

STORM KING ART CENTER

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

PETER STEVENS

February 22, 2018

February 28, 2018

Interviewed by Sarah Dzedzic
Storm King Oral History 012
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Support for Storm King Art Center's Oral History Program and Archival Program is made possible by generous lead support from the Henry Luce Foundation. Support is also provided by the Pine Tree Foundation.

Interview with Peter Stevens (session a)	Peter Stevens's home, Chelsea, NYC
Conducted by Sarah Dzedzic	1 audio file
February 22, 2018	Some restrictions on use

Audio File 1

Dzedzic: Today is February 22, 2018. And this is Sarah Dzedzic interviewing Peter Stevens for the Storm King Oral History Program. So just wanted to start by laying a little bit of groundwork for how you came to be involved with the David Smith estate.

Stevens: David Smith died in 1965. And at that time his two daughters were 9 and 10 years old. And David Smith had left his entire estate, [00:01:00] his work, his home, to his two daughters in trust. And as they were so young the trust was overseen by the trustees whom he'd appointed. And they were three people that he was very close with. The first was his lawyer, Ira Lowe. The second was the art critic Clement Greenberg, who had been a real champion, and an early champion, of Smith's work, a very influential figure within the milieu that Smith was in, which was the New York School and modernism in America. And the artist Robert Motherwell.

Of those three trustees the one who really was involved and engaged and formulated what the estate would do and how it would do it was Clement Greenberg. He took over in 1965. Now in 1965 [00:02:00] the IRS wanted their taxes. They wanted estate taxes, which had traditionally always been a very serious problem for artists in America and before that even in Europe, that artists would work in obscurity and often in poverty much of their life, and then achieve some success, achieve a market. And just at that point they would die owning a tremendous amount of work of significant value, and then have a tremendous amount of tax to pay. And that was exactly the case with the David Smith estate. He sold very few works during his lifetime.

First of all, there was not a great market for contemporary art in America until really the late '50s. Second of all, he was rather loath to sell his work. Having his work around him in his home and studio that he had created in Bolton Landing in the Adirondacks [00:03:00] was a very important part of his process, of his life really. And his life consisted of the world that he created in Bolton Landing. And it was a world of work, of his art, the result of his work, and his two daughters. And he had started to put work and think about sculpture out in the fields in the early 1950s. He placed works on the little terrace outside the small home that he had built there. And he started to put work out in the fields.

At the time of his death there were almost 90 major large works in the fields. Greenberg, along with Smith's gallery at the time, sold a tremendous amount of work in order to pay the estate taxes. And

although somewhat necessary, it was also very upsetting. It was certainly upsetting to the two daughters, the young children, who saw [00:04:00] what was left of their memory of their childhoods and their relationship with their father and his relationship to the place, which was his work, and to see it leaving incrementally every time they would go there was very troubling.

So fast-forward to the mid '70s, like around really only nine years later. I met Rebecca Smith, David's older daughter, in college. We both went to Sarah Lawrence College. And Smith had taught there. Rebecca's mother, Jean Freas, had gone to school there, and so Rebecca had that connection through her father and mother to the school. I ended up there for my own reasons. And we met. And I graduated from Sarah Lawrence in 1977. So at that time [00:05:00] Clement Greenberg had been running the estate for around 12 years. And it was clearly at that time quite an unhappy relationship for Candida and Rebecca and their father's work having been taken over by this other kind of force, which was Clement Greenberg's own interests in how he wanted to present work, which aspects of Smith he wanted to present, the commercial aspect of selling work, and the disregard for their emotional connection to it.

So the terms of the trust were such that Rebecca and Candida were to inherit this work and to take over and the trustees would no longer be involved when they turned 25. So that was 1979, Rebecca turned 25 [00:06:00] in 1979. That was also the year that she and I were married. So there was a kind of a reckoning. There was at that point a clear unhappiness, and the decision was made that we're getting rid of the trustees, it's time for them to go.

And so it raised the question of who was going to take over from Greenberg, what was the next step, who could we hire to run the estate. And of course in those days, the answer was really nobody. At least as far as we knew, and we kind of looked into it, there was no profession of artist estate's management. Most artist estates [00:07:00] were run by families, and there were really two types of estates—those that had the financial resources, the artist has a reputation enough, where you have the resources to preserve the work and to develop a program, think what you want to do, and make proactive decisions. The second category are those estates that are constrained by limited resources. It's not just practical, what can we afford?

The first thing of course anyone wants to do is preserve the work itself, to take care of it, and to make sure it's not deteriorating and that it's cataloged, that it's all organized. That takes money. Now in the case of the David Smith Estate that had been begun, but the work was not adequately being taken care of by the trustees. That was one of the more upsetting aspects of their stewardship that we remedied.

[00:08:00] In terms of management, usually an artist's widow oversees the artist legacy. There was Lee Krasner, there was Annalee Newman, it was someone that was involved with the artist. Sandy Hirsch,

who has been involved for many, many years with the Adolph Gottlieb Foundation. So there were a few instances of artist's family and people close to the family like Sandy that managed the estate. And then you saw that with Calder with his daughter Mary and her husband Howard. And then their son Holton and ultimately Sandy Rower running that estate.

So it falls to the family to do it, that's the tradition. Subsequent to that we've seen this huge growth in artist foundations and the professionalization [00:09:00] and the kind of formalization of the business and educational and cultural aspects of running an artist estate as a foundation. That was something that we probably didn't consider because that would have been in a way for Rebecca and Candida to have lost the estate, to turn it over to become a public institution. Really they wanted it to become more private, not more public. So at that moment Candida was going to Paris. She was a modern dancer, choreographer. She was studying other things. She had a lot of interests. And Rebecca was a practicing artist, as she still is. And I was also a practicing artist.

But I said, "Okay, I will just watch over this until [00:10:00] we can figure out how we can find someone that can take care of it and manage it and do the things that you all," and at that point I had opinions too, that we wanted to do with it. And it was not a hard kind of task to take on because the major kind of goal that was set for me was to not lose the work. So my goal was to not sell work, to not make it more public.

So it wasn't that I had to immediately jump in and start working extensively with galleries. And so what happened is the National Gallery was opening at that time, the East Building. And there was a curator there, E. A. Carmean, who was very committed to the abstract expressionists, to David Smith in particular. And so we got involved working directly with the National Gallery. [00:11:00] So that was in a way—for me I feel from my perspective—the real education at the highest level, which was a really great privilege and really a testament to kind of my education in this role because of the greatness of David Smith.

And I didn't have to bring anything to the table to get started at the highest level. It's sort of like someone just writing you a letter and saying, "Okay, you can go to Harvard," even though you didn't go to high school. I felt like I had this great opportunity. And the support of Rebecca and Candida to—and they were quite involved themselves. They were very concerned about what was happening with their father's work. So we had a relationship with the National Gallery. We lent a substantial number of works to them and developed a kind of exhibition program. And subsequent [00:12:00] to that we worked with the Tate Gallery, which we're still today, we still have loans from our collection to the Tate Gallery.

So there was a way of creating a model that was not about the commerce of selling work, either because financially you have to or that's your goal. Our goal was to just do everything we could to create kind of an

understanding, appreciation, and a context for Smith's work. And part of that was commercial. But we kind of were always reluctant to go in that direction. We always kind of sought more the—you could say educational, the working with museums, and balancing the kind of commercial aspect with that.

As I started working more on this [00:13:00] and Rebecca and Candida and I were involved for let's say like from around 1980 until the mid '80s, I started to get much more involved and then much more active, because I had ideas of things that we should do. And Rebecca and Candida also. We were all on the same page as far as like how we saw, what we saw as our mission, which was to do everything we could for the appreciation and understanding of David Smith's work.

So around 1990 I gave up my own work as far as exhibiting it, and focused myself full-time on the management of the estate. And Rebecca focused herself always with a deep involvement with the work, but on her own career and her own work as an artist. [00:14:00] And Candida developed a kind of a very interesting role of engaging in projects with great passion. And it was very intense for her. So she co-curated, as we'll get to, we'll talk about that, numerous—curated several exhibitions on her own, was involved extensively with the books, a lot of the books that we were working on, either with galleries or museums. And so we had a kind of a system that we developed that was I think pretty unique for an artist estate. And as I said now almost all artist estates are foundations.

But I would say the role that we had, the role that we had created for ourselves, or the roles that we created, were kind of foundation-like in that our [00:15:00] mission was broad and diverse. And the number of people that were involved in the decision making process, like a board and a director and the fact that Rebecca and Candida are the daughters of the artist and it was always a priority of what their emotional connection was to the work.

The commercial aspect was never the focus on the one hand, but on the other hand it was not a public institution. So every project we did, and still to this day every project we do, means a great deal to us. We have to feel it really represents what's in Smith's best interest but also what we think is right from our perspective.

Dziedzic: I have two questions to kind of respond to what you've said. One is that I think it might be helpful to hear about [00:16:00] the aspects of Smith's work that Clement Greenberg wanted to promote and was promoting, because I think that will fold into I think filling in some gaps that you and Smith's daughters then filled that in, in a way. So I think it will add specificity to that. And then I also want to know if there's any other reasons why—I think it would be helpful to understand why the urge was to make it a more private organization as opposed to opening it up to a board and hiring a professional kind of staff. Even though as you said that wasn't really something people did at the time. But building from that sense

of the disregard for their emotional connection to the work. But I think there's some more details that we can get into with that too. [00:17:00] So maybe it would be easier to start with why you wanted to make it more private.

Stevens: Okay. Well, it's funny. When I hear you say that, the idea make it more private. In a funny maybe that's the word I chose, but it's a complex balance. Art by its nature is both public and private. It's private in the sense that if it's great art it's representing the deepest inner purpose of the person who made it. And that can be anything, whatever their purpose is. And so the process of making art and then being that kind of artist who sees their work as part of a larger context—which Smith certainly did—and I would call that ambition. His ambition was to be part of the larger discourse of human creativity and [00:18:00] the creation of meaning for what it is to be a human being. So that's a hugely public thing. So how do you—on the one side you're private, on the other side you're public.

And what I was referring to is really very kind of a microcosm for Rebecca and Candida, the kind of honoring of their relationship with their father. That's the private. But of course in doing that there's also that incredibly public impulse to—private not in the sense of holding in and preventing anyone else from seeing the work, we don't want to show it, we—our goal was to show it. So it was a goal through this private feeling to create something very public. But public that you're not losing control over, that's not an outside person saying, "Oh, these six pieces are going away and you're never going to see them again," because that's what happened in their childhood. That was an instance of one of them having a favorite piece that they had loved their [00:19:00] whole life, sitting in the field outside their home, and then coming to Bolton Landing and seeing that it's gone and having Greenberg just tell them, "Oh yes, I sold it." With a total disregard.

So it wasn't the fact in and of itself that the piece was becoming part of a public discourse that was upsetting but it was the fact that the decision making process was totally hostile or even you could say violent towards their needs of that kind of personal connection. So it's maybe more like personal and public which are not necessarily in conflict as to private and public, which seem a little more at odds with each other. And I think that's a really, really important part of running an estate or of being a kind of custodian or looking over the legacy of an artist [00:20:00] is trying to honor that balance of their personal private kind of message, intent, for their work, and allowing that to grow and expand to being something very public and grand and as expansive as is appropriate for that artist. So that's what we were trying to do.

Dziedzic: That's really helpful clarification. I had a sense that it wasn't—in using the word private you didn't mean to like you said keep the work from being shown or have more—keep the collection under lock and key. In a sense it was that but it was also—

Stevens: Right, but it was really the opposite of that, because if you look at the first thing we—the first major act we took was to lend—I don't know the exact number, I'd have to look it up, but [00:21:00] I think it was maybe almost 20 works to the National Gallery. And just take them away from Bolton Landing and put them on display in this beautiful big new public building of I. M. Pei's East Wing for the National Gallery, and to have his work representing the nation in this museum. That's incredibly public. But it represented an expression of a deep private connection. And that's because of relationships. That's what you have when you have relationships with people and institutions.

And again, we had the luxury of that because Smith was such a great artist. Of course, every artist would love to have 20 works on view at the National Gallery and feel that that's both honoring the kind of deep personal love you have for the work and sharing it in a very public way. But because Smith is so great, we had that opportunity to not have to choose. And also that the gallery was very generous. [00:22:00] Because normally museums don't like to take on long term loan works that are not part of either their collection or promised to be part of their collection. And again that was something that was not an intention. It wasn't an intention that we would give the works to the National Gallery and it was a loan that would eventually become a gift. Rebecca and Candida did not want to lose those works, but they did want to share them. So that's sort of how that happened.

Dziedzic: So my other question about—and I guess we can frame it however you like, but one option is to frame it in terms of what are the things that you felt had been kind of neglected that you then started to become more involved in, I don't know, promoting for lack of a better word, rectifying, organizing.

Stevens: Yeah, I think that it's—I like the word promoting in one sense. [00:23:00] It's a funny word because it has a double meaning. Promoting in the sense of raising up in a very positive way. It also has the kind of darker tone I think we have, especially within art, that the promotion of something implies an inherent kind of flaw or weakness that is being overcome. And I think that it's like in a child. You want to promote all the aspects of a child. You don't want to just pick the things you like and squelch the rest. And I think that's how we felt about Smith's work, that of course any person would have something they like more or they might like less. Someone might love small intimate work, and someone might love the grandeur [00:24:00] of a great monumental piece. Well, Clement Greenberg had very strong opinions of what—and he had very strong taste. It was something that was very important to him. The idea that through education, through intellect, and in a way kind of an arrogant deep belief in his own judgment that what he quote liked from my perspective, he probably didn't see it as what I like and what I don't like.

In fact I knew him pretty well. He saw it as what's good and what's not good. And that's a distinction that I think is very dangerous. And it's something that's been really interesting in seeing how art—again this

microcosm or macrocosm. The microcosm of one artist in a specific time. If you look at the macrocosm of the development of how art functions in our culture, we believe now as a culture generally—at least [00:25:00] modern art, contemporary art is seen as essentially seeking diversity, seeking more narratives, seeking more viewpoints. And great artists in a way are doing that too. And Smith specifically was doing that. So whereas some artists are very focused—let's take Barnett Newman, a great, great artist, who had a tremendous focus in his work. Smith chose to have a great diversity in his work. From figuration to geometric abstraction, from the smallest handheld scale to what was at the time some of the most monumental sculpture being made. Varying materials, varying media, from painting and drawing and sculpture, and combining them into different kind of hybrids.

So this kind of diversity of his work didn't fit in with [00:26:00] Greenberg's view of making a choice and having a scale. He would refer to a work as an A or a B or a C. And what he thought were—not just for Smith. With Pollock and other artists who he liked, and then from artist to artist, he would say, “This is a B artist, this is a C artist.” So that kind of way of thinking was anathema to us, especially because again for the deeply personal reasons we were embracing the entire artist. It was about who David Smith was as a human being and as a creator. And so our view was not—maybe we weren't even so sophisticated to think—we weren't thinking in terms of a market, which I guess is what I think a lot of people think of when you think about promoting work. We were thinking about deep appreciation, like how do people really understand that David Smith at the time that he was making the *Cubi* sculptures, [00:27:00] his most celebrated work at the time, was also making this great series of paintings of the nude. That those two incongruous things are kind of what made him great. And for Greenberg it was the opposite. He didn't want anyone to even see those paintings. He wouldn't show them. He wouldn't exhibit them.

So for us to bring those out into the world and let people see them was not a sense of promoting them in a way of saying, “Oh, you should look at this and not that, this is really great.” It's saying, “This is what David Smith did, this is how he worked, and then the world at large will make their own decision as to what's important, what they value, how they value it, whether it's intellectual, financial, culturally, emotionally.”

So, our goal was really just to do everything. It wasn't that we were trying to rescue [00:28:00] certain parts or emphasize certain aspects of what he did. We didn't have a five-year plan. But we exhibition by exhibition and relationship by relationship tried to open up what David Smith had done as an artist. So we did exhibitions of the nude paintings. We worked with E. A. Carmean at the National Gallery, who was very close to Clement Greenberg. He liked and wanted to focus on specific series as David Smith worked in a unique way on series of sculpture that he titled the *Cubi* series, the *Tanktotem* series, the *Zig* series. So that was E. A.'s approach.

The curator Karen Wilkin wanted to do an exhibition of what she considered the formative work, [00:29:00] his earlier work from the '30s and '40s. She also later did an exhibition on his bas-reliefs and the use of bas-relief in his work. So we worked with varying people. Later we worked with Carmen Gimenez who had a very specific approach to how Smith's work could be seen from a maybe more European perspective as a Spanish scholar on modern sculpture.

So we not only in general because of our feeling about the work and of the man and Rebecca and Candida's it being their father wanted to generously share everything he did, but also—I've kind of lost my train of thought on that. But it really was—the purpose [00:30:00] of the whole exercise was to show the total picture.

Dziedzic: A fuller representation in a sense.

Stevens: Yeah.

Dziedzic: I did want to ask about—and you may not know this specifically. But when Ted Ogden from Storm King came to Bolton Landing to look at the sculptures there, ultimately he did purchase 13. And I'm wondering about how that acquisition or sale from Clement Greenberg from the estate, the executors, to an institution—is this sort of a typical collection in a sense, or acquisition? And how did it kind of typify the way the items were sold at the time?

Stevens: Well, there are probably [00:31:00] quite a few people that you are very close with who know more the story of that. Because I only know secondhand, and it far predates me. But I do know the process and the way that Greenberg sold work and the way that he thought about work—the work—going out into the world. One of the better aspects of Greenberg's handling—although he sold a lot of work very quickly, which was obviously—had caused problems for the family. But he did prioritize institutions. He really believed in culture. The idea you could say was kind of snobby, but he believed in [00:32:00] institutional ownership of art. Most of David Smith's great works that he sold were sold to museums. But he did also have certain collectors, like anyone who is a kind of impresario in the art world, had certain collectors that he also thought were quite important. And something that I agree with. I think that there are some collectors who actually will be better stewards for a work of art than some museums. And it really depends on how engaged that institution or that individual is with the art that they own and how they balance that public-private kind of dialectic.

And I think that Greenberg did give thought to that. He refused to sell work to some people or some institutions, [00:33:00] and he chose to place Smith's sculptures across America. So almost every good even regional museum in America owns a wonderful David Smith sculpture. Greenberg was very, very

nationalistic. He really believed that America was—he was kind of defensive about it. So he did nothing to advance the understanding or awareness of Smith's work in Europe. It was one of the things that we were quite upset about, because Smith was a global artist, a great sculptor of the twentieth century, not just an American artist. And he was getting that recognition starting in the late '50s. He—in 1962 at the Spoleto arts festival he—really brought him to international attention. He showed at [00:34:00] *documenta* several times. And that all kind of came to a screeching halt when Greenberg took over.

There were a few cases where he sold groups of work to individuals, and I think the pieces to Storm King were really the major instance of that. And I don't personally have any understanding of what led to that decision and I don't know if anyone really knows what Greenberg was thinking at the time and why he approved of such a massive acquisition, because it would certainly be understandable to me, knowing—again from Clement's position—if Storm King had already existed as it is now to say, "Okay, there has to be a place that's like Bolton." All the great things about Storm King [00:35:00] of course argue for why David Smith's work should be seen there. But that didn't exist then. So it's kind of interesting and a great kind of turn of events that it worked out so well.

The other group that he sold was a much smaller group to Rockefeller for the plaza in Albany. That was a group of sculptures, really great sculptures, that he sold to one individual. Other than that, I don't think there were really cases where he would sell multiple works to a single place, because he did believe in this kind of spreading out of the work, like kind of Johnny Appleseed spreading across the country. So I think it'll be a really interesting part of the oral history, and [00:36:00] it's a really interesting part of Storm King's history, how this rather unique moment when Greenberg agreed to this. Because if he had just said no—and he was certainly a very whimsical person as far as why he made the decisions he made—although he probably would be rolling over in his grave to hear the word whimsical used in relationship to him. But let's just say he did things for his own reasons that weren't clearly understandable to other people.

But I think I can only say really again as an outsider that I think it worked out splendidly. And my understanding is that the selection was not made by Greenberg. So it was really made from a group of work by Mr. Ogden. So I think that's quite remarkable. [00:37:00]

Dziedzic: I wondered if—to use this kind of strange terminology that you said Greenberg used of perhaps it was work that was B work or C work or something like that. And the ones that Ted Ogden was moved by potentially were easier for Greenberg to let go of in a sense.

Stevens: No, I don't—no, not at all. And I think that was a good aspect of Greenberg. He did see the work going out in the world as it had to be good work. As I said, like for example with the nude paintings,

something he really didn't like, he didn't want to show them. Because he had a strong enough ego and identity that he felt that if he sold a work and put it out in the world that was his reputation on the line. That's what he was saying was good, that should be out being seen. [00:38:00] So it was kind of the reverse.

He would probably moderate, not sell a work to somebody, one museum, because he really thought it should be in a different museum or a better museum. And so I think that that did happen. But by and large, he—the categories were rather large for him. So really what I'm talking about more is the really fully realized sculptures, most of them, Greenberg, at one point in his thinking, understood the greatness of them. It was more the idea that there was one area, which is well-documented, that he had a great deal of trouble later with the painted [00:39:00] sculptures. Not so much at the time that they were made, but later on, because of his own evolution of his philosophy and his theories about sculpture, David Smith's painted sculpture, many of them, he found highly problematic, because they were counter to his whole kind of theoretical belief in what the role of sculpture was. It's interesting that Storm King doesn't own a brightly colored painted sculpture, but on the other hand, others of that period were sold by Greenberg, and are in great museums. The National Gallery owns the three circles, which are great. Most of those pieces have ended up in great museums.

The other thing that Greenberg did, which we're very happy about, was that certain pieces—he believed that really, really [00:40:00] great pieces should remain in the estate. So that's one of the reasons that the estate has been able to function the way it has, because we have a great collection, and that we have great examples that Greenberg always did—he did, at least from the perspective of, again, Rebecca and Candida's connection to the work—there was always maintained, in the family, a high level of work. Areas that he was not interested in, for example, were the works on paper. Now, that was a huge and essentially important part of David Smith's work. David Smith exhibited them almost equally to his sculpture, throughout his lifetime. It was a very important part of his practice. He wrote about it, he talked about it, and he actually did it. He was very prolific, and worked on developing not only on drawing, but on advancing the complexity of what he could do [00:41:00] with works on paper.

Greenberg had very little interest in that, and that was one of the things that really kind of was a spark for me getting involved. It was around 1979, so before—when Greenberg was still fully in control of everything. Rebecca and I, I absolutely remember—and probably Dida was there. I think in either a warehouse or the basement of the Whitney Museum, Paul Cummings was doing a retrospective of David Smith's drawings at the Whitney. Paul was a great connoisseur and lover of drawing. So it was really—I was seeing the work for the first time, and through this great lens of Paul's selection, and standing in the basement, looking at these works. And at that time, the Whitney acknowledged a kind of [00:42:00] aspect that works could be sold from—likely—from a museum exhibition. I think museums now kind of

pretend maybe that doesn't happen, I don't know, but it does. It's not that they were involved in it, but we were in the basement, looking at the works, and Greenberg was deciding what works could be for sale. Also, the Whitney was actually interested in purchasing some, which they did. They purchased a group for the museum. I remember standing there with Greenberg, and I felt he was demeaning the drawings, just by the way he was talking about them, by the prices he was putting on them. I think I kind of physically put my body between him and the work, and felt like, this can't be. You just can't have the person looking after the work who doesn't understand how important, beautiful, great it is. So it was more areas [00:43:00] like that, where it was whole swaths of what was interesting and important to Smith, but not to Greenberg, and then him just sort of shutting it off to the side. Greenberg hated surrealism, for example, famously. I think he wrote about that. Surrealism was a hugely important aspect of Smith's kind of lexicon and how he thought about art.

In a roundabout way, I think getting back to the pieces in this group of 13 sculptures, are very diverse. It doesn't seem that it was a type of work that was selected, either by Greenberg to offer or by Ogden to acquire. I think it's one of the wonderful things about Storm King's collection. It really shows a tremendous range of [00:44:00] Smith's work, and includes some of his great masterpieces that Greenberg certainly would have acknowledged as great masterpieces.

Dziedzic: He would have?

Stevens: Yes.

Dziedzic: Maybe, to think about it another way—and also just speculating—perhaps they were sold because Ogden had identified a group of sculptures that Greenberg approved of or something, perhaps acknowledging a kind of instinct on Ted Ogden's part to—even if he wasn't known within the art world, or even if his museum was not well-known either and just recently established, that if he had this ability to identify a group of work that Greenberg would have stamped with approval, then they were permitted to go there.

Stevens: Right. My understanding—and correct me if I'm wrong—that Ogden was also interested in Hudson River School, and was interested in kind of 19th-century [00:45:00] American painting. Those are things that Greenberg valued, too, to a certain degree. So I think that the fact that Ogden came with a—far from being a kind of neophyte that wouldn't have the respect of Greenberg—and it seems like an exciting opportunity for the two of them to have come together, because they were both—Greenberg was able to facilitate the movement into this other area of 20th-century modernist sculpture. I'm sure that there is good documentation as to whether—see, I'm not aware even if they knew each other before that.

Dziedzic: No, I think the story is that there was a nephew, by marriage, of Ted Ogden who was [00:46:00] involved with the art world, collected work, Lewis Cabot.

Stevens: Oh, yes. He was very, very close to Clem.

Dziedzic: So I'm sure he would have promoted—there's that word again—would have been able to explain the potential for Smith's sculptures to be shown at Storm King. But I also think that it was the acquisition of these works, or even Ogden seeing these works outside, that gave him the idea that this is what his art center could be used for, to show art outdoors, art in nature. Well, let's dive into the works in the collection. I think it would be helpful to hear you just kind of describe them a little bit in terms of where they fit into Smith's work as a whole. Those are just the individual photos, but [00:47:00] there's a larger photo of each of them as well.

Stevens: Chronologically, it's obviously a great moment in Smith's work, because it's really pretty much the last 10, 11 years of his life. It's a high maturity. Because Smith died, unfortunately, so young—he was only 59 when he died—his last works were really a high maturity, not late work. Smith never lived long enough to have reached a moment where he may have repeated himself, or he may have been kind of refining or rethinking. It was still a kind of youthful, forward-moving, kind of creative [00:48:00] height that he was at. So he was making more work than ever. He was still, though, working in his method. He was just starting to work with some fabricators. He was just starting to expand his ability to produce more work. But he was by no means producing a tremendous amount of work. He made his own work. So these last 10 years were really—if he had lived longer, would have been kind of a central moment in his life, rather than the last years of his life. That's a different kind of perspective, I think, that people often think of David Smith's the *Cubis* and the *Zigs* and these big, major works as his late work, but they weren't. They were like an amazingly fertile, in a way almost youthful, maturity.

I think Storm King's collection shows that by its variety, where he's still fusing [00:49:00]—he hasn't created an answer. He's still answering questions, in every work, in a new way. So you see this interest in figuration, and you see the interest in complete abstraction. Also, not just figuration, but the idea of nature. The relationship of industry and nature, which are so interwoven through the meanings and the approach that Smith had to his work. The industrial technique and the industrial materials of welding steel, but also the use of found objects that were cast-off and remnants from the industrial age, or agricultural tools that were iron, that were discarded, and this kind of interest in expressing both of those seemingly oppositional forces of industry and nature, you can see in many of the [00:50:00] works in Storm King's collection.

The *Raven*, for example. It's part of a series of sculptures that he made. *Raven V* in Storm King's collection. Again, Smith's series are designated by sharing a title, with a Roman numeral that follows: *Raven I*, *Raven II*. There were a number of *Ravens* also that didn't have numbers. There's one titled *Black Flock Raven*. The raven was an important image for Smith from nature, and yet the sculpture is so much about kind of an industry. So he's combining stainless steel. He's clearly using some cast-off, found objects. He uses the tank top, the industrial tank top element, which was central to his *Tanktotem* series, which was just ending. The [00:51:00] last *Tanktotems* were made in 1960, the year after *Raven V* was made. So you see him bringing in aspects of this other series, the *Tanktotem* series. His use of stainless steel, which was becoming very important just at that time, in the late '50s. He's bringing so many different aspects of his work into one single work.

Also, that particular sculpture has a tremendous sense of motion. Motion in Smith's work is usually upward. It's an uplifting, optimistic sense of sculpture, which is unusual, because sculpture usually deals with mass, and it's about solidity, it's about defining an object-ness. Smith's emphasis was always on the image of the work, not the object of the work. I think this is [00:52:00] a great example of a kind of drawing in space. The use of the stainless steel, which is light and reflects light, gives the darker, rusted steel element, horizontally, a sense of weightlessness, as if it is a bird that's kind of flying by.

I didn't necessarily pick that piece to be the first one to talk about, but it is also nice to point out in relation to—I mentioned the *Tanktotems* that Storm King owns, the great *Tanktotem VII*. The *Tanktotems* started in the early '50s. They really break into three different groups. The early ones are much more simplified and iconic, and totemic-looking. They all integrate this commercial top for a commercial tank, that's a convex, concave circle. That's really the only unifying [00:53:00] aspect of the *Tanktotems*. I would say *Tanktotem VII* in Storm King's collection is not really totemic in the sense of tribal art, or what we think of as totems in kind of a figurative or animal or human kind of reference. It's very pictorial. It relates more to kind of Russian abstraction, something that also interested Smith from the earliest part of his career, right through, and actually became more of an interest of his in the late '50s and early '60s. His insistence on the visual nature of the sculpture. So this really reads as a group of paintings, almost like paintings and drawings floating in space, and the flat plane of a picture plane suspended in the sculpture, that on one side is a vertical, on the other side is a horizontal, and the use of black and white to kind of dematerialize the weight of the steel.

[00:54:00] One thing that is represented really beautifully in Storm King's collection is this kind of visual nature of his work. Again, when I say that, I mean that it's functioning primarily as an image. He called it an eidetic image, the image that you hold in your mind of something that becomes the reality of it, not the thing itself. Like an after image, like a dream image. And that's what gives it meaning. That was the power

of painting. I think he felt that painting and drawing doesn't exist for us that much as objects. They exist as images that you expand. You give it dimension. You don't look at a Monet painting and think it's big or little; it's the size you feel it is, that space. Certainly with some of his painter friends, like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman and de Kooning—and he wanted his sculpture to have that equal [00:55:00] emotional and kind of resonance of a visual image.

You see it beautifully in *Study in Arcs*, which is a kind of drawing in space, a little earlier piece from 1957. One of his larger sculptures at the time he made it. It was one of his largest. He's using all found objects. Everything in the sculpture is a found object or an altered found object. These industrial kind of springs that make up the arcs, which he had bought a large number of, he had used them in the *Tanktotems*, he had used them in other sculptures, and here he puts them together into a composition, which clearly was spontaneous and abstract, very akin to the kind of drawings he had been doing for most of the '50s. It's a kind of gestural reference [00:56:00] to nature. You can almost imagine these iron forms kind of fluttering down. In the photographs that we're looking at, but actually at Storm King even more so, you see them in relationship to nature, and you see that kind of—again, this merging of what we know, intellectually, is industrial, but we experience it as almost a part of nature.

I think that's dramatic, this kind of crazy color he painted it, this kind of pink that was kind of a '50s car paint color, but one that was—for him, the essential aspect of it was that it was not a tasteful or decorative color, but that it was what he referred to as vulgar. That you would just have to really experience it not as something that you would just accept, like red [00:57:00] or blue, but it's just like, what is it? What is this color? And kind of be a little put off by it. So it gave the piece kind of a sense of more autonomy. It's really nice that Storm King owns this piece, along with the *Tanktotem*, because the aspect of painting and the surfacing of his sculpture is so important.

Dziedzic: Maintaining that, you mean?

Stevens: Well, for him, for Smith, making the work that way, and then for us to maintain it is very important. It's interesting to see the *Study in Arcs* in relationship to the sculpture *Becca*, which is another kind of assemblage of found objects. In this case, cut-off pieces of industrial steel, both very heavy round bars and kind of rectilinear bars, that, like the *Study in Arcs*, look almost [00:58:00] tossed up in the air and kind of frozen in motion. The reference to his daughter, Rebecca, which he either titled or inscribed on many, many of the works that he made during their childhood. He felt that by doing that, he would connect his work to them, and that they would be able to connect with it later, when he was no longer there. The work would be there with their names on it, literally.

The sculpture *XI Books III Apples* is, again, a great reference to both nature and, in this case, a kind of still life, a tradition that's obviously a painting tradition. So just given the title, one would think of a [00:59:00] traditional still life painting. The sculpture presents this kind of cubist collage of planes and circles that are pretty frontal. There are a few elements that give the sculpture a little three-dimensionality, but really, again, it's creating this visual image, like a collage. The reflectivity of the stainless steel—which, as I said before, around 1957 was when he really turned himself to thinking about and utilizing stainless steel on a large scale. This work, which relates very closely to the series of sculptures the *Sentinel* series, many of which are stainless steel—this looks like it could be a *Sentinel*. So the fact that he titled it something else sort of pushes it outside of that series, but it really, to me, [01:00:00] could be an honorary member of the *Sentinel* series, which was a hugely important series that followed the *Tanktotems*.

Those were his two most important series of sculpture that related to the concept of a figure in a kind of deeply—I don't want to say historical—kind of humanistic way. Like, how do we see objects outside of ourself, and view them with human quality? A totem—a tribal sculpture is one way, and the kind of idea of a monument, or a heroic figure, or a sentinel figure, was something that he explored in these sculptures. So here, he's combining some of the things that he had gotten from working on the *Sentinels*, but also with this pure abstraction of circles and rectangles, and then [01:01:00] also pushing it, again—this layering that Smith's always interested in—into the realm of figuration, of the most traditional type of art, which includes the rich history of the traditional still life painting.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about the surfacing on that one, too, and the kind of reflectivity, I guess, of the surface?

Stevens: Well, I speculate that Smith—it was a great invention of Smith, this surface, which didn't really exist, that I'm aware of. I've never seen an example of this surface existing in any context before he started making his sculpture in the mid-'50s, by taking an industrial grinder and burnishing, or grinding, [01:02:00] abrading the surface in this kind of rough way. The way that—the texture that that creates on the stainless steel provides a reflectivity, because there are so many different angles of these very small scratches, really, that the light doesn't just reflect from the sculpture. It almost seems to be absorbed into the sculpture, so that, sometimes, you can almost feel like it's like a hologram. You kind of see the light an inch behind the surface, rather than just reflecting off the surface. I think it's an amazing surface, and clearly other people do, too, because it's now ubiquitous around the world. I mean, any place you go, whether it's an airport restaurant or—you see this surface as kind of what has become almost a cliché. But his discovery of it, I think, came out of something that anyone who had worked in metal [01:03:00] had seen. If you are welding, as he did, found metal, or even when you buy steel that's brand-new, it has a surface on it that has to be taken off for it to be welded properly. So the easiest way to do that is to

grind the surface. Now, if you do that, you get this very reflective, great surface. But with steel, within a few days, you've lost it, because it starts to rust, and it's hard to maintain, or impossible, really.

He did experiment with it once, in a group of works—in a few isolated cases, but in one group called the *Forgings*, he took steel that he forged on an industrial forge, he ground the surface to make it shiny, and then put many layers of varnish on them, so that they would maintain that reflectivity. That's not [01:04:00] a very satisfying surface for a very large work, I don't think, and it would be also hard to maintain the *Forgings*, which are indoor works, really, and which are very narrow. It works beautifully because they have a kind of solidity to them. On a piece like this, he understood that if he used stainless steel, this surface would be maintained. He wouldn't have to put any varnish on it. Something that he had probably seen forever, he realized could be the finished surface, and he immediately grasped, again, the way that it fused nature with industry. He wrote about it. He talked about the fact that the light and the atmosphere around the sculpture was absorbed and reflected from the sculpture. The sculpture took on the tone and the feeling of its environment.

So in a way, it's one of the [01:05:00]—I don't know first—and first was not something that was interesting to Smith himself. But it certainly is a very important case of a kind of environmentalism of art, that the art is not separating itself from nature. It's really more integrating itself with it. There's a kind of very—I don't know, sort of accepting—it's the opposite of the image of Smith particularly, and of the generation in general, of the macho assertion, me versus the world, because the sculpture is very reactive, very absorbing, very—the opposite of aggressive in some way. [01:06:00] That piece, in particular, I think is very beautiful in that regard.

The other stainless steel piece in Storm King's collection, *Three Ovals Soar*, is kind of different, in that it's more like *Study in Arcs*, and he's kind of created the same form, which were found objects in *Study in Arcs*. He's now probably purchased these. He didn't have the equipment to cut stainless steel, so he had to buy stainless steel that was already in the forms that he used. He did not order and have it fabricated for a specific sculpture. Rather, he would buy group—amount of work, and to be able to use his raw materials. So this work is probably made in a very, very, very similar way to *Study in Arcs*. But again, the use of that material makes the piece absorb into nature.

[01:07:00] Being able to see at Storm King *Three Ovals Soar* with *Study in Arcs* is, I think, really wonderful, because you see very similar goals in those pieces, but affected totally differently. The natural feeling of the three ovals in *Three Ovals Soar*, it's almost like a moon that's moving through the sky. It has, again, this very much relationship to nature. It's, for me—maybe it's very personal—a less abstract work than *Study in Arcs*, which seems more about pure abstraction, although it has a kind of animalistic and natural reference. This piece does seem to be almost like Chinese landscape painting, or this kind of

vertical sense of gesture, and the movement of the moon through the sky, or the sun through the sky. That is accentuated by this stainless steel surface, [01:08:00] because it's absorbing. When you see a piece like that at night, which the visitors at Storm King don't often get to do, they're remarkable. The moon is enough to reflect off that sculpture and give it an amazing presence.

The other aspect of—or another aspect, because there are many—of the works at Storm King are the use of found objects, in several different works. *Volton XXII*, for example—*XX*, I'm sorry. *Volton XX*, from 1963. A part of a very, very important, kind of crucial moment for Smith was his visit to Italy for the Spoleto Art Festival in 1962. The works he made there, and then the steel he had shipped back to continue that series in his studio in Bolton Landing [01:09:00] for the *Voltri-Bolton* series, of which *Volton XX* is one, these are found, discarded, really abandoned objects. I think this kind of sense of recuperation and healing, of taking something that has been cast aside, that had function, and had meaning because it had function—and to just sort of literally pick it up off the ground and create what Smith referred to as a new unity. The two words together are wonderful, because “new” expresses the idea of the moment. When something is new, just by virtue of being new, it has a kind of importance. It has a kind of freshness. [01:10:00] For him, that was the discovery, so that he referred to his sculptures, starting with the *Agricola* series, which were his first major series, and also was made out of found objects—and that's where he first used that expression, creating new unities.

In 1962, 10 years later, going back to the exact same methodology of making new unities of found objects, after many, many intervening years of many different ways of working, I think is really remarkable. The expansion of the scale from the *Agricolas*, which are smaller and pedestal works, to the *Voltris* and *Voltri-Boltons*. With a few exceptions, they're all larger scale works that are not pedestal works. This work also relates to the tradition of still life, and also to the idea of a surrealist tableau, this [01:11:00] kind of incongruity of what are these things sitting there. It kind of relates to a surrealist dream space, that the table top is also a place where an artist works. It's like you're involved in the process of the sculpture itself, of the sculptor making it, of the objects that had no meaning and now they have a new meaning, but the meaning is—and this was central to Smith's identity as an artist, that it was really just about him. That he created it. It was his choice. The idea of welding is the best expression, because once you weld two things together that are separate objects, they become not only joined, they become chemically, physically, one object. If you look on a microscope of two pieces of steel welded together, one doesn't stop and get [01:12:00] joined to the other. That is what welding is. It's actually merging them to become one thing.

I think that was aesthetically important, and kind of spiritually an important part of Smith's process. I think he found himself often at odds with the world. I think he was, in some ways, troubled in a lot of his human interactions. He was very competitive. He was very forceful. I think he connected greatly with people, but

at some cost, and at some kind of—it drained him somewhat. Although that's my speculation. I never knew him. I think that that's one of the reasons he moved to Bolton Landing in 1940 as a young man, so that he could separate out work from his interaction with people. [01:13:00] Basically, that was very hard on both of his wives, who tried to live there with him, and neither really could—although Dorothy Dehner, his first wife, did live there many years with him. But she ultimately started to leave more and more. It's not really well understood how much time she actually was spending up there with him. But certainly, it was very hard on his second wife, Jean Freas, who was much younger than he was.

So for him, it was through his work that he expressed this pure sense of connection, both in how the individual works were made, but then also, once they were made, those works connected him to the world. They connected him, as he felt, to—the caveman making the drawing on the cave became connected to him when he made his drawing on a piece of paper. And when he made a sculpture, it connected him to the people who had used those tools, [01:14:00] and the people who had discarded them. So I think this kind of interconnection, and this really tremendous humanist spirit he had of creating unity, bringing things together, being part of a larger whole, and expressing something that really was kind of timeless, ultimately, was really important. I think a piece like the *Volton* is a great example of that, because it just connects so many things, literally and figuratively, in so many ways.

Dziedzic: It's interesting to think about his connection to the kind of modernist tradition, because, in a sense, finding that new unity was kind of a driving force of artists, writers, et cetera. New in a technical sense, and also new in a conceptual sense, [01:15:00] too. But the bringing things together, that process is interesting to think about, too, because, in a lot of cases, it was about representing a disunity. That just kind of goes to your point that there's a lot of different forces going on in his work that connect him to a lot of different traditions since.

Stevens: And he didn't feel the need to do everything in every piece, and that's why there's great diversity in his work. There are plenty of artists who take a lot of different source material and merge and create a style and a certain syntax, a certain grammar, that they kind of put together. But Smith did that almost afresh in every work, or in every maybe groups of works. It's why what's wonderful in the Storm King collection, too, [01:16:00] or even within similar years, you see such diversity of what those things are he's bringing together. Like the bronzes, which I think are a really important part of Smith's work, which are well-represented in Storm King. The *Portrait of a Lady Painter*, and *Sitting Printer*, and *Personage of May*, the three bronzes, again, in a very different way, bring together disparate sources, impulses, influences. They all relate, certainly, to surrealism, and the dislocation, the kind of uncanny feeling of recognition, but disassociation. *Portrait of a Lady Painter* is a really complex piece. It's been said that it may relate to his, [01:17:00] at that time, ex-wife, Dorothy Dehner. I'm not sure. He uses the palette as a kind of Piccasoid head, which is obviously a very unnatural and awkward place for a head to

be on a sculpture, which is sort of the underside of a horizontal element. So the painter is fused with the kind of easel, the kind of tripod support of the sculpture. It looks more like a structural element than a figurative element. So much of the sculpture relates to—again, it relates to a still life surface, of a kind of horizontal with objects put on it.

It's one of the sculptures, also, that—it's a sculpture that represents Smith's interest in viewpoints. [01:18:00] That this sculpture varies incredibly, depending on what angle you look at it. It's also something kind of unique—one of the unique aspects of Smith's work as a sculptor is—and Rosalind Krauss wrote about it in the two books that she wrote and dealt with him extensively. She referred to this lack of possession, this denial of possession. When you look at a Giacometti, or you look at a Brancusi, or even a Calder, as you walk around it—or in Calder's case, it moves—you grasp the work. You understand its structure. You could go away and you could remember that work. It was a series of forms; it looked this way. Whereas with Smith, it's very hard, as you walk around the work, in many of them—and this is one to really understand that it's the same object that you're seeing from different points of [01:19:00] view, because the different points of view are so unique, because they're functioning as different images. So from one end, you have the circle that you're looking through, almost like an oculus, and the piece is very vertical and very simple. Then as you just walk a quarter way around it, it becomes this drawing in space that's a completely different kind of object, a different kind of experience, visually and physically.

The process was interesting, too. Smith, who was identified with working directly with iron and found objects—this is a very elaborate process, where he makes the individual elements out of steel, out of wood, out of plaster, out of different elements. Then he took them to have them cast, sand cast. Unique casts of those objects. So now he's transferred from [01:20:00] whatever its original material that he made and the surface that he gave it—with plaster, with modeling compounds—and has a bronze cast of it. Then he works with those bronze elements to construct a unique sculpture. It's a really beautiful group of work. The Fogg Museum owns a beautiful piece from this series, as does the Hirshhorn.

The three at Storm King, I think, show a great range of approaches, again, to different kinds of subject matter and different feelings of what the sculptures are. *Personage of May* is a much more iconic work. It relates to the more totemic sculptures that he had been making for that decade, from '52, '53, up to 1960. *Personage of May* in 1957, [01:21:00] which was toward the tail end of these large bronzes, from '54 to like '58. He continued working in bronze into the '60s, but in different ways. He started to work more with lost wax and other methods. But *Personage of May* uses the fender of a car and a shovel to create this clearly—one of the most anthropomorphic works he made. It's a work, I feel, most hard to talk about, because it really is iconic. For me, that kind of means that the image is singular, and therefore it speaks for itself. I think the fact that he altered these surfaces so carefully is what's most [01:22:00] interesting

about it. The handle of the shovel is no longer the handle. It's this very thickened kind of element. He's created a relief on the shovel to give it—so it doesn't look any more like a functional object, although you can tell what it was. Then this very modeled, textured surface is a car, which is just a purely uninflected surface, normally. Again, he's imposed his mark and his hand on every aspect of the work. That gets to the—and then the surfacing on this green antique patina connects it with this idea of antiquity, so it becomes almost like something that could have been dug up from a primitive culture. Again, he's connecting himself, through the use of bronze, and through the use of this patina, with another whole era of art-making. [01:23:00] The opposite of the new. It's more like trying to look back and reflect the old, and connect himself with the traditions of sculpture, because this is how they made sculpture in the Bronze Age. He's going backward in terms of connecting himself to what he saw, I think, as a continuum, which were all the people that had ever made art.

[break in audio] '58 is another iteration of the merging of industry, figuration, and abstraction. It's these kind of very sensual forms that—his ability to evoke the weights and balances of the human body, [01:24:00] using very nonrepresentational forms, is remarkable. I think you really get the sense of a feminine presence in this work. Having to do with weights, having to do with the centrality of kind of the central figure of the—the central portion of the figure. It relates to kind of traditional, again almost like tribal ideas of fertility, to emphasize the belly, emphasize the middle of the figure, and the complexity of that. The kind of grounding of the sculpture, and the complexity of where it meets the ground, is also something very interesting, because normally sculpture treats that as a functional aspect of itself, as a base. Although his sculptures always had to have bases, or meet the ground in some way—it's something he paid a great deal of attention to. [01:25:00] In this sculpture, you see the sculpture dividing into kind of three sections. The bottom, complex, kind of more geometrical support pushing up, and then this kind of fluttering, biomorphic, ovoid forms that make up the central weights of a body, and then the more linear, airy part of the sculpture that gives it this real upward push, and then the clear indication of a head. The head is open, and you can see through it. You often see that in Smith, the idea of vision expressed in the sculpture itself. Many of the *Sentinels* have the heads—they're aspects that look like they could be eyes, they could be expressing the idea of vision. So the fact that you [01:26:00] look at the head of the sculpture and you look through it at the world, you're now in the sculpture. You're seeing what it's seeing, rather than seeing it.

Again, I think this is a great masterpiece of, if you were going to describe what's interesting about the tradition of the human figure in sculpture, going back to tribal art or prehistoric art, up to the present, I think this would be a great piece—along with several, like *Personage of May*—that really describe innovative ways of looking at the figure. In fact, when the Royal Academy, years ago, did an exhibition called—I think it was just called *Bronze*, was the title of the show—they chose one of David Smith's bronze. It was actually the mate to *Portrait of a Lady Painter*, which [01:27:00] was *Portrait of a Painter*,

which uses some of the same forms that he had sand cast in bronze. It was interesting to see that sculpture in the context of the trajectory of the history of bronze sculpture, and that his piece looked like an antique bronze, but it didn't, because it was so fresh for its time.

I want to say something about *Five Units Equal*, which is just a personal—although this is not necessarily interesting to anyone—but a personal favorite of mine, because I love pure abstraction myself. It's just an interest of mine. That Smith, for all the complexity and the layering that exists in so much of his work, always maintained an interest in the ability of pure abstraction to have a very strong, kind of emotional [01:28:00] and physical impact. This sculpture, I think, is a hugely influential work. I think the fact that Donald Judd, for example, was looking at David Smith at this time, that this idea of repetition—which was something that had been a modernist device, going back to Gertrude Stein and maybe a little before—the idea that repetition creates new kinds of meaning, and the repetition of the form and his reference in the title, that he is giving us an abstract experience. It sounds like a title that could be the title of a Richard Serra, rather than thinking that it's a work from the '50s. That it's five units equal, and that they are all suspended, they're all equal fabricated forms.

But what's [01:29:00] interesting and so different about Smith, and the artists who followed him and may have been influenced by the industrial purity of some of his work, is that it's completely handmade. He calls your attention at every moment to his deep connection to the work and its kind of metaphoric weight. The boxes on this are painted. Each vertical support is a different dimension, so that, in a way, it's functional, because the lowest support has to be the strongest, because it's supporting the weight of everything above it, and the top one can be the thinnest, because it's only supporting one box. It just creates, again, this great feeling of uplift. You can't not see it as somehow relating to a totemic figure, yet there's nothing figurative about it. That also has to do with the scale that he worked in. He worked often, [01:30:00] and certainly in this piece, in relationship to the scale of his own body.

I think that it's great that Storm King has this example of the pure abstraction, which is almost arrived at in *Books and Apples*—but by titling it that, he throws in a monkey wrench to the idea of seeing it as pure abstraction. Here, he's really saying that this is an important aspect of his heritage, I would say. It informs all his work. The idea of pure abstraction underlies so much of how he thought about sculpture, whether it's the little base element in *Iron Woman*, which is a very abstract, geometric object, or different parts of different sculptures. Here, he's giving that full voice in terms of just pure geometry [01:31:00] Then, in the piece, the *Albany*, you see—like in *Tanktotem VII*, you see the pure geometry, but it doesn't—he's still pushing it. He's still pushing it away from actual pure geometry, I feel, because there is that kind of—I don't know, feeling of nature. Maybe I'm reading that into it. At Storm King, where you see it with the *Raven*—it's usually exhibited with the *Raven* sculpture, and so it does take on some of that quality, almost, of having some naturalistic feeling to it. But the fact that it's just a few circles and rectangles is—if

you saw it with just, say, alone, with a Mondrian painting, you would see it in a different way. So that pure [01:32:00] abstraction was something that underlies a lot of his work, that we tend to then overlay other readings to, whereas in *Five Units Equal*, you really can see that pure expression of abstraction.

I didn't talk specifically about *Sitting Printer*. I think a lot of what I've said about the other two bronzes are true of it. It's a totally, again, fresh approach to those same issues. He's taken the little stool that a printer might use to sit down, and a letterbox, a form of what a printer might use, and created this totemic—for me, kind of primitive-looking—figure. But also, then, so it's connected to the technical aspect of printing, and it's connected to the [01:33:00] antiquity and the bronze casting and the patina. It's also, obviously, very, very figurative and relates to surrealism. So it almost has a Magritte feeling to it, or a kind of feeling of, again, this disjunction between the functionality of what these objects were, and now how they're being used as body parts. I think, all together, Storm King's collection of Smith is just absolutely an amazing opportunity to see these layers interwoven through a number of different pieces, and all made roughly within a 10-year period, a little over 10 years.

Then, lastly, [01:34:00] I don't know if I've talked about all of them, but the latest edition to the Storm King Smith collection, the *Cubi XXI*, is his most celebrated series. It's the group of work that was—the last works that he exhibited were the *Cubis* and the *Zigs*, which were the two large-scale series that he made in the '60s. He started both of them in 1961. He did not make a *Zig* in 1965, so I don't know if that series was finished or not. There are far fewer *Zigs*. He still was working on the *Cubis* at the time of his death. Although he said he wanted to stop doing them. I think he said something—I'm paraphrasing—that I keep thinking I'm done with them, and then I make one or two more. They're, again, this [01:35:00] wonderful expression, going back to the earliest ideas of geometric abstraction, to the Russian constructivists, to pure geometry and geometric abstraction.

Yet, in *Cubi XXI*, you see this kind of angular support, like you would see in an old marble sculpture from ancient Greece, where you need to have a support so there's something there holding it up. Rather than do it in a kind of subtle or tricky way, he makes that another integral and quite important element in the sculpture. Then the balancing on the one curved lozenge shape—again, the piece looks like, as in *Study in Arcs* and in the piece *Becca*, like it really is in motion and has just been frozen, and could fall over, could kind of move. Yet there isn't that sense of precariousness, because of the way [01:36:00] that it's welded, the way that it's put together. What you end up with is not a sense that it could really dissolve, but this is frozen, and I, David Smith, am the one that decided this is what it could be. And yes, it could be something else, and you could see it as something else, but this is my reality.

I think that taking this very solid, massive forms and giving it this very light, reflective surface, and the ground stainless steel—it's great that Storm King has now, also, this example of that late work. Which I

really feel, along with the *Zig* sculptures, are a kind of—because he didn't live long enough to make the next work, became the kind of coda of his career. Both the *Zigs* and the *Cubis* [01:37:00] absorb most of the interest that he had in terms of geometric abstraction, the visual nature of sculpture, and at the same time, this expansive scale. So as the largest piece in Storm King's collection, and one of the larger pieces that he made, it's a nice kind of end piece for the Storm King collection. Not that Storm King won't get more, but—

Dziedzic: It is a bridge, in a sense, to some of the larger sculptures that they have from other artists who, I think, were inspired by Smith, in a way. It has that function as well. Thank you for that.

[Side conversation]

Dziedzic: Can you talk about your involvement with Storm King in terms of the maintenance of the sculptures or their conservation? The kind of ongoing challenges that outdoor work causes.

Stevens: As far as conservation goes, I think [01:39:00] the real challenge is about preservation. Unfortunately, it does often get to rehabilitation, but that's what you want to avoid. Also, there is the reality that any physical object will deteriorate, and will age. I don't think that that was a huge issue to Smith. Even you can see, with the patinas he put on his sculpture, that that represented damage. We think of it, and he certainly thought of it, as a great surface for a sculpture, but a bronze patina was an accident that happened to ancient Greek sculpture and became beloved by 19th-century artists. But [01:40:00] I think that he felt a little bit that way. I know that one collector, who owned one of his *Agricola* sculptures, wrote to him, saying that they were concerned that they had it outside and it was rusting, and they were kind of concerned about that. His answer was that he liked rust. That the work had a life of its own. Our view is to avoid that at any cost, but on the other hand, what we would not ever really propose for Smith's work, which is to bring work back to what it looked like the day he made it.

On the other hand, it's our goal, and I think it should be everyone's goal, to prevent all deterioration. I think that the best case is [01:41:00] really about conservation, rather than restoration. When you get to the point of—whereas a lot of sculptures—I'm sure several at Storm King—it's part of the plan, that they just are repainted every so often, or some artists may feel that certain parts of their work could be re-fabricated and remade. I know some living artists redo their work. They have a work they made in the '60s, and they'll completely repaint it in modern paints now, which we wouldn't do. I know that some of Smith's work, like, for example, the white sculptures that we showed, those are repainted. Works like *Study in Arcs* have to be repainted every once in a while. But a lot of effort, as you know, went into that with—I worked with Storm King, and conservators work, to make sure that that sculpture was [01:42:00] repainted as close as it can be to look as it did when it was first painted.

That's possible with a monochromatic, uninflected surface, where Smith's surfaces were—like, for example, the *Cubis*. This is an example—or *Books and Apples*. The stainless steel pieces. Smith said himself that if those ever got worn or weathered or damaged, that you could just regrind the surface. Now, we wouldn't take that view, and we wouldn't do it, and I don't think any museum would do it. His hand and his gesture is, to us, very important. I don't know how important it was—it was important to him in his process, and he was very vocally against anyone altering his work. It happened in one very notable case, where [01:43:00] a sculpture of his was stripped by a dealer and repainted a different—I don't know if stripped, but it was actually repainted a different color. Smith disowned the work, and said it's not a David Smith anymore, it's just worth the steel that's in it. He ended up getting the work back and repainting it himself.

I think that the conservation issues for Smith are unique, as they are for every artist. Every artist has their own approach to what they find acceptable, and maybe we're even a little more strict than Smith would have been himself in terms of what can or can't be done. One of his great bronze sculptures—it's now in the collection of Harvard, that was donated by Lois Orswell, who was a great patron and collector of Smith's. He told her she could pour rhubarb juice on it every once in a while, maybe that would help the bronze patina age [01:44:00] well. He was a little bit all over the map in terms of what that surface means. What is its relationship to the world, to time, to age, and how is that impact—and I think it's different on different pieces, too. Take a piece like the *Tanktotem*, that's painted by Smith. It has the integrity of a painting. I don't think he would have wanted—I feel pretty strong that he would not have wanted someone to repaint that sculpture. So it's our job to maintain each work as carefully as we can to keep it from aging and being altered from the surfaces that he gave them. I think that Storm King does a very good job of that, and a lot of attention is given, for example, to the [01:45:00] bronzes and to maintaining them. I think, for example, the iron sculptures, the *Voltri-Bolton* piece, the piece *Becca*, that those works are also maintained very well in terms of the surface treatments that have been able to maintain the natural steel surface.

I don't think it's a really big issue. I think Storm King addresses it really well. I think most museums do. I think there's a certain standard that we haven't really seen a big problem in terms of it. Really the biggest problem is damage, and that we've been really lucky. I think Storm King has been very lucky not to have damage to the work. I don't know if I've even answered the question, because I'm not sure there's— [01:46:00] there's not a problem, so I don't think there's really much of an answer. I think conservation is a really—ultimately, I think our highest priority for art. Otherwise, it's just a temporary thing, and we want it to last and share it with future generations. So I think that museums and collectors and artists' estates are all pretty much on the same page. People that are on a different page about it are usually the artists themselves, I think. That they have their own views. But once they're not there anymore, I think we all

have to have the same view, that we just preserve, maintain, and do all we can to protect the integrity of how that artist left that work.

Dziedzic: Well, I do have questions about the exhibitions that have been at Storm King, but let's just meet again and—

Stevens: Yeah, I think we'll have to do that.

Dziedzic: We can spend time with those.

Stevens: Also, you'll be able to listen to this, and if there's any parts that are repetitive or that we need to [01:47:00] make more concise, we can do it.

Dziedzic: Yeah, absolutely. I want to make sure you have time for your next appointment, so just—quick approaching, I think. But thank you so much. It's really invaluable to hear the details for each of the sculptures. So thanks so much.

Stevens: Well, thank you.

[End of session]

Interview with Peter Stevens (session 2)	Peter Stevens's home, Chelsea, NY
Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic	1 audio file
February 28, 2018	Some restrictions on use

Audio File 1

Dziedzic: Today is February 28, 2018, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Peter Stevens for the Storm King Oral History Program. This is our second session. So first I wanted to do maybe a little housekeeping, regarding some specific conservation questions. I think, last time, you talked really thoroughly about your conservation philosophy with Smith's sculptures, and commended the work that Storm King is doing. I think it would just be good to have on record your responses to some questions that came up with an independent conservator visit. Basically, the conservator was saying, these are the kinds of things that I see you're keeping [00:01:00] in mind. But to hear you respond to them would be good for our records. I don't have questions for every single sculpture, and I don't know how to ask these questions in an open and interesting way, so I'll just preface it with that. Again, for the record.

With *Books and Apples*, as you know, there's nothing going on to disrupt the actual surface design, but I just wanted to ask, I guess, is there ever any situation that you can imagine where the surface should be changed in some way, or would need to be changed? Thinking maybe 50 years in the future, 100 years in the future situations.

Stevens: [00:02:00] After Smith's death his assistant, Leon Pratt, reported that Smith felt that they could be reground if, for any reason, the surfaces were non-reflective. As an abstract expressionist gesture, the grinding is seen as very autographic, as very much the hand of the artist, and in some cases it was. But certainly, by the '60s, much of the grinding on the *Cubis*, for example, was done by Leon Pratt. Leon. He was his longtime assistant and was very attuned to working with Smith. So, it really was an extension of Smith's aesthetic. Our [00:03:00] view, and I think the generally held view, is that nobody should intervene, despite what Leon said, or whether David Smith felt that or not—that these sculptures were made in David Smith's studio, whether it was his hand or Leon's that ground them. That is the contemporaneous finished work.

That said, I believe that if a piece were seriously damaged, to the point where the piece was not functioning anymore as a sculpture, really, and the surface was so damaged that, for example, a mark or a big scratch were there that interrupted the gesture of the grinding, then I think there would have to be an intervention. Intervention, in my opinion, [00:04:00] for Smith's sculpture, is the equivalent of a painting. So I would almost universally take the view: what would you do if this were a painting? If there were a big, huge scratch or cut across the surface of a painting, you would have to alter that. You would

have to fix it. You would now have a fixed, restored work. So, I think that that's, for me, the same criteria that we use for Smith's sculpture.

A very extreme case would be the stainless steel, because there's so many infinitesimal gestures on the piece. Certainly, a little scratch here and there I don't think is a problem. Smith used steel that was scratched. If you look almost at any one of his works, and even look at contemporaneous photographs from when he made them, they are not pristine. They are not perfect. These are industrial materials, and there was not a preciousness of a lack [00:05:00] of any accidental marking on them. So even now, with perfect photographic records to see, oh, this little, tiny scratch wasn't there 25 years ago, I again would equate that to a crack in a Mondrian painting. No one would dream of going and filling in every crack in a Mondrian. So there is a natural aging process that I think always has to be allowed for with any work of art, and to intervene with that would, I think, ultimately mar the intention of the artist and the feeling of rightness that the work has, ultimately, for the viewer.

Dziedzic: And what about the use of a protective wax? I think there's been discussion with maybe the *Cubi* sculptures about whether that wax is tinted. The general [00:06:00] rules around using that as a maintenance measure.

Stevens: Smith never put wax on any stainless steel pieces that I'm aware of. I talked, the last time we talked, about the *Forgings* as an example of him using layers of varnish to protect the shiny surface of mild steel sculptures, because without that, they would rust. The use of varnish, oils, waxes, polyurethane, were things that Smith experimented with. Of course, those materials change also over time. So a varnish yellows. Oils decrease in their oiliness. I think that, again, we use the same conservation standard of, first of all, doing things that are reversible. So we would never put [00:07:00] or advise putting on any sculpture—painted steel, mild steel, stainless steel—putting another material on that work that could not be removed, or would not wear over time, for example.

The Estate, for example, in the '60s, put a polyurethane varnish that Smith used in his lifetime, on many, many of his rusted steel sculptures. Some of those surfaces are intrusive now. The varnish has turned brown. But it's wonderful that they did serve the conservation function of preserving perfectly what's underneath them. So those varnishes can be removed. But again, we recommend revarnishing them, because it's wonderful to be able to preserve those surfaces. That's an example, I think, of a very well-thought-out and, [00:08:00] in practice, worked-out, conservation program that Storm King does on the rusted steel sculptures, for example. The use of oil that is thinned to the right density so that it doesn't intrude with the surface of the sculpture, but it does protect it from any rust. It wears off and is renewed over time. So I think that that's a great example of being able to really preserve the original surface of the sculpture, with as little change as possible, but also not adding something to the sculpture to do that.

Dziedzic: Then I think—so for instance, with *Becca*, since it's an outdoor sculpture, there are issues with moisture getting into the horizontal pieces of it. So I think in that case, there are some physical objects that are not visible [00:09:00] to the viewer, that are used to reduce the moisture or stop the moisture. If you could just talk about interventions like that.

Stevens: I don't know what you're referring to, and I'm not sure that I'm aware of that.

Dziedzic: You'll have to forgive me—this was quite a long time ago that I talked with Mike about this—but I believe there is just an issue of moisture collecting in just those hollow [horizontal] pieces of that sculpture. Basically, they have some strategies to reduce the moisture accumulation within those areas that would be to prevent any degrading of that steel.

Stevens: I think it's great. I think when you can do something that prevents damage, again, without altering the work, it's fabulous. Another example, of drilling holes in [00:10:00] sculpture so moisture doesn't—and that I would not—again, you're changing the actual nature of the sculpture. I would rather see a little water stain. Because these sculptures, in a way, are living things. I think that the fact that Smith put them outside around his studio, and he himself lived with them, it's a part of his aesthetic that they are not frozen. They are like living things. I really believe that, on the one hand, he was ok with that. He understood that things would evolve and change over time. It's the history of sculpture. I think we talked a little bit about it last time. Certainly, any sculpture from antiquity is a far cry from what it looked like in antiquity. [00:11:00] That was the tradition and the history of sculpture. He was not someone that was trying to create a modern space-age perfection, where any change in the surface would represent some radical departure from his intention. It would be worse to then add an element or change the physical nature of the sculpture to prevent it from aging. So ideally, if you can add something that is removable—whether it's structural, whether it's a surface treatment—is an ideal solution.

Dziedzic: Let me ask you about *Personage of May*, which—I think that vertical pole structure is a different metal. Or it is metal, rather than bronze. [00:12:00] Basically, I think that there's a management of whatever corrosion is related to that, but the question came up of could it be X-rayed or radiographed to better understand what that interior structure is. What do you think about that level of preparation? Maybe not intervention, but knowledge, I suppose, and attempts to predict what could happen in the future?

Stevens: I think it's great if you can—research is always useful. Even if you aren't able, right now, to interpret it fully, you'll be able to, possibly, in the future. I think that it's a good thing, and it's also a basic necessity to really understand what the problem is. So, for example, I know I've talked to Mike about that

sculpture. [00:13:00] I think the issue with that sculpture is the elements of *Personage of May* were fabricated by David Smith out of found objects. They were altered found objects that were sand cast in bronze. The bronze elements were then put together, welded, by Smith, in bronze. He clearly used some structural support in that piece that was not bronze. I think that the belief is that it's another metal, whether it's iron—and that the reaction between the two metals is something that certainly was not intentional. If it's a matter of degradation of the original point of having that support, which was to support the structure of the piece, and it's not visible, then I think it's absolutely appropriate to fix it—to either stop the corrosion or to even, possibly, ultimately replace an element that was [00:14:00] really inadequate to do what it was designed to do, in a case where it's not altering the visual appearance of the sculpture. It's actually preserving it.

The danger of doing that is sometimes one thinks one is doing that, and it turns out, in later understanding of conservation techniques, you've actually done something bad. I think the biggest example of that is in painting, of lining oil paintings, where they affixed a canvas that was a malleable, a soft piece of canvas that was painted, to a support, and it cannot be removed. So now you have this hard, flattened-out object. It was believed, even just 20 or 30 years ago, that that was absolutely the right thing to do. I don't think people do it at all anymore. It's a horrible thing. Unless you had to do it, like the canvas was so deteriorated you had to affix the paint to something else. So I think that's something [00:15:00] I would avoid. I would avoid removing an iron support and putting in another metal because you think it's going to be better. Again, I would want to do something that might be removable, or put in something fiberglass that's nonreactive, and then later be able to do something else if you realize—or science advances. But with that piece, I think that the conservation issues of it are not affecting the actual visual appearance of the sculpture, so that makes it a little bit more academic, and something that can be thought through, and there's no crisis, really.

Dziedzic: Now, in terms of maintaining the patina on the bronze sculptures, my understanding from Mike is that, at some point, they'd been maintained with a colored wax to look like the patina that I assume was depicted in photographs at Bolton Landing, [00:16:00] and then that that was subsequently removed and the patina restored. What are your thoughts on that strategy?

Stevens: I think that that's an opposite evolution of what I was just talking about. It was going from a very conservative point of view, of we're not going to add anything to this sculpture. I think it was the right thing to do. At a certain point, the ultimate issues have to do with sustainability of—and the intention of the artist, and the realities as they play out in the world. If the intention of David Smith, as it was, was to have that piece green, from a traditional green patina—and we know that he did his own patinas, he experimented extensively with different chemicals, and he put things on the [00:17:00] sculptures—sometimes paints, sometimes chemicals, sometimes traditional patinas—that it seems horrible, the idea

of adding something else, changing it. But on the other hand, as with the tradition of bronze sculpture that is patinaed, patinas are traditionally redone and refreshed. There was a real—and there still is, I guess—a potential debate about what to do with the piece. We have a little bit of guidance from Smith himself. One of the bronze sculptures, *Detroit Queen*, which is now in the collection of Harvard University, was purchased by a collector of Smith's, someone he was quite close to, Lois Orswell. There's extensive correspondence between Lois Orswell and David Smith, which is a really rich resource. There is a reference [00:18:00] in their correspondence to this bronze green sculpture, from the same series of sculptures as *Personage of May* and *Portrait of a Lady Painter*, where David Smith advised her that she could put rhubarb juice on the sculpture, because the acid in the juice—it might give it a nice, more rich color.

I think that, although that's just one isolated remark, and Smith, like many people, often said very contradictory things—he might one day say put rhubarb juice on it, and the next day say no one can even touch it with a Q-tip. But I think in the case of the bronzes, our decision, ultimately, advising Storm King, and I think the view that Storm King took, was this is a patinaed bronze sculpture; to put green wax on it is really a [00:19:00] compromise that's not supporting the intention of the work, and the spirit and the feeling of what bronze meant to David Smith, and what a patina was. I think even if the color of the patina might be slightly different from the way it would have looked the day David Smith did it, certainly there's no such thing as a patina that's more than a few days old that looks the way that it did the day it was done. So I think that we really have in these pieces, now, a really optimal expression of Smith's intention, that they are patinaed bronze, with a traditional green patina that is aging over time, that's being affected by rain, that's being affected by the environment. And the worst thing would be to just lose that patina totally and have them turn brown or become something else.

Dziedzic: Now, for painted sculptures, like *Study in Arcs*, I think in one of the [00:20:00] earliest catalog of exhibitions at Storm King of David Smith's work, it was yellow-orange—it was described as being yellow-orange. So my questions are how was the salmon-pink color determined, and also, how often do you think is ideal in terms of repainting? How does one decide that something is faded and needs to be touched up?

Stevens: One factor is where you are in the timeline of a work of art. Where we are now with *Study in Arcs* is sort of late in the timeline of the original paint. That sculpture was made by David Smith and put outside. There's not clear [00:21:00] documentation of what it may or may not have looked like at different points in his working and living with the piece, but we do have documentation of what it looked like when he died, the way he left the work, and that was pink. So there are photographs, but the problem with color photographs is that the color is not exact. You cannot photograph any colored object and then expect that the photograph is going to match the color. It's not that you just take a photograph and then say, let's

match that. So a fair amount of research was done, looking at other sculptures of David Smith's, looking at that particular color in relationship to his use of automotive paints, looking at what automotive paints existed at that time. It turns out that that pink color was not that far from—there were [00:22:00] identifiable automotive paints, which was the paint that Smith often used on his large sculptures, that were that color. I was consulted pretty extensively at the time—to arrive at that tonality and that color, so that the piece could be restored.

I don't know if I made it clear, but the piece had already deteriorated. It already had been repainted. So there was this idea of bringing it back. That was a restoration, I would say, rather than a conservation. Let's bring this piece back. It was not documented, this intervening period. So we have photographs, we know what it looked like when David Smith finished it. And to bring that piece back to the intention of the artist, the decision was to [00:23:00] paint it—repaint it the texture and color that we believe, with all the evidence that we have, that it originally was. So once you've done that, it should be done as frequently as is needed. There's no argument, really, that would hold water to not do it. Certainly you want to protect the physical structure of the work, so leaving it unpainted, letting the paint deteriorate where moisture was getting into the steel, and actually damaging the physical structure of the work, would be horrible. The good thing is, by restoring the paint and maintaining the paint, the physical sculpture is not being altered at all. That was an important part of the painted sculpture for Smith. He had this view that the paint was serving the function of inhibiting rust. He used that as [00:24:00] one of the explanations of why he was painting his sculpture. He said, well, you need the paint, because otherwise the piece would rust. Of course, it became a major aesthetic investigation of his, how paint and sculpture interact, and how the aesthetics of painting and sculpture can interact.

So I think that *Study in Arcs*, like the white sculptures, particularly, and a few others where there are flat, uninflected surfaces that are painted, it's absolutely the right thing to repaint them and to maintain the sculptures. It's really wonderful that a piece like that can be seen out of doors. So that's the other trade-off. There's no painted steel sculpture you can put outdoors that would not need to be repainted. Maybe if you used some [00:25:00] super high-tech, amazing modern paint, you might not have to do it as much, but then you would lose Smith's surface. So the fact that we're using a paint that looks like the paints he used, that needs to be repainted, the trade-off of that repainting is that it's one of the few painted, large-scale sculptures of Smith's that you can see outside in nature, as he intended it. So I think it's an amazing outcome.

Dziedzic: And what's your gauge for when it's basically faded enough that it needs to be repainted?

Stevens: Well, when the paint loses its gloss—not that it has to be shiny and brand-new, but when it loses the sense of, I would say, a consistency. If you look at paint that ages, it gets chalky. It gets mottled.

It's not all one color. It looks sad. [00:26:00] I think that the piece should not look sad. It should look happy and healthy. It's a problem I have. When I talk about my own aesthetic, so much of my aesthetic was formed by Smith, so maybe I'm channeling him, but also my personal views are really deeply informed by his, and what my understanding of his intention is. His painted sculptures, certainly from the '60s, have to look fresh. I would say, if that paint starts to look old, even just to the eye, just to a casual observer, and it looks like something that needs repainting, it definitely needs repainting, and it should be done as needed. Also, once the paint surface starts to have what I'm calling a sad look, or a worn look, it also is degraded in terms of its functionality of inhibiting rust, and that is a really high priority.

Dziedzic: Ok, that's super helpful. I don't think I have any other specific questions about the maintenance of the sculptures, in terms of conservation.

I think we can move on to talking about exhibitions. I did want to ask about—I think this is something to keep in mind as we talk about exhibitions, but I think, in terms of looking at the 14 in the collection now—[00:28:00] their siting, and where they've been placed at Storm King. In fact, I'm not sure how much they've changed over time, or whether they've always been more or less in the same arrangement. So I guess I would maybe ask you where you think the best way to talk about the particular locations of all the sculptures—where in our conversation it's best to talk about that.

Stevens: It's interesting to think about site specificity in relationship to Smith's sculpture, because it's clearly not something that he thought of in the terms that we think of it now, because of where sculpture went in the '70s, and earthworks, and artists like Richard Serra in the collection of [00:29:00] Storm King, whose work was made for that specific site. Clearly, Smith did not make work, even at his own property—in his fields of sculpture, there's no evidence, and I think it would be very far-fetched to theorize that he made any work for a specific location. The fact that he put the pedestals in rows and planted a sculpture almost—it's been referred to as a sculpture farm—that leads to the view that they're almost arbitrary. That they're just put there in rows. But it is true, contrary to that, that he moved sculptures from place to place, and he did actually put pedestals in specific places, for specific works. He oriented pieces so he could see them from [00:30:00] his home, so he could see them from his studio, so he could see them when he was sitting out on the deck outside of his house. So he did have specific sites where he moved sculptures to look at them, even changing the location of a specific sculpture, which was labor-intensive. He also took his sculptures, sometimes, from his studio, three miles down, in a truck, down the hill, and looked at them on the lake, and photographed his work extensively on the dock, in the town of Bolton Landing, with Lake George as the background.

So how these sculptures looked in nature, and what view you first saw them from—from the side, on a flat surface, in relation to other works—I think is something that is interesting, but it's also something that is

changeable. We don't have records—again, that I'm aware of—[00:31:00] we don't have records in which Smith instructs someone how or where to install a sculpture of his. This has to be with a tree behind it, or this has to be on a pedestal this height. That's unusual. A lot of sculptors—especially since Smith did think of every detail of his work. He was really not leaving much to chance. Yet it seems, in the installations of his work in museums and in galleries, they're often shown on varying heights and different pedestals. He clearly didn't have one way of looking at the work.

That's all a very long way to say that I would not propose that a place like Storm King, which has this tremendous collection, find the "right" installation for those works. Especially because Storm King has repeat visitors, and lives in [00:32:00] history, that adds work to its collection, that rethinking and re-looking at the work in different configurations will only add a richness to how the collection is seen. I think, again, fitting within David Smith's own aesthetic, context was something that was really important to him, and it wasn't about his control. It was about someone else bringing their experience, their memories, their associations into the mix, to complete and create a richer meaning for his work. I think, at Storm King, where you can see the relationship, let's say, between the bronze sculptures, between *Portrait of a Lady Painter* and *Personage of May*, if you see those two pieces close together, you immediately see a lot of the variation of how different they are, even though they're dealing with similar materials, similar methods. [00:33:00] If, on the other hand, you were to take one of those bronzes and put it quite at a distance from the other, you might see them totally differently.

So I think that Storm King has changed the siting of the sculptures over the years that I've been going there, and I think it could happen even more. There has been a sense that there's a rightness to some of these places. And it's true that a piece like *Study in Arcs* looks great where you have it, with a background where it's contained in a space, almost like a painting would be on a wall, and giving it that priority. Trying it in another place—which is also—I'm switching thoughts, but it's also great with sculpture, or painting, or the installation of a work of art. That's completely reversible. If you put it in the wrong spot, you just move it. So I think that thinking [00:34:00] of the art, especially at a place like Storm King, that is a sculpture museum, that that's one of the interesting and enriching things that can be done with the collection as a whole, is to bring pieces by one artist or by multiple artists to multiple dialogues over time.

Sort of a sideways answer to the question. I've never experienced, at Storm King—and credit to Storm King—I've never had the experience of seeing a sculpture and saying, why on earth is it there? The piece is not working. It happens quite a lot in museums, in interior spaces. It's, why is it so close to the wall? Why do they have this painting behind it? You get these much more practical intrusions in the visual experience of the work. Storm King has the space, and I think the sensitivity. [00:35:00] I like that Smith's work is kept together as a group. It doesn't mean it would always have to be that way. I think there is a variation in terms of how close some pieces are, and some pieces are farther apart, some are closer. I

think that also is something that's appropriate for Smith. Somehow, if they were so spread apart, so each piece had completely its own space, I think you would lose something of this animate interaction of these diverse sculptures, which replicates, or at least is reminiscent of how he showed them in Bolton Landing. That's one of the most significant features of the works at Storm King, is that it is the only place in the world where you get a sense of how Smith saw his own work, how he [00:36:00] lived with his own work, and how the works lived with each other.

Dziedzic: Thank you. Why don't we, I guess, go through each of the exhibitions. I guess the first one ["David Smith"] predates your involvement. That was in 1971. I believe it was essentially announcing that this collection was—that Storm King had this collection. I'm wondering if you have any knowledge of how that exhibition came together, and if there was any input from the Estate in terms of how Storm King placed the sculptures at that time, or showed them.

Stevens: No, I don't have any—I didn't see the show, and I, again, have not seen, in our archives or in any records, any correspondence or any information about that exhibition. So it really falls [00:37:00] out of my knowledge.

Dziedzic: As far as I can tell—I couldn't find anything that was necessarily especially nuanced, or a nuanced explanation of how the location was arranged or the siting was arranged. I think maybe it predated that strategy.

The next was in 1976 [also entitled "David Smith"], again before your involvement, but there's a little bit more information on this one. [00:38:00] For instance, this exhibition included loans, and then a few other kinds of work by Smith, drawing and ceramics, and then also some works by Dorothy Dehner.

Stevens: I don't remember this exhibition—and that's just more of a comment on me than the exhibition. I may have seen it. David Smith was relatively new to me at that time. I met Rebecca Smith in 1974. It's more than likely that we went to see the show together. But certainly I was not involved at all with anything [00:39:00] to do with the Estate at that time, and as I said, David Smith was even—I was newly aware of him and his work. I would have been seeing it very freshly, as just any viewer saw it. I'm not aware, again, of any of the decision or curatorial process, or any of the background of what led to that exhibition.

Dziedzic: Was it typical for institutions to be beginning to show this fuller view that we talked about last time of Smith as an artist and a person, in the way that this exhibition starts to get at?

Stevens: No. I think that Smith's work was, and often still is, fragmented into exhibitions—because of the diversity and the richness of the work, [00:40:00] it tends to be more approachable by fragmenting it. Even, for example, the centennial exhibition—this is jumping forward—2006 at the Guggenheim, curated by Carmen Giménez, chose to focus on very specific aspects of the work. The word “retrospective” was taken off that exhibition in the middle of its planning, because it was understood that it would not be retrospective. It would be a selection. An exhibition which grew out of that, because those works are almost completely absent, was the show of geometric abstraction Carol Eliel curated for LA County, “David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy,” which, again, segmented out, from the '30s, all the way until the '60s, and in all media, the ideas that Smith was really immersed in throughout his career, [00:41:00] dealing with geometric abstraction.

I think the idea of a show like the Storm King show, to show a range of work—to not parse it and show one aspect, but to try and show a richer array, was, and still is, a unique approach. It's one that I believe in, and the last show that I curated, the show at Hauser & Wirth, “Origins & Innovations,” took exactly that approach as the purpose of the exhibition, to show work from the '30s to the '60s, in all media, in all scales, without trying to make it into a narrative or a progression, and to show the intermixing of these rich sources and inspirations that Smith drew on, and how he reconfigured [00:42:00] them over time.

Again, I don't recall the Storm King exhibition well enough to comment on how much it did that. But also including Dorothy Dehner, who was an important influence in—well, that's even the wrong word. I mean, an important figure in David Smith's life, and I'd say influence in his aesthetic development, because she was the first artist he met, he ever knew, and it was really through her that he ended up at the Art Students League, and ended up becoming the artist that he became. Their long marriage, their aesthetic relationship, as well as personal—I think it was really nice to be able to show some of her work in relationship with his.

Dziedzic: Let's move on to “David Smith: Drawings for Sculpture: 1954-1964” (1982). [00:43:00] I guess you would have been involved at this time. I'm curious to know if you were involved, and how.

Stevens: This is a touchy one. It's one of those uncomfortable moments in the David Smith legacy. The exhibition that was called “Drawings for Sculpture” consisted of works that had been taken from a deconstructed sketchbook of David Smith's. It's something that was, and is, very upsetting to me, that that was done. It was done by people that had been friends of David Smith's. It was not known by the [00:44:00] Estate, or certainly not by Rebecca and Candida, that this sketchbook was missing. It was only much, much later, roughly around the time of that exhibition, that these works surfaced. This very personal and very important sketchbook of David Smith's—we found out, only through a small dealer in California, that this sketchbook even existed. We were, unfortunately, at that time unable to have it

returned to the Estate. It was the position of the people that had it that David Smith had given them that sketchbook. It was the sketchbook he was using at the time of his death to document his finished works, and also to do some sketches and ideas for work, but many, many of the sketches in that book were his records for his work. In my view, it's highly [00:45:00] questionable that he gave it to anybody. That he had it with him at the time he died in Bennington, and these people from Bennington ended up with the sketchbook, I find very problematic. So I was very upset. We tried to get them not to destroy the sketchbook. They wouldn't listen to us. They wouldn't communicate with us about it.

Then you jump to the idea of, ok, we couldn't prevent the book from being destroyed. The drawings are beautiful. They're important. They weren't created by Smith to be exhibited as individual works. They were a sketchbook, of which we have 50. It's something that was a very important part of his process and his life as an artist. David Collens approached me to talk about the idea of doing the exhibition, and what did I think about it. I probably told him exactly what I'm telling you now. Ultimately, as I [00:46:00] said earlier in our conversation, our view—Rebecca, Candida, and mine—is the more we know about Smith, the more we share about Smith in the world, the better. So the idea of, because we're unhappy that this sketchbook has been destroyed, because we have questions about even its rightful ownership and all of these issues, don't preclude the benefit, or don't contradict the fact that there is a benefit from sharing this, from looking at it and seeing what Smith did. The exhibition was something that we were not involved with. It was something that Storm King undertook on their own, had their own relationship with these people that we were not on speaking terms with.

Some of the sketchbook pages had been sold. [00:47:00] The reason it was broken up was purely commercial. It was the idea that the people who had the sketchbook wanted to sell the individual drawings. They have gone out into the world, and I think they do—like any living legacy, it may not be a happy or certainly not an ideal outcome, but it's another part of the story. It's another part of who David Smith was. The sketchbook is documented, in order, in our archive, so we know what the sketchbook looked like. We've tried to keep track of as many of the pages as we can, and leave it at that. So I think it was a worthwhile exhibition, but one that had a unhappy association for us.

Dziedzic: Yes, I had no idea. You'd mentioned last time that there were drawings being shown at the Whitney in '79, I think. At what point [00:48:00] were there exhibitions of Smith's drawings that, I guess, were works that were meant to be shown, that didn't have this other troubled legacy?

Stevens: Well, David Smith drew throughout his career. As many artists do, he started out as a student, learning to draw. He had one of the great pedagogues. One of the great teachers of drawing was Kimon Nicolaides. You can still buy his book. Every art student probably should have it. I think it's called *The Natural Way to Draw*. He understood the relationship of line and contour and shape, and had his

approach to drawing that I think was very influential to Smith. Drawing became, for Smith, [00:49:00] a central core for his approach to art, primarily for two reasons, I think. One, paraphrasing him, it's the closest to our true self. The drawn line or gesture is an immediate extension of the human body and the motion of making that mark. The fact that the caveman did it, that drawings could even exist in nature, just as he commented, the marks that an animal makes when it walks through the snow. Drawing represents the most direct manifestation of making an image. Also, as I said before, image-making was the centerpiece of Smith's aesthetic, which is very unusual, and I think one of his great [00:50:00] innovations was viewing sculpture as a purely visual medium, not as necessarily about mass and form, but about image.

Drawing was very important to him. Early on, I'd say in the early '50s, he started to exhibit his drawings almost equally to his sculpture. I think he would do an exhibition of drawing one year, an exhibition of sculpture the next year. He drew extensively. He wrote about drawing. He lectured about drawing as being not only important to him, but, he felt, very important to what art is. The Museum of Modern Art was very supportive of that aspect of his work, and they also did a retrospective of his drawings—at least one. Both museums and the commercial galleries he worked with exhibited [00:51:00] his drawings, and they were collected.

It was really only at the time, again, of the Estate, after David Smith died, that the drawings took a backseat, because Greenberg was much more interested in focusing on certain aspects of the sculpture that he thought were the most important. For Greenberg, it was really about prioritizing—which is a nice way of putting it. That you just focus on what's important. That sounds good in a lot of aspects of life, but I don't think it's a good approach to art, looking at art. Because the importance of a work can be greatly enhanced and informed by looking at something that you could deem less important. For example, a drawing as opposed to a sculpture. I think that understanding what Smith was doing in his works on paper, and in his paintings, informs and makes the richness [00:52:00] of his sculpture that much more.

The exhibition that I was talking about at the Whitney in '79 and '80 [December 5–February 10, 1980] curated by Paul Cummings was, as far as I understand, probably the first full retrospective of David Smith's drawings. That wasn't a group that he put together. That was, after his death, someone looking back and really evaluating this body of work. There were over a hundred works in the show, and it covered, from the 1920s up until the '60s, most of the vast number of approaches that Smith took to drawing, from drawing with pen and ink, to the use of his own invented medium, egg ink, where he combined [00:53:00] egg yolk with India ink to temper paint on paper. And one of his really great innovations, which was the use of commercial, industrial spray enamel on paper and on canvas.

Subsequent to that exhibition at the Whitney, the exhibitions that the Estate did, we almost always tried to include drawing, painting, and sculpture in almost every exhibition that we were involved with. Again, for the reason that the media inform each other, and they were linked for Smith. They weren't really separate. In fact, he stated that there was no difference for him between drawing and sculpture, except the difference of one dimension. Which is to say that the intent is the same, the message is the same. [00:54:00] It's just the fact that they exist in the world differently, but for him they exist in a way, in your mind and in your experience, similarly as images.

Dziedzic: That's really interesting to hear. It seems so rare to have the different kinds of media together. I guess, in light of what you were saying about fragmenting, the tendency to fragment his work, do you feel that those kinds of exhibitions with those different intents, do they work in tandem in terms of representing Smith's work to the world? [00:55:00] Is there a time and space, I guess, for the fragmented exhibitions, is what I'm asking.

Stevens: It's a hard question, because I've realized that some of the assumptions I make are not really relevant to how other people are looking at the work. I have the luxury of having the memory of many exhibitions. So for me, they become cumulative. If, on the other hand, someone that's going to see their first exhibition—how are they going to perceive it? Now, I think because of the amount of information, the amount of art, the huge explosion of visual [00:56:00] culture, I feel now that we should probably try to do more with every exhibition, or really focus it dramatically and have it clear that one is doing—not even a selection, but having a focus. I think there's a place—I'm sort of thinking out loud—I think there's a place for both. Because when you do—if you're just going to show, let's say, the *Tanktotem* series, well, why would you do that? It's not really showing the full picture of David Smith. But it's so clear that you're not, that it's ok. You can go see that and understand. And if you love it or hate it, you might want to see what else David Smith did, and it would open the door. That's the goal of any exhibition, I think, to open something to the viewer that they didn't have before.

[00:57:00] To do an exhibition that includes drawing, painting, sculpture, that shows the richness of how Smith approached his work, is very difficult. It's difficult to do it well. It's also difficult to do it completely—maybe impossible to do it completely, especially with an artist like Smith. I talked, for example, to Kirk Varnedoe, who was going to do an exhibition at MoMA for the centennial of David Smith's birth in 2006. Tragically, he was ill and passed away and was not able to do that exhibition. He was really a great scholar, and a really thoughtful and deep thinker about art. He and I talked extensively about the idea of what MoMA would do for this show. We were [00:58:00] talking in the '90s. He said it would have to be the whole museum. You would have to fill the whole museum. You would have to have a section for the jewelry, a section for the photographs. You would have to show the drawing, the painting, the sculpture. That vision has never been manifest. There's never been an exhibition that has taken that on, and it

would be a wonderful thing. So given that that is not really in the works, I think that even a show like the show that we did at Hauser & Wirth, showing the various media in different periods, it is not showing everything that David Smith was. It's, again, just opening some doors that people can walk through and maybe they become interested. There only were a few works on paper in that exhibition. Maybe they want to find out what other things he did. Then we do shows, also, that focus on very specific [00:59:00] bodies of work. We could do a show on the egg ink drawings from the 1950s. But for us, again, this idea of the cumulative—even though, as I said, other people may not see it that way—that's still how we have to think about it. Catalogs exist, history exists. Hopefully people over time do see numerous exhibitions. We just take that view that it's part of a living culture.

Dziedzic: I almost feel like we should talk about “David Smith: The White Sculptures” (2017) exhibition next, actually, because it seems, that it hits on both of those kinds of strategies.

Stevens: I think the other two exhibitions really both speak in different ways to what we're talking about. “The White Sculptures” is an example of a highly, highly focused exhibition. There were eight monumental white sculptures that Smith made. So it's really a concise group of work. They were [01:00:00] all made within a few years of each other. It is very focused. Again, that's what I think the strength of the exhibition was. No one would go to see that show and think, oh, David Smith is the guy that made the white sculptures, and so you don't have to worry in a defensive way when you're planning an exhibition like that. It opens a door, again, to one specific interest that Smith had. I think the white sculptures represent a very extreme concern of Smith's, or extreme expression of this idea of the visual nature of sculpture. They're, for the most part, relatively flat sculptures. They occupy the space of a painting. Some of them are only a few inches [01:01:00] thick, although they're many feet in terms of width and height. Their whiteness cuts out space from the landscape very similarly to the way that he was thinking about space in the spray paintings that he was making. So this interaction between two- and three- dimensional work, the idea of white as either a figure or a ground, the nature of how we see objects in space—do we see the space or do we see the object? Can we see both at the same time?

I think that was an example of a really focused exhibition. We were then able to branch out. As I said, I like to show that richness. If door was opened by the white sculptures, little windows then were opened by other aspects of that exhibition. How did he think of white in his photographs? How did he think of [01:02:00] white as an element in a sculpture, like in Storm King's *Tanktotem*, or in the coral sculptures. I think that, in curating the show, that richness was brought into play, taking this concise group of works, and then showing other avenues of how it connected into other aspects of Smith's work. So, ultimately, I think the experience of that show was both vertical and horizontal. Both the focus of one moment, one aesthetic approach, and then showing how it was part of a richer project.

The other exhibition, “The Fields of David Smith” (1997–99) was [01:03:00] the closest to the exhibition that I was talking about with Kirk Varnedoe, in a way, although it didn’t include every medium. It was highly focused on the sculpture. But the fact that it took place over three years made explicit this idea of the cumulative nature of how rich Smith’s work is, that it takes time. That you have to almost come back and see this show every year for three years to even start to get a sense of the range of the work. There were certain focuses that were brought out from year to year. The bronzes were focused on, at one point. The stainless steel sculptures were focused on. Also, the relationship between indoor and outdoor space for a Smith sculpture. That was an exhibition that I think really had a deep, [01:04:00] broad-ranging—the agenda was to really see the totality of Smith. The fact that Candida Smith was a co-curator with David on that exhibition, and had that DNA, and reflected her experience of living with her father’s work over a long course of time, of him making it and having lived with it—and she herself had experienced that change from year to year to year. So that was another way that Storm King emulated Bolton Landing. Bolton Landing, when David Smith was alive, was not static. It was new work every year. So it was really exciting, I think, for all of us, but especially for Candida and Rebecca Smith, to see this living procession of his work over a multi-year exhibition. I think it was one of the most exciting Smith projects that has taken place.

Dziedzic: It also seemed like [01:05:00] there were changes in the sculpture arrangement even within the years, too. Not just three different iterations, basically, but many within that, I guess which goes to your point of it emulating Bolton Landing, in a sense. It’s not just seasonal changes. It’s more based on the sculptor’s wish. I don’t know if anything changed unexpectedly, Candida requesting that anything be moved somewhat suddenly. I don’t know about the planning, the detailed planning of that exhibition.

Stevens: Well, that was a very collaborative project, because David and Candida worked, obviously, extensively on curating the exhibition, on the concept of it, expansive concept of it. Which was not the original—the original idea was to do an exhibition. [01:06:00] It then grew into the idea of it being a three-year exhibition. There was tremendous excitement. I still feel very excited at the support of—“let’s see where this goes.” Let’s follow it to a very rich, expansive view, which was—Smith was an expansive artist. It was the right thing. I was involved a fair amount in terms of the installation. There were a fair number of people, I think, involved in that dynamic, and it really was, again, a dynamic exhibition. It was the opposite of so many exhibitions where you have a checklist, you get what you can get, you hone it down, you have an exhibition designer come in, everything is done in a [01:07:00] model, and you fix it. This show had a much more organic—and it grew, not only leading up to the show, but as you said, during the years and over the years. It was a tremendous dynamic. The book is a beautiful document of it, really. Think you get that feeling in it.

Dziedzic: Yes. Maybe my question revealed that it's a little squirrely in our archive, too. Or hard to follow, in a sense that it seems as though there were things that happened dynamically or organically, but there may not be documentation.

Stevens: Yes, it was far from a bureaucratic exercise—or even academic, let's say. And that can be really great. You need that in certain cases. This was more of almost like a laboratory project, on a grand scale. What was done in terms of moving [01:08:00] so many big sculptures, bringing things together from so many collections, was hugely ambitious. I think that the fact that it was allowed to grow—it was the opposite of having something and then worrying about where you have to compromise—it was just whatever was needed was sought. Of course, you followed where it went. I think it was truly an exciting project for everyone involved.

Dziedzic: What was the Estate's role in securing loans? How much of the work that was shown was already in the Estate's collection?

Stevens: I think a fair number of works were ours, because we obviously are very willing lenders. Then there were some key collectors that owned Smith's work that are very supportive, that lent numbers of works. [01:09:00] I don't remember, but it's often the case where someone doesn't want to lend something, and then we'll intervene, and because it's the family and it's the Estate, we can coax and maybe guilt-trip people into feeling that their obligation to the public stewardship of the work should outweigh their private desire to have it in their backyard or whatever. But I think that's become more and more a problem than it was even then. I think we've seen a big shift, partly because values of art have gone up so much. People are very wary of potential damage. Often collectors want the work at their home. They want people to see it. They feel less of a sense of that public stewardship. Not across the board. There are obviously great, great collectors, and we're fortunate that many Smith collectors feel that [01:10:00] enthusiasm for sharing the work with others. I don't remember any cases in that exhibition where there was resistance to lending the work.

I think that, as I look back and flip through the catalog, or just remember the different years of the show, we pretty much had what we wanted for the exhibition. Not that there couldn't have been other works. But also the fact that Storm King had such a core group itself, so there were certain—starting with Storm King and our collection, then the show could really grow out from that. That also was part of the laboratory quality. It's also—when we do [01:11:00] our own exhibitions, let's say, at a commercial gallery, which doesn't have necessarily the rigors required of a museum exhibition. I would say this show was a hybrid, because it had the support, budget, space of a big, really amazing public institution supporting it, but it was still, as I keep saying, more open-ended, more of a laboratory. We started with certain works, and we then built on that. I think it was appropriate, too, because I think this exhibition really showed Storm King's

collection in a context that I don't know will ever be repeated. That every work from Storm King's collection was shown in that exhibition with works that related to it, that enriched the understanding of it, [01:12:00] and also really made the case for the centrality of Smith's innovation of how his work relates to nature in a very unique way in the landscape.

Dziedzic: Smith's photographs of his sculpture were included in this exhibition, right?

Stevens: I believe there were photographs in that exhibition. It was something that we have done increasingly. Smith's photographs [01:13:00] were first brought to public attention by Joan Pachner. First, that was an area of interest of hers as a student. She later was working at Storm King. There's that connection between Joan and us and Storm King, which really was the first focus on David Smith's photographs. She had been a student of Kirk Varnedoe's, so it's another link. He encouraged her to focus on these works. She brought them to his attention, and he said, "Go for it. This is important." Smith had always thought of his photographs as absolutely essential, because that's how he wanted people to see his work. He wouldn't let his gallery, he often wouldn't let magazines, reproduce his work, unless they used his photographs of them. They were really important aesthetic [01:14:00] statements for him of how he wanted his sculpture to be seen. Those were the photographs of individual sculptures. He did other, more experimental photographs where he photographed groups of pieces, collaged sculpture, photographed sculptures in groups or with different aspects of nature, and then did other types of photographs. Photographs of the nude, photographs of nature, and even earlier, he did journalistic, political photographs in the Virgin Islands, as well as really experimental, abstract photographs. The photographs are a very rich body of work that was then also written about Sarah Hamill. She wrote a great book on his photographs, and actually did her dissertation on them. Really in the last, I'd say, 10, 15 years, there's been an increased interest, and therefore an increased [01:15:00] exposure of the photographs.

Dziedzic: I think to me, from what I've read of them, that there's—he not only is the one who's taking the professional photos of his work, but he's including a certain amount of the natural background, and that is very unique. Even looking at that first catalog from 1971, it's really hard to tell where the sculptures are placed. They're very close up on the work itself. There's some greenery in the background, but other than that, the sculptures are just outside. Then we go to "Fields of David Smith" and that publication, and, it varies, but there's so much specificity to the natural environment that they're [01:16:00] placed in. It seems like some of David Smith's photographs were very much about, let's say, not capturing the details of the sculpture, but capturing the sculpture as it exists outdoors as one might view it. So, in a sense, not a photograph that you'd look at it if you were going to buy it.

Stevens: Right, but also Smith's photographs do that, but they also often do something that you can't do when you really see the sculpture, whether in nature or not. It was something that was frustrating to his dealer, Marian Willard, because he insisted on using these photographs that flattened the work out to look like a drawing. It didn't look like a sculpture. So he would look from a very low angle, so the sculpture is against the sky. There's no sense of scale. There's no sense of depth. It's really like a line drawing. You're so far divorced [01:17:00] from the idea of an object. If you look at a photograph, let's say, of Brancusi, of his work in his studio—and they're beautiful, they're considered very important works of art themselves—yet they really are about how that sculpture really functioned in the world. I guess that was important in Brancusi's world, in his view and his studio. For David Smith, they become divorced. He's, I think, giving us the message that, again, this visual image is what's really important. Because he was so insistent on every action that he took had to be an authentic action that had meaning; to document something that he had already done was not interesting to him. Here's the perfect photograph of this sculpture. It was a new experience for him, and he created it as an experience. [01:18:00] I think what's fabulous about David Smith's photographs, even the ones just of a single sculpture, is that you often are really experiencing something aesthetic when you look at them. Even though it wasn't his intention. He wasn't taking the photographs as works of art. I see them more as sketches, or process pieces that helped him understand his own work and his own vision.

Dziedzic: Where do you think that he and his approach to photographing sculpture falls in this much larger, I think, area of study about the relationship of photography to sculpture? I think something that I'm aware of is great interest [in photography] when work is ephemeral—or even with earthworks, where not everyone can get out to see it—[01:19:00] and it lives through its representation. Then, in the current moment, there are artists who are interested in this as well, and working with that. Where does Smith fit in that, and where does, I guess, the showing of his photographs fit into this renewed interest?

Stevens: You should read Sarah's book; I'm not a historian. Because I think they do fit in, and that's not really my area of expertise about what other artists—I'm hyper-focused on Smith. To say how they relate to other things, I know that they are within a tradition of modern ideas about the relationship of these two very disparate media, these very disparate approaches of photography and sculpture. One is so flat, and almost divorced from a real sense of understanding of scale, and the other [01:20:00] is a real object in space. They're so far apart. Yet, certainly in the 20th century, and now in the 21st century, the two-dimensional image is something we rely on for so much of our experience. I think that it was understood in beautiful photographs of Rodin's sculpture, Henry Moore was interested in the photography of his sculpture, Brancusi was very involved with photographing his own work and his own process. That is one historical context for understanding Smith's interest in photography. Also the fact that photography represented an avant-garde medium, because it was a relatively new medium. Certainly in the 19th century, it was a brand-new [01:21:00] medium. By the early 20th century, it was still being understood as

an aesthetic medium. Certainly artists like Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy, and these artists that were radically using photography as a form of art. So that's something that was very influential, I believe, to Smith.

His very first photographs were, in a way, his most radical, modernist photographs. They were abstract. He often, at that time, was making surreal or object tableaux to photograph them, even though the objects themselves were not preserved. They weren't sculptures being documented, so the only expression of that experience was the photograph itself. I think that photography was really, really influential in the context of Smith's development, in his thinking about [01:22:00] art in general, and in terms of how you construct an object and then represent it in two dimensions.

His early photographs, he makes an object, converts it into a two-dimensional image by photographing it. It's the inverse of his later photographs, where he makes a sculpture and photographs it, and then the sculpture and the photograph both exist, you could say, for comparison, but they really don't have that much to do with each other. If you look at a David Smith photograph side by side with a sculpture, what's exciting about them is that they are not echoing each other. They're showing two different experiences, really. Which was the problem that people had with his photographs as documents. They didn't really document the sculpture that effectively, as effectively as a professional photographer with good lighting and a sense of scale, a sense of depth, would have to it. [01:23:00] I think that the fact that photography has expanded tremendously as a medium for artists—there's so much richness now in terms of how photographs are used in relationship to objects. The Museum of Modern Art did a whole exhibition on the relationship of sculpture and photography, which included David Smith. So that context is not something I am well-versed in, but I think it's an important one.

Dziedzic: It seems to make sense that if his interest is in the image, then he would thereby need to be interested in that conversion to the 2-D.

Stevens: And also the idea of methodology, that art is something that's made. Smith was a maker. He loved making. As opposed to a lot of artists, and certainly sculptors, and [01:24:00] I guess painters too, that they arrive at a method, or material, or a process, and then they explore it. It becomes so rich for them that that is what they do. Henry Moore is a good example, or Barnett Newman. There are certain focuses of methodology, approach, materials, and Smith really wasn't like that. But he loved making, so it was always about expressing what that medium—what he could do, and how could he make something, whether it was taking a can of industrial enamel and spraying it on some pieces of metal, or whether it was using a camera and taking a photograph. I think the fact that it was a technical process that he could impose his own aesthetic on was also something that was really important. [01:25:00] He was always looking for new ways of doing it, rather than honing in. He had books on how to use laminated plywood,

something he ended up never doing in his work. But the idea of using glass—again, something he never did, except he used glass enamel on a few of his works in the '30s. So this idea of using whatever processes are out there, that are available to making things. How can I make something? Discovering a commercial forge in Indiana in 1955, when he's out there teaching. He made the series of *Forgings*, because here's another way he could make stuff. I think that's an important aspect of photography for him. He wasn't just going to pass it by and not do it.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about how the white sculptures' function as frames? Thinking about this double frontality that they have. [01:26:00] The ways in which they're involved with image-making is different than the other sculptures, to my mind.

Stevens: I think, yes, they're very different. I think that's how they originated. There's no documentation on the part of Smith, and there's been a lot of controversy as to what was the process of the white sculptures. Smith's painted sculptures were—the large-scale, painted sculptures—made, basically, from 1960 until his death, if you take that set period, were made by taking industrial steel, welding a sculpture. Usually, not always, fairly simplified, geometric forms. Then he would have to grind off all the impurities of the surface. So he would end up with a shiny surface. That [01:27:00] would then be primed, painted with a chemical primer that was a yellowish zinc chromate primer. It's an industrial material that's used to inhibit rust on steel. Over that, he would paint coats of white paint. Now, those sculptures would be put out in the field, in most cases, in their white state, and he would see them. Most of those sculptures ended up getting painted in various colors, some one or two colors, some more. Of all of those large-scale works, eight of them stayed white. He moved them from place to place. He was looking at them.

It's clear, as you can see at Storm King, especially in the show "The Fields of David Smith," where you see the white sculptures side by side, as he did, with the polychrome painted sculptures, with stainless steel sculptures, and with the iron sculptures, and the bronzes—you see [01:28:00] how each of these surfaces functions completely differently not only in our vision, but then in our feeling about them. Even an iron sculpture or a bronze has a very different feeling in space than, let's say, a polychrome sculpture, or even a monochrome sculpture, like *Study in Arcs*. The white sculptures function very differently, because of this prejudice, or this way we have of seeing, where white and black are seen as neutrals. They can be seen as "not space." It could be seen as this thing that's—I don't mean not space, but it's "not space"—negative, anti-space. It's like a void or a cut-out.

This is something that he had been doing since the mid-'50s with [01:29:00] spray paint, where he had put an object down on a canvas, sprayed paint around the object, then removed the object. What was left was the white of the paper, or the white of the canvas, so the object was really the absence, and the background was the presence. So the white sculptures, I believe, when David Smith saw those out in the

field, they presented a real challenge to him, like, what is this thing doing? I think that the white sculptures therefore became a very important expression for him of this visual nature of the sculpture.

There was some suggestion, and rather well-documented controversy—again, Clement Greenberg’s prejudice was to believe that the white sculptures were unfinished. I think that that’s a real testament, again, to the richness of Smith, and it says something about Greenberg’s hatred of that richness. That he wanted to erase that idea that these anti-matter sculptures, which was [01:30:00] the opposite of what Greenberg thought sculpture could be—Greenberg just was really—not offended. He was, I think, hostile. He was hostile to this idea. I think it’s an idea that was very important to Smith. You see the three *Primo Pianos*, three very different sculptures, all in the same series, that Smith had two of them in one field, one in another field, so he could see them both parallel to the arc of the sun, and then in the same plane as the arc of the sun. That this visual experience of how those white sculptures were functioning in the landscape was, clearly from the effort that Smith put into it, something that he was really, really engaged in.

That, I think, ties in and says something really rich—adds another chapter, adds another layer, to the [01:31:00] different kinds of approaches that Smith had to this visual nature of sculpture, just as the sprays totally invert how he had been drawing and working on paper his whole career. You take a black ink and you make a mark, and it’s a black ink on a white ground, whereas the sprays inverted that. The relationship of the sprays to his other two-dimensional work, to me, is exactly analogous to the nature of the white sculptures, particularly these large white sculptures, with the exception of one of them, which are all basically flat and pictorial to his other sculpture.

Dziedzic: Yes, looking at the photographs of it, too, the representation in photographs [01:32:00] is very different, it seems. What they communicate through photography is different than the other works in Storm King’s collection.

In the book associated with the exhibition, there were responses—moderated by Sarah Hamill—responses by some contemporary artists. I just wondered if you could talk about the role that you see that exhibition playing in continuing the discourse on Smith. In a sense, we have one document of it continuing discourse, but maybe speaking more broadly.

Stevens: I’m not sure I understand the—it’s not really a question, but I’m not really sure I [01:33:00] understand what you mean.

Dziedzic: The “White Sculptures” exhibition—this strategy for presenting this one part of Smith’s work, but still really in a context of different forms that he worked in, and over time. What has this exhibition added to the discourse about Smith broadly? And particularly with contemporary artists.

Stevens: I think it goes both ways. We could say that the exhibition adds something to the discourse, but I sort of see it the other way around. David Smith’s work is static in one way. It exists. It’s not going to change. We’re not changing it. That’s it. But everything else changes. The new art that’s made, the cultural climate, the intellectual [01:34:00] climate, the way people even interact with art, how they think about it. What I find interesting about Smith is, because of his openness, because of the diversity of what he was willing to risk or try or really deeply invest himself in, as time changes, it allows us to then see him in a different context. So yes, that exhibition adds something to a discourse and to the understanding of Smith, and to the trajectory of exhibitions and artists, but more than that, I think it’s that we now—and not only someone like me, but let’s say a younger person—can bring other prejudices, other assumptions, other passions [01:35:00] to an exhibition, to a body of work, and see it in a totally fresh way.

I think that doing an exhibition like the “White Sculptures,” now, is adding to our understanding of Smith. This work had never been the subject of an exhibition. It had been written about often, and in a, I think, superficial way, focusing more on the aspect of the responsibility of someone looking after an artist’s legacy, the conservation of the works, how they were treated. But no one had really addressed what these sculptures were doing aesthetically. So I think that that was a very important piece of the Smith puzzle, because I think, as I said, [01:36:00] they’re an important expression of how Smith saw the potential for sculpture, as we’ve talked about, in this visual way. But having the contemporary artists commenting in the catalog and through the panel, the discussion with Sarah Hamill, showing this exhibition now, at a time when the diversity of art is seen as expanding rather than—and the goal is to expand it—is, I think, what’s really important.

In some ways, I feel like the world has caught up to David Smith’s approach. That now it’s a given—and I think I said this the last time we talked, so I’m maybe almost paraphrasing what I already said—but this idea that diversity—[01:37:00] that there isn’t one narrative, there isn’t one perspective, there isn’t one aesthetic. That it’s important that we understand the diversity, and that’s what’s going to make our culture richer. Then you take the artists of the ’50s, who seemed to be the opposite of that. It’s this or nothing. It’s like, this is the story. Smith wasn’t like that. I think, now, to look at a show like “The White Sculptures” and not see it through the lens of specificity, of a monolithic, modernist purity, which is how they could have been seen, but instead to see it as opening up a sense of diverse approaches within a single artist’s work, it reflects a larger cultural climate that we have now of understanding that that’s how we want to see all of life. We want to be expansive, and to be more inclusive, rather than less. I think that [01:38:00] was the

right show, in a funny way, for people that really could focus on Smith, to see that we're opening up Smith in a way that the larger culture is also opening up to be more inclusive.

Dziedzic: In a sense, an artist could come to that exhibition with questions about their own work, not expecting to see any exploration of those questions in work that happened so long ago, because of the way that art has been written about, and because of the way certain artists and dealers have really guided art history. But then you can find, well, this artist was dealing with the same kinds of questions, but didn't necessarily have the language, the keywords, that we now know and use in our own work. It's really exciting.

Well, I guess I just have some general questions now. First, I think if there's anything that I've missed in reviewing the exhibitions that you think is significant, please let me know.

Stevens: Well, no. The only other thing to touch on, because this project of your oral history is for Storm King, is I think that it's just worth noting what, again, is apparent if one looks across the history. The ongoing relationship between Storm King and David Smith's work, and between Storm King and the Estate, and between the individual people involved, is, I think, also a really important social aspect of it, and that Storm King has changed and evolved, and continues to have this regular interaction with Smith's work. Having this core—this great group of sculptures itself, and then rethinking it now over a period of how many years—40-some [01:40:00] years.

Dziedzic: I think 50.

Stevens: Yes. You can do the math.

Dziedzic: Since '67.

Stevens: Yes. Well, it was 50 years since the acquisition of the work. So yes, the "White Sculptures" show was the 50th anniversary of that acquisition. Then since the first exhibition in '71. I think that's a great story, too. I think that it's also, just on a very personal level—I've talked a lot about just very personal aspects of the family and our involvement and our views, as I see them—that is a personal aspect of it for me. I think of my youth, going up to Storm King. I think that's nice, that there is that continuity.

Dziedzic: Well, let me ask you this, then. [01:41:00 What thoughts do you have about the way that Storm King has changed in terms of its collection and expansion in terms of acreage since the years that you've been going there? I guess you mentioned earlier the different dialogues that Smith's sculptures could

be—by placing them in different locations around other artworks, or even natural spaces, that they could be seen as being part of a different conversation, or sparking a different conversation. Are there examples of that that you see?

Stevens: I'm really delighted that Storm King has grown. I think that it started out as—we talked about public and private last time—but almost like a private museum. It was very intimate, very much the vision of a few people, almost—I felt—almost [01:42:00] a little bit guarded. The expansiveness that Storm King has instituted, and then that in terms of the program of exhibiting contemporary artists—of course, David Smith, in 1967, was a contemporary artist—that that continues, and that the changes that have occurred with the landscape architecture, the changes that have occurred with the evolution of the collection, I think are really great, and add to the understanding of what's happening with Smith there. Anything that is about growth and bringing in more people has been a huge [01:43:00] change. You know the numbers. The amount of people now that go to Storm King is so much greater than what it was 20 years ago. I think, obviously, that's a great, great thing.

As far as the future goes, I think there's a lot of potential of what can be done with Smith's work there, in terms of interactions between his work and other artists' work, between—again, maybe creating a laboratory feeling about some of the installations of the work. It's something that's always intrigued me, the idea, maybe, of having a contemporary artist come to Storm King and interact with those sculptures, and maybe doing—I'm not a big fan of two-person shows, generally. I don't think they're that great. But if it was about a living [01:44:00] interaction, that an artist would come and make work that, for them, had some relationship with or against or in some way with the Smith sculptures, I think that it's something that Storm King could do with Smith. They could do it with di Suvero, an artist that has fairly substantial representations [in Storm King's collection]. I think that the continued dynamic of Storm King as a contemporary art center is something that's really good for Smith's work there.

Dziedzic: Would that include things like—I'm thinking more about some of the programs that they do with contemporary artists now. Not just the "Outlooks" series, but other programs. [01:45:00] What are your thoughts about things like performance or music, or things other than sculpture or painting?

Stevens: I think that those—again, anything that broadens the context is good for Smith. I don't know, for some artists it might be imposing. It might be an imposition. I still, because it's my aesthetic, think it would probably be ok with any artist. Certainly, it's within the spirit of Smith. He loved music. He loved—maybe "love" is too mushy or soft a word. He deeply believed in breaking boundaries. So to say there is such a thing as music, and there is such a thing as dance, and there is such a thing as drawing, and there is such a thing as poetry, I think—and this is my projection—in Smith's perfect world, we would get rid of those distinctions. That it was [01:46:00] about human creation, human creativity. We don't have an

example of him really doing a collaborative project, where he made sculpture with a modern dancer, like Noguchi was involved with modern dance. But I think it's something that could be really exciting, to bring other contexts, whether it's other art, whether it's poetry readings, whether it's dance, whether it's, as Storm King does, nature. Just being in nature, and focusing on nature, and let's not focus on the sculpture, and see how that interaction—so I think anything that broadens the context in which the sculpture is seen broadens the sculpture, and broadens the understanding of it.

Dziedzic: I guess this is sort of a sub-question to that. What is the [01:47:00] role of institutions and museums in representing, with historical accuracy, the legacy of artists? I think, on one hand, you've given a very good example in what you just said about—as far as your understanding goes, Smith would want to get rid of the distinctions between different kinds of genres or media. But I guess where I'm maybe trying to draw a line—artificially, but would be helpful for you to illustrate nonetheless—would be what sort of leeway could institutions take in representing an artist's work? Let's say if they do [01:48:00] have a full collection of many artists, or they do have a lot of visitors, or whatever the other kinds of simultaneous goals might be. What does one do if there isn't a historical record of what would be appropriate? This is asking a speculative question.

Stevens: I'm not exactly sure—

Dziedzic: I'm interested in the idea of representing the attitude with historical accuracy. The attitude of the artist. And how museums and institutions can further that [beyond what has been stated explicitly by artist at a particular point in history]. They have that capacity [for furthering the understanding of an artist's thinking]. What sort of freedoms do they have, I suppose?

Stevens: My view is that they should have tremendous freedom, because I think, again, it doesn't harm a work of art to show it [01:49:00] in one context or another. Now, that could be a controversial statement, because you could say that mistreatment or misrepresentation contextually would, in a sense, be a violence to a work of art. It's not irreversible, though. Then you get into the question of who's doing it, and what their motives are, and what their qualification is. A really insightful art historian, we accept as a good context. But it could be another artist. It could be a group of children. It could be—there are other contexts. I think that [01:50:00] each museum, each curator, each collector in their own home, every time I do something—you bring an approach, you bring a contextualization, that is not ever going to be exactly what David Smith would have done. In fact, what David Smith would have done on one day might be very different from what he might have done on another day.

So this idea of representing an artist's intention, or representing the artist's true aesthetic, I think it's like trying to catch smoke in your hand. It's a good goal to think about the [01:51:00] artist's intention and the

historical, emotional, political aspect of it, but how many times do you see exhibitions that try to do that, and they just look like theater pieces? That, I think, doesn't serve the artist, where you have a designer trying to give you the feeling of modernist moment, like 50 years ago, 100 years ago, and they create this authentic context. But creating something authentic is, by its nature, artificial, because either something is or it isn't. In 2018, there's nothing that you're going to do, other than the present moment, that isn't a construct. I think, for Smith—again, I don't know if this is exactly what you're asking, but I think that I'll say what I've already said—that the more variety and the more openness and the more inventiveness that's brought to the way that his work can be seen, again, over a cumulative experience [01:52:00] of it, enriches it. Of course, if that's the only thing you see, it becomes a little more crucial that it actually be worthwhile, that it really has something to communicate that is enriching.

The question is, could something be enriching to the viewer and to the understanding of life, that would be using David Smith's work, or any artist's work, but not really expressing its own aesthetic? I don't even know if that's possible. So that's a really abstract question. I think I would just go for it. I would choose more openness, more freedom, than museums usually avail themselves of, I think. Although they're much more happy to do it with living, contemporary artists, to give them free reign, because, of course, then it's a monolithic—then it's one person deciding what they want for their own [01:53:00] work. But we're kidding ourselves if we—I've never thought that I'm expressing David Smith, in the sense of—I used the word before—I'm not channeling David Smith. I don't know what David Smith thought. Any time I say, well, David Smith is this, or he wanted that, or this was his intention, I'm so aware that this is a subjective, contemporary viewpoint that has to be expressed in concert with other viewpoints and other approaches. It's one reason why the Estate has—and I firmly believe—has encouraged curators, museums, to have their own vision for the work, and have their own vision for the exhibitions. Some estates are very controlling, or artists are very controlling, of how they want the work seen. As I said, I don't think David [01:54:00] Smith was really that way, and we are not that way. I don't know if that was the question.

Dziedzic: Yes, you took it and made it meaningful to you, and I appreciate that. I can tell you a little bit more about my thinking after we're done.

I guess I just have two more questions. Again, I think maybe you've touched on them quite a bit. I'll narrow it down to one question, which is just, what has the role of Storm King been in the representation of David Smith and the furthering of understanding about him and his work?

Stevens: I think the primary thing could seem a little [01:55:00] superficial or obvious, but I think it's huge, and that is what I've alluded to, that Storm King is the only place where you can see David Smith's work in a setting and in a context in its relationship to nature and its physical environment that communicates an aspect of how Smith lived with his own works. Say, how he saw them. Again, that gets a little touchy,

because I don't know how he saw them. But I do know where he put them and how that functioned. When people ask us, "Can I come to Bolton Landing and see David Smith's sculptures?" we say, "Well, David Smith's sculpture is not at Bolton Landing anymore, and it's not open to the public. But [01:56:00] there's a really great place you can go, which is Storm King." The landscape is different, the feeling is different, there's no question, but in those differences, the fact that there's a diverse group of great works that can be seen in relationship to nature, and architecture of the house—even though, again, the house is very different from David Smith's very simple, cinderblock, concrete, small house and studio that he had in Bolton Landing—I think that that's just huge. The fact, again, that I think Storm King has done it so well is obviously even more important. The way the works are displayed, the context of just even driving up, and the sense of arrival that you have at Storm King, is [01:57:00] important. I think the fact that—a rural experience is very different from a city experience. When you walk into a museum, that sense of arrival is very different than it is—whether you're in a bus or a car, and you get to Storm King, and you're now in this transitional moment of entering a new space. I think there are very few places in the world where you can see sculpture with that experience. I think that those are really important.

The fact that Storm King also has works by di Suvero, Calder, Serra, who are all sculptors that, I think, relate pretty importantly to Smith in various ways, and many other of the artists that are in the collection, is also something that really enhances Smith's work. [01:58:00] It's not just a David Smith museum. It's a sculpture museum. It's bringing in—whether it's an exhibition of Lynda Benglis, or younger contemporary artists—again, that context of the active culture and the other artists that fill out the story at Storm King is super important. I think I've talked a lot about the importance of the continuity of the relationship and the number of exhibitions and the diversity of those exhibitions from each other—they've all done very, very different things—is great.

Dziedzic: Yes. Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you'd like to add?

Stevens: [01:59:00] Hmm. No, I don't think so. I think that the only thing I would add is just, again—and I alluded to it before on a personal level—that the people of Storm King are important people in my life. Peter Stern, John, David, Nora, Mary Ann—all the people of Storm King that I've known, I feel now, my whole life almost. It's, on a personal level, really nice to have that.

Dziedzic: All right. Thank you, Peter.