFLUENCE OF MY WORK SINCE THE EARLY 50'S HERE AND IN EUROPE. I HAD A DEALER IN STUTTGART WHO TOLD ME THERE WAS A LEON POLK SMITH SCHOOL OF ART IN SOUTHERN GERMANY. NOT AN INSTITUTION, BUT MANY ARTIST'S INFLUENCED BY MY WORK.

IN THE 50'S AFTER I HAD LEFT THE VERY GEOMETRIC STRAIGHT LINE PAINTING OF THE 40'S I WAS PRACTICALLY THE ONLY ARTIST WORKING IN THE HARD-EDGE MANNER. AND OTHER ARTISTS KNEW THAT. ONE TIME NICHOLAS KRUSHENICK CALLED ME AND HE SAID, "I KNOW SOMEONE WHO HAS STARTED WORKING IN YOUR DIRECTION."

I SAID, "WHO IS THAT?" AND HE SAID, "AL HELD." THEN I WAS NO LONGER EXACTLY ALONE. AND WITHIN THE YEAR KRUSHENICK STARTED WORKING IN THAT DIRECTION. AND ABOUT THE SAME TIME, I GUESS IT WAS 1955 APPROXIMATELY, A NUMBER OF PEOPLE STARTED WORKING IN THIS STYLE. ELLSWORTH KELLY, FOR INSTANCE, CALLED ME AND SAID, "I'M AN ART STUDENT WHO JUST RETURNED FROM PARIS, AND I SAW YOUR WORK REPRODUCED IN ART AUJOURD'HUI. I WAS INFLUENCED BY IT, AND I WOULD LIKE TO COME TO YOUR STUDIO." WELL, HE CAME, SEVERAL TIMES. AND HE BROUGHT WITH HIM, ROBERT INDIANA, JACK YOUNGERMAN AND SEVERAL OTHER ARTISTS. THEY WERE ALL INFLUENCED BY MY WORK. I KNOW WHEN I FIRST SAW ROBERT INDIANA'S WORK HE WAS DOING HUGE, BIG ROUND PRIMITIVE HEADS IN MUDDY COLORS. HE CALLED ME AGAIN ABOUT SIX MONTHS LATER AND ASKED ME TO COME TO HIS STUDIO AGAIN. HE HAD MOVED TO A NEW STUDIO AND IN THE BASEMENT THERE WERE STENCILS, LEFT BY SOME ADVERTISING AND COMMERCIAL ARTISTS WHO WORKED THERE BEFORE. HE STARTED USING THOSE STENCILS FOR LETTERS AND NUMBERS AND GEOMETRIC SHAPES IN HIS PAINTINGS. I TOLD HIM I LIKED WHAT HE WAS DOING, "IT'S VERY EXCITING__GO RIGHT ON WITH IT." TODAY SOME OF THE FORMS AND SHAPES BEING USED I HAD USED IN THE 40'S AND 50'S AND 60'S. AS FAR AS I KNOW I DID THE FIRST SHAPED CANVASES IN THE MID-50'S.

WJ TED CASTLE HAS CALLED YOUR WORK "SELF-REFERENTIAL." IS THAT A FAIR CHARACTERIZATION OF YOUR WORK?

LPS IN MY UNDERSTANDING OF THE TERM, ALL ABSTRACT ART IS "SELF-REFERENTIAL". OTHERWISE IT IS EITHER ABSTRACTION OR REPRESENTATIONAL. ONE OF MY MAIN INTERESTS IN ART AS A STUDENT WAS SPACE--AND HAS CONTINUED ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING ELEMENTS OF ART TO ME. WHAT IS THE ARTIST'S CONCEPT OF SPACE AND HOW DOES HE USE IT. AND THAT'S FROM CAVE PAINTINGS ON. CERTAINLY I FOUND A NEW WAY OF USING IT FROM MONDRIAN'S WORK AND THAT GAVE ME A BASIS FOR THE DEPTH OF FEELING THAT I HAD FOR SPACE__HAVING GROWN UP ON THE PLAINS OF OKLAHOMA.

WJ TO WHAT EXTENT HAS THE SOUTHWEST BEEN A FACTOR IN YOUR ART?

LPS IF I HADN'T BEEN BORN AND RAISED ON THE PLAINS I DON'T KNOW HOW MY WORK WOULD HAVE COME ABOUT. IT'S FULL OF THAT OPEN SPACE AND THE BIG SKY FEELING WHICH IS A MISSING ELEMENT IN SOME ARTISTS WORK WHO WERE INFLUENCED BY MY PAINTINGS.

WJ WHAT HAS SUSTAINED YOU OVER THE PERIOD OF YOUR CAREER?

LPS YOU MEAN THE SPIRIT OR FORCE THAT HAS KEPT ME GOING?

WJ YES.

LPS WELL I FELT VERY STRONGLY WITHIN A FEW WEEKS AFTER I HAD DISCOVERED ART AT EAST CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA THAT I HAD ALWAYS BEEN AN ARTIST. AND I DON'T KNOW IF THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN ANY WAY OF LIVING WITHOUT USING IT. THAT WAS REALLY ME, THE ARTIST. AS IF I WERE MADE AND PUT HERE FOR THAT PURPOSE, THEN OF COURSE, I HAD TO DO IT, THE SAME AS BREATHING. I COULDN'T STOP PAINTING, I COULDN'T STOP CREATING. I NEVER PAINTED UNLESS I HAD TO. I NEVER FELT THAT JUST BECAUSE I WAS AN ARTIST I HAD TO HAVE SET HOURS EVERYDAY TO PAINT. THERE ARE SO MANY THINGS TO DO.

WJ DO YOU SEE ORGANIC AND GEOMETRIC ABSTRACT PAINTING AS HAVING COMMON SOURCES OF INSPIRATION?

LPS I CERTAINLY DON'T KNOW THE SOURCE OF INSPIRATION. NOW A LANDSCAPE OR PORTRAIT PAINTER KNOWS THE SOURCE OF HIS INSPIRATION. COULD I SAY THE SOURCE OF MY INSPIRATION IS STRAIGHT LINES, CURVED LINES, GEOMETRIC FORMS, ANGLES, SPACE, COLOR? I SUPPOSE THE SOURCE OF MY INSPIRATION IS LIKELY SPACE: SPACE AND COLOR AND MOVEMENT. AND MY OWN PAINTINGS.

WJ DO YOU SEE YOUNG ARTISTS MOVING IN THE DIRECTION OF ABSTRACTION, EITHER GEOMETRIC OR ORGANIC?

LPS THERE ARE ALWAYS A CERTAIN PERCENTAGE OF ARTISTS WHO ARE DRAWN TOWARD ABSTRACTION--ORGANIC ABSTRACTION OR THE PURELY GEOMETRIC CONSTRUCTIVIST SORT OF ABSTRACT PAINTING--AND THERE ARE ALWAYS ARTISTS WHO WANT TO PAINT AS NATURALIST-

ICALLY AS POSSIBLE, OTHERS WANT TO PAINT IN A VERY EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIONISTIC MANNER. THE PROPORTION OF ARTISTS WORKING IN EITHER WAY IS ALWAYS CHANGING, BUT NO MOVEMENT REALLY DIES. BUT IN ANY DIRECTION THERE ARE ONLY A FEW WHO ADD SOMETHING NEW. AND WHAT IS BEING PRESENTED NOW, THE BIG WAVE OF EXPRESSIONISM, I SEE LITTLE THAT IS NEW. WHAT AND WHERE DOES NEWNESS COME FROM? IS IT A NEW TECHNIQUE? OR IS IT A NEW ATTITUDE OF MIND? INTUITION? THERE ARE MANY PAINTERS BUT FEWER ARTISTS. "TALENT IS NOT ENOUGH; IT TAKES GENIUS TO MAKE A GREAT WORK OF ART."

WJ WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE MOST PROMISING TREND AMONG YOUNG ARTISTS?

LPS I THINK THE MOST PROMISING THING IS THE WHOLE THING. I LIKE THE IDEA THAT A YOUNG PAINTER CAN PAINT IN ANY DIRECTION THAT HE CAN THINK, FEEL, OR IMAGINE. AND IF HE'S GOOD HE'LL LIKELY GET RECOGNITION. AND I THINK THE ART WORLD HAS NEVER BEEN SO HEALTHY IN THIS PARTICULAR MANNER. IT SEEMS THAT MANY PAINTERS IN THE LAST TWENTY YEARS HAVE GONE INTO THE ART PROFESSION BECAUSE THEY SAW THAT THEY COULD GET RECOGNITION, FAME AND SOMETIMES A GREAT AMOUNT OF MONEY. IT MIGHT BE THAT SOME VERY CLEVER PERSONS COULD GO INTO IT FOR THOSE REASONS AND BECOME SUCCESSFUL, FAMOUS, AND WEALTHY. I DOUBT THAT THEY COULD EVER BECOME GREAT ARTISTS.

William Jeffett

interview

22 March 1985

Leon Polk Smith

born 1906

WJ How has your attitude changed over your career?

LPS I think my attitude concerning my art, concerning creativity, has not changed. I always felt that I was painting for myself. I'm not so unique that other people can't understand what I'm doing. If I understand and like it there must be other people who will. I have always had complete faith in my intuition and unconscious to feed my mind and give me ideas-- I've never questioned that. That has been the same all the way through. ~~All of my work has come from myself.~~ The last person who gave me an idea about art was Mondrian, whose work I was introduced to in 1936. The things I thought were the most important in Mondrian's work were his contributions to the interchangeability of ~~the~~ ^{and} forms ~~in~~ ^{as} space, foreground and background. But I ~~would~~ ^{do} never want ^a to be a painter à la Mondrian. I was merely starting there. One ~~must have to~~ ^{must} start somewhere. An artist doesn't start in a vacuum? *which vac? who knows?*

WJ How do you see your current art and the art over the period of your career relating to contemporary art?

LPS There has been a wide influence of my work since the early *here in Europe*. 50's. I had a dealer in Stuttgart who told me there was a Leon Polk Smith School of Art in Southern Germany. Not an institution, but many artists influenced by my work.

In the 50's after I had left the very geometric *straight* line painting of the 40's I was practically the only artist

the hard-edge manner

working in my manner. And other artists knew that. One time
 Nicholas Krushenick
 Nick Krushenick (?) called me and he said, "I know someone who has
 started working in your direction." And I said, "who's that?"
 And he said, "Al Held." Then I was no longer exactly alone.
 And then within the year Krushenick (?) started working in that
 direction. And ~~then at~~ ^{about} the same time, I guess it was 1955
 approximately, a number of people started working in ~~that~~ ^{this}
 style. Ellsworth Kelly for instance called me and said, "I'm
 an art student who just returned from Paris, and I saw your
 work reproduced in Art Aujourd'hui, and I was influenced by it,
 and I would like to come to your studio." Well, he came,

~~maybe a half a dozen times.~~ ^{Several} And he brought with him, ~~to the~~
~~studio,~~ Robert Indiana, and Jack Youngerman and several other
 artists. They were all influenced by my work. I know when I
 first saw Robert Indiana's work he was doing huge, big round
 primitive heads in muddy colors. He called me again about

six months later and asked me to come to his studio again.
 He had moved to a ^{new} studio in a basement ^{and the} ^{were stencils, left} ~~and there had been some~~
^{by some} advertising and commercial artists ~~there who did work out of~~ ^{with} ^{← LPS}
~~stencils and~~ ^{He} ^{worked there before} and he started using those stencils for letters and
 numbers and geometric shapes. ^{in his paintings} I told him I liked what he was

doing, "its very exciting-- go right on with it." ^{Today some of} ~~lot of~~
^{former being} the shapes that my ^{and} ~~followers~~ use I had ~~already~~ ^{used} in the 40's
 and 50's. ^{as 60's} As far as I know I did the first shaped canvases ^{in the mid} ~~even~~ ^{50's}
~~done~~ ^{and "scribbles" etc.} (Moon, 1958).

WJ Ted Castle has called your work "self-referential." Is that a
 fair characterization of your work? ^{In my understanding of the}
~~what ever that means~~ ^{term, all abstract art is}
 Well, I haven't seen a painting that has influenced me since
^{self-referential}
~~otherwise it is abstraction~~ ^{either}

or representational

Mondrian. So where did they come from? They came from myself.

But I had ^{MUCH} a lot to base it on, to draw from. I had ~~already~~ studied art history. ^{and} Even when I was introduced in 1936 to

Mondrian and Brancusi at Columbia ^{University}, the professor ~~told me~~

that these were the greatest artists in the world today, the most advanced. But it seems that there were only a dozen ^{or so} people in the United States who knew their names. ^{at this time} And at that time Mondrian hadn't been accepted in Europe.

One of my main interests in art as a student was space-- ^{and continued} ~~that~~ has ^{of} been one of the most interesting elements in art to me. What ^{is} ~~was~~ the artist's concept of space and how did he use it. And that's from cave paintings on ~~up~~. ^{from} ~~and~~ Certainly I found a new way of using it in Mondrian's work and that gave me a basis for the depth of feeling that I had for space --- having grown up on the plains of Oklahoma.

WJ To what extent has the Southwest been a factor in your art?

LPS

If I hadn't been born and raised on the plains I don't know how my work would have come about. I think it's full of ^{and by sky, really} ~~that~~ open space. ^{which is a} ~~And there's one thing missing in most of the~~ ^{element of} ~~work~~ ^{paintings} ~~who have been influenced by my work-- they find something in their own lives to feed them to go ahead with it.~~ But the ones who are most strongly influenced by my work and ^{from my paintings} ~~keep using my images, often those images seem so unalive and dead, stillbirth, because they didn't have the background for it.~~ You take a person who grew up in the swamps of New Jersey. ^{the primal} How could he have a feeling for the space that comes out of my painting? Openness -- throbbing with tensions and movement, ^{and at the same time} ~~and at the same time~~, silent and contemplative ??

* which is a missing element in some artists' work who were influenced by my paintings

WJ What has sustained you over the period of your career?

LPS You mean the spirit ^{or force} that has kept me going?

WJ Yes.

LPS Well I felt very strongly within a few weeks after I had discovered art ^{at} ~~(the)~~ ^{of Oklahoma} ~~EASTCENTRAL~~ (University) that I had always been an artist. And I don't know if there would have been any way of living without using it. That was really me, the artist. As if I were made and put here for that purpose, ^{then of course,} and I had to do it, the same as breathing. I couldn't stop painting, I couldn't stop creating. I never painted unless I had to. I never felt that just because I was an artist ~~that~~ I had to have set hours everyday to paint. *There are so many things to do.*

WJ Do you see organic and geometric abstract painting as having common sources of inspiration?

LPS I certainly don't know the source of inspiration. Now a landscape or portrait painter knows the source of his inspiration.

Could I say the source of my inspiration is straight lines, curved lines, geometric forms, angles, ^{space, color} I suppose the source of my inspiration is likely space: space and color and movement. *And my own paintings.*

WJ Do you see young artists moving in the direction of abstraction, either geometric or organic?

LPS There are always a certain percentage of artists who are drawn toward abstraction-- organic abstraction or the purely geometric constructivist sort ^{abstract} of painting-- and there are always artists who want to paint as naturalistically as ^{possible} ~~as they can.~~ *and others* ~~There are always artists who~~ want to paint in a very emotional expressionistic manner. The proportion of artists working in either way is always changing, but no movement really dies.

But in any direction there are only a few who add something new. ~~to it~~ ^{any direction perhaps} ^{presented} And what is being taken now, mostly, and I don't ~~say altogether~~ ^{now}, the big wave of expressionism, I ~~don't~~ ^{little that it's} see ~~anything~~ ^{what} much new, being added, to it. ^{where} does newness come from? Is it a newness of technique, or is it a new attitude of mind? Intuition? There are many painters but ~~much~~ ^{fewer} great artists. "Talent is not enough; it takes genius to make a great work of art."

WJ What do you see as the most promising trend among young artists?

LPS Well, I think the most promising thing is the whole thing. LPS

I like the idea that a young painter can paint in any direction that he can think ^{or imagine} of ~~as~~ feel. And if he's good he'll ^{likely} get

~~some~~ recognition. And I think the art world has never been so healthy in ^{this} ~~that~~ particular manner, ~~before~~. It seems that ~~many painters~~ ^{many painters} a lot of artists in the last twenty years have gone into the

art profession because they saw that they could get recognition, ^{that times} ~~and some artists~~ ^{and some artists} make a great amount of money. It might be that some very clever person ^{could} go into it for those reasons and ~~might~~ ^{doubt} become successful, famous, and wealthy. I ~~don't know~~ ^{doubt} that they could ever become great artists.