

SUBURBAN SUBLIME

Michel Tombroff

I am trying to make sense of an event. A singular, unpredictable, and ephemeral event that had a profound effect on the artworld by precipitating the transition from the modern to the postmodern. This event was a car ride on an unfinished portion of the New Jersey Turnpike, between Newark and New Brunswick, on a dark night of 1951. Yes, a mere car ride!

The driver was modernist sculptor Tony Smith, accompanied by some of his Cooper Union students. Smith described his revelatory experience – one of the most celebrated anecdotes in the annals of twentieth century art – in a 1966 *Artforum* interview with Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr. Here is an extract:

“The drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn’t be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first, I didn’t know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art. [...] There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.”

Why did Smith’s epiphany – remembered fifteen years after it occurred – have such an influence on contemporary artists and critics including Robert Smithson, Michael Fried, Phyllis Tuchman and others during the sixties and seventies? In a 2013 essay entitled “The Highway Not Taken: Tony Smith and the Suburban Sublime” (*Places Journal*), Ithaca College art history and architecture professor David Salomon wondered “Why did that architectural encounter leave such a strong impression on Smith?” and proposed some answers.

Indeed, why? Answering that question might help us better understand why the artworld went through such a series of brutal transformations after the Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting sequences: Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Land Art, etc. Smith perceived something unique that night and today, more than 70 years later, we still feel the ripples of that vision.

Suburban Sublime is my attempt to shed light on this extraordinary event. By resuscitating it: not the evanescent reality, long gone, but the experience.

Michel TOMBROFF

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Praises for *Suburban Sublime*

“Michel Tombroff’s work is nothing if not art. Its complex surfaces, shapes, and lines are captivating. They also require sophisticated spatial skills to comprehend and create. They are also models. Not models of past or future racetracks or highways. Nor models of ideal or dystopian landscapes. Rather, they are models of intense, confusing, intoxicating, mischievous, but real objects and experiences that are possible when one creatively reconfigures (and multiplies) the existing elements we find at our disposal.”

David Salomon (Ithaca, NY)

Author of “The Highway Not Taken: Tony Smith and the Suburban Sublime”, *Places Journal*, September 2013)

“Brussels-based artist Michel Tombroff explores the legacies of modernism and postmodern art in his work. His *Suburban Sublime* exhibition was inspired by Tony Smith’s 1966 Artforum interview with curator Samuel Wagstaff. Tombroff has created a series of three-dimensional paintings drawing on Smith’s references to the intersections of art, urban planning, and the sublime, inhabiting the aesthetics of 1960s monochromatic shape paintings by artists such as Frank Stella.”

James Voorhies, Executive Director, Tony Smith Foundation (New York, NY)

Author of *Postsensual Aesthetics: On the Logic of the Curatorial* and *Beyond Objecthood: The Exhibition as a Critical Form since 1968*.

PHOTOS
(Selection)



