Tony Smith
In Hawaii

Tony Smith is one of a few great artists, such as Max Ernst, who have briefly visited the islands, learned quickly and intensely from them, and created works which teach us something about them.

His stay in Hawaii was extraordinarily fertile and culminated in the monumental sculpture, The Fourth Sign, at the University of Hawaii's Manoa campus. My interpretation of this

The Fourth Sign at the UH

period of Tony Smith's work is influenced by my brief contact with him and his own remarks published later.

Smith arrived in 1969 already recognized as one of the greatest American sculptors. He had worked as an architect and a painter, had been a member of the prestigious New York school, and was receiving increasingly important commissions.

He impressed one immediately with all the intelligence and authority one could have expected. But he was also surprisingly interested in Hawaii, its land and people. "This is a magic place," he once said. "Inspiring." He reciprocated by devoting himself to his students and friends and leaving a large number of sculptures as gifts.

This combination of intelligence and feeling characterizes his art as well as his personality. He uses cardboard, three-dimensional geometric forms—tetrahedrons and octahedrons—as modules to construct small-scale models of his statues. His rapid fingers move like a card-sharp's as he pats little
cardboard pieces into shapes I couldn't predict. Some resembled objects in ways which made me think about them all over again. Others aroused my feelings or laughter without my knowing why.

As Smith worked, a part of him seemed to watch and decide when to fix a shape. Awkwardly applied scotch tape or bandages kept the cardboard pieces in place. This was the model which Smith, the architect, then described in blue-print form for the person or firm that would produce the final piece.

In small pieces, one can see how Smith moves from interest in geometric shapes to their pictorial and emotional possibilities. In his monumental works, a new interest is added—fitting the sculpture into its setting: making the sculpture appropriate to its place and also using it to express something about the place.

In his unrealized project for the University of Hawaii, Haole Crater, Smith was interested in the formal problem of the relationship between a shape dug into the ground and one built above it: “I have always been particularly interested in excavating and then piling the dirt up...” As an architect, he had built sunken gardens for houses he designed.

The viewer walking up to Haole Crater would have met a sloping waist-high wall, the side of a square enclosure. Looking over the edge, he would have seen that the interior floor was sunk below the ground level on which he stood. Descending a metal ladder, he would have found himself in over his head, able to see only the sky.

The sculpture reminds us immediately of a volcano. One is supposed to see the stars most clearly from inside Haleakala. But the title warns us that this is specifically a haole crater. I sense a note of culture
conflict, of the artist defining himself over and against a culture he is just encountering. Smith said later haole "probably means square," geometry again connected to emotion or character. The squareness shows the crater is man-made or, more particularly, made by Tony Smith. But even as such, the crater retains something of the bigness and fearsomeness of a volcano.

Significantly, Smith did not continue with this project because he was convinced it was inappropriate for its setting: "I was talked out of it for the campus project by a Japanese-American student who contended that Hawaii already had too many craters, square or otherwise."

The next unrealized project for the Manoa campus was *Hubris*. A square pavement of nine rows of nine square slabs was set beside an equal square of nine rows of nine 3-foot high pyramids. Smith was again interested in the relationship between shapes: pointed and flat, protruding and non-protruding. Smith showed me the object that gave him the idea for the piece: a long cheese board, one rectangular end flat for cutting, the other with points on which to set the cubes of cheese. The rectangles were changed to squares which he felt were more appropriate to the monumental scale of the project.

The title reveals that Smith was characteristically using geometry to express character. The Greek term *hubris* is used in ethics and classical tragedy to describe the person who tries to go beyond his limits in the plan of the universe. Smith was still using and re-examining his own cultural heritage.

The sculpture also had a definite pictorial aspect: "There are two squares: one representing the mountains, and the other, the plains." Since the piece was to be placed on the Manoa campus, Smith undoubtedly had in mind the mountains at the head of the valley, which resemble a row of pyramids. The sculpture would have been built low, so the viewer would have looked up at the mountains and then down at the sculpture and seen corresponding shapes. Those shapes would also have performed the service of framing the campus buildings, which are otherwise so sadly disconnected from their
Smith was surprised that local people did not respond to his piece with the same emotions he felt himself: "The mountains in Honolulu...have very sharp crests and sharp curves. I had thought of Hubris as very hostile and I found out the students didn't think that way at all; they go barefoot and thought of running through it, racing, which seems to me quite a feat—to go from one of those things to another with no place to settle your feet."

In The Fourth Sign, donated by Smith and constructed in front of the new UH Art Department building, the same factors are at work as in the earlier projects. Geometry is used to construct a fearsome shape: the arms and claws of the astrological crab.

Again, Smith has connected his sculpture and the neighboring buildings to the setting. The sculpture echoes the beams of the art building behind it and the encircling mountains and arms of the valley in front. Smith again reacts to the land in a fearful way. The arms of the valley remind him of those of a giant crab. Again, he searches in Western culture for an idea. This time he settles on a religious one, astrology, to interpret this "magic place."

When he returns to Hawaii, Smith will see students draping their young bodies over his sculpture and nestling within the circle of its arms, just as they bathe in the pool under Manoa falls. This is the local reaction to what, however awesome, is beautiful and a gift. Hubris must be a constant temptation for a monumental artist. Perhaps its cure can be found in learning to feel an aloha for the land equal to the aloha Smith already feels for people.