

# CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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### PAINTER LEE-SMITH PUSHES FIGURATION TO LIMIT

by David McCracken

In conjunction with Black History Month, the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center is the site of a retrospective of Hughie Lee-Smith, the respected African-American artist whose career spans six decades. Almost 50 paintings dating back to 1938 are on view, detailing the development and elaboration of Lee-Smith's concerns as a painter, one who is usually lumped in with the style known as Magic Realism.

But as Lowery Sims, associate curator of 20th Century Art at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, noted in the catalogue essay accompanying the show, Lee-Smith's works "consistently elude being pigeonholed into a convenient category because Lee-Smith relies on his personal predilections and unconscious impulses to propel the development of his imagery."

Lee-Smith begins and ends with figuration, a necessary part of his commitment-stated more than 40 years ago-to an art of the people. "Unless the artist takes into consideration the art understanding of the common man," he wrote in *New Masses* magazine, "I am afraid he is imposing art from above; art that is uncalled for and unwanted."

That is not to say, though, that his painting derived from quotidian sources; certainly the strongest influences on his mature style-smallish figures isolated within a blank and enigmatic landscape-are the paintings of Edward Hopper and the Italian Giorgio de Chirico, debts that he has acknowledged.

That recognizable style had emerged by the late 1940s with his painting

"The Scientist," a solitary figure in a lab coat centering a composition of somewhat stylized perspective. He described his *modus operandi* in 1957:

"By selecting and organizing symbolically significant visual relationships I attempt to make my own emotional intent felt by the observer."

By the 1960s, it seems that in some respects those visual relationships are already straining against the figurative esthetic. As early as the 1961

"Rendezvous," where two figures, faces unseen, stand on a concrete breakwater with a large lake as backdrop, one senses that the demands of narrative, however oblique, have been subsumed by a fascination with formal concerns. In that same painting, a wooden scaffolding is just behind the figures, acting as frame within frame and as a matrix for more detailed examination of the typical Lee-Smith construction: horizontal base (horizon line, jetty, wall), counterpoised vertical (figure, poles) and strong diagonal.

That scaffolding allows for further diagonal elements to jostle the line of perspective

for dominance. In a composition such as "Two Girls," the figures seem almost purely formal elements; in "Outing," one of the female figures is awkwardly poised, seemingly about to jump off a breakwater but more importantly forming another counterpoised diagonal. Indeed, in some later paintings human figures have been replaced by statues, further emphasizing the artist's interest in painterly architecture.

Sims alludes to that shift, but places it much later, in "the present decade, when the artist has begun to entertain the more dramatic possibilities of diagonal elements." This viewer would go so far as to point out that in this decade, Lee-Smith is making self-conscious references to that drive towards abstraction in paintings such as "Hard Hat," with its Kenneth Nolandesque target on a brick wall.

In its presentation of the show, which originated at the New Jersey State Museum, the Chicago Office of Fine Arts has subtly underlined Lee-Smith's almost Constructivist arrangements and rearrangements of line and object by arraying a half dozen of the "breakwater" paintings along the west wall.

Whether one is looking for elliptical evocations of American race relations, or more impersonal, existential concerns, or simply an artist who is doggedly investigating compositional permutations, all are present in Lee-Smith's work.