



Julio Gonzalez: The Montserrat, 1936-37, iron, 64 1/4 by 18 1/2 by 18 1/2 inches. Stedelijk Museum.

Virgins

Related sculpturally, Julio culturally: the Spaniard at ease by his Protestantism. Below, a their disparate ideas of woman,

BY ALAIN KIRILI

Julio Gonzalez and David Smith had two major points in common: they worked with the same material—iron; and the formal context of the sculpture of each was grounded in autobiographical references. As we will see, very little else brings them together; they had neither the same ethic nor the same concepts nor the same spiritual origin.

Iron, the material of these two artists, breaks the traditional concept of the monolith as a totemic mass and substitutes for it a vocabulary of lines, spaces, surfaces and hollowed-out solids. As the sculpture takes on transparency, the void can assume the role of solid mass. Inaugurated by Picasso, Gargallo and Gonzalez and developed further by Smith, this investigation in iron greatly enriched the formal properties of modern sculpture. But in the work of Gonzalez and Smith it never led to a formalism that was not thoroughly inflected by their very different cultural histories.

The contrast between Gonzalez's relatively small body of work and Smith's heroic production underscores the contrast between their two cultures: the tranquil elegance and often mystical grace of Gonzalez's Spanish tradition versus the aggressions and ambivalences of Smith's American Calvinist ethos. Here, a Catholicism that is sometimes extravagantly, sometimes austere sensual, is matched against a Puritanism irreconcilably opposed to sensuality. In brief, it is Catalonia versus the Middle West.

With his fine intuition and broad learning, David Smith was able to

& Totems

Gonzalez and David Smith were quite different with his Catholicism, the American conflicted sculptor's view of how their work reflects institutional religion and secular modernism.

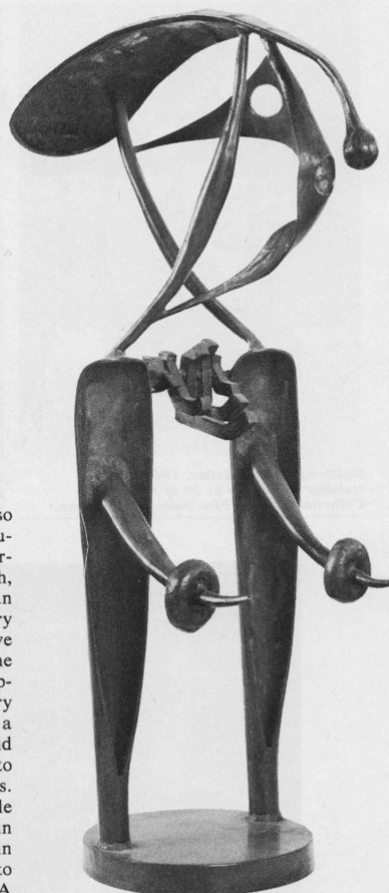
measure the weight and force of his Protestant tradition. In an important interview with Thomas B. Hess in 1964, Smith, one year before his death, acknowledged the Calvinism in his background: "The idea of satisfaction," he commented, "is like the idea of happiness—the great American illusion . . . The American Protestant idea leads to revolt. A format is made to be changed."¹

There is a persistent expression in his work of aggressivity toward women in general, especially in his theme of "cannon-rape." This aggressivity is overcome only occasionally—for instance, in the sculptures that express his love for his daughters, such as *Rebecca Circle*, 1961, and *Running Daughter*, 1956–60, in which the figure, abstracted from a photograph and constructed of curved metal rods, has a beautiful grace. But for the most part, woman assumes for Smith the Protestant role of predator, as in *Portrait of the Eagle's Keeper*, 1948–49, in which one motif can be read as a woman's breasts transformed into weapons. *Maiden's Dream*, 1947–48, is another nightmarish vision, apparently based on a photograph of two insects on a twig; here, hidden in the base of the sculpture is a female face, its grotesque mouth expelling a mess of anxious, intricate lines. Finally, there is *Home of the Welder*, 1945. A surrealist, autobiographical work, it shows a room with mirror reflections of a nude woman and a dog; to this ensemble Smith added a short piece of chain and a scaffold—images suggesting imprisonment and castration.

Smith's notebooks and drawings also document a deep attraction to the brutal. In addition to his drawings of tortures inspired by Breughel and Bosch, there are many disturbing entries. In an essay for the Edmonton Art Gallery show "David Smith: the Formative Years," Karen Wilkin notes that in one sketchbook Smith copied out a description of the atrocities of a 15th-century sadist; one of these tells the story of a pregnant woman who is stripped and bound and forced to give birth, only to have her baby devoured by wolves. Smith also saved a magazine article about American soldiers at the front in World War II, circling a passage in which a G.I. described his desire to shoot pregnant German women. A third sketchbook inclusion tells of a newborn child eaten by rats. In these drawings and notes Smith faced directly the fears of sexuality and maternity that appear in more sublimated form in some of his sculptures.

These fears contrast sharply with Gonzalez's feelings. Gonzalez drew women and children all his life—a preoccupation that led him, in the '30s, to a group of sculptural masterpieces, the abstract "Maternities." Indeed, in his drawings Gonzalez often depicted maternity in terms of the Madonna and Child, whereas Smith once depicted his mother, in *Spectre of Mother*, 1946, as a praying mantis devouring her male.

The two sculptors also held very different views regarding religion. Smith resisted the institution of the church, as is suggested in *Cathedral*, 1950, and



David Smith: *Portrait of the Eagle's Keeper*, 1948–49, steel and bronze, 38 1/2 by 13 by 23 inches. Collection Helen Frankenthaler.

Pillar of Sunday, 1945, a curvilinear column with a bird on top that seems to parody both family and religion through the figure of his mother, a Sunday-school teacher whom he called "the pillar of the church." For his part, Gonzalez was a devout Catholic, and his devotion can be sensed in a sculpture of 1932–34, called in its final version *The Prayer*: the elegant genuflection of the figure here translates all the richness of corporal kinesis contained in the ceremony of the Catholic liturgy. The grace of the vertical lines in *Gothic Man*, 1937, also expresses his love for the art of the cathedrals. This largely abstract work perpetuates the tradition of statuary and so dissociates Gonzalez, here

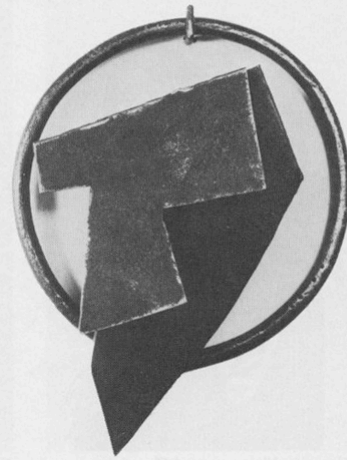
In Catholic Europe in the 19th century the cult of the Virgin was revitalized. Gonzalez's childhood (he was born Sept. 21, 1876, in Barcelona) was located spiritually in an atmosphere permeated with the *Ave Maria*. This Marianism produced a kind of feminization of Catholicism, something which neither Judaism nor Protestantism nor the Orthodox Church knew. One of the most seductive aspects of Catholicism, Marianism protects against the inhibitions created by an otherwise patriarchal religion and offers a wealth of iconographic sources; it can be a powerful inspiration for creation.

The formal consequences of such faith can be seen in Gonzalez's work. His sculptures express no misogyny, no aggressivity toward women, only grace—the grace of a woman combing her hair. For Gonzalez woman was the guarantor of liberty, just as she was for Delacroix. If her dignity is put in question, she has the force to engage in

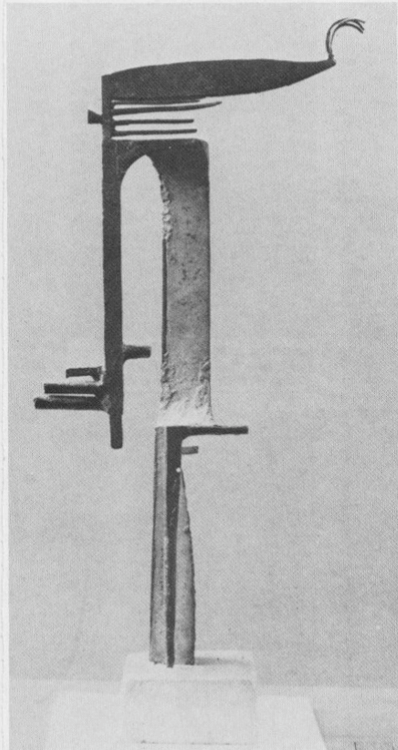
struggle: she is the Montserrat, the peasant in revolt who protects her child. Gonzalez began to explore this theme at the time of the Spanish Civil War in drawings and sculptures, most importantly in the proud, iron figure of the large *Montserrat*, 1936–37, in which his concern for both his country and countrywomen is apparent.

Gonzalez was very clear about this recognition of the grace and power of woman. In the catalogue of his drawings published in Paris (Editions Carmen Martinez, 1975), we see the constancy with which he addressed the theme of maternity from 1906 to 1942. These drawings show how interested he was in the attributes of maternity—its qualities of tenderness and strength, of veiling and unveiling emotion—and how he interpreted them in a religious way.

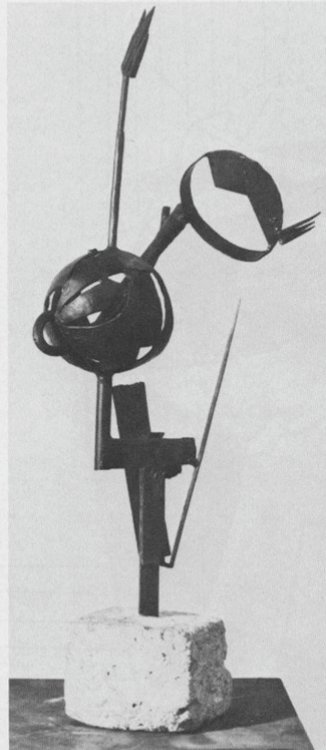
A deep sense of tradition is evident in his mostly representational drawings on the theme of the Virgin (e.g., *Vierge*



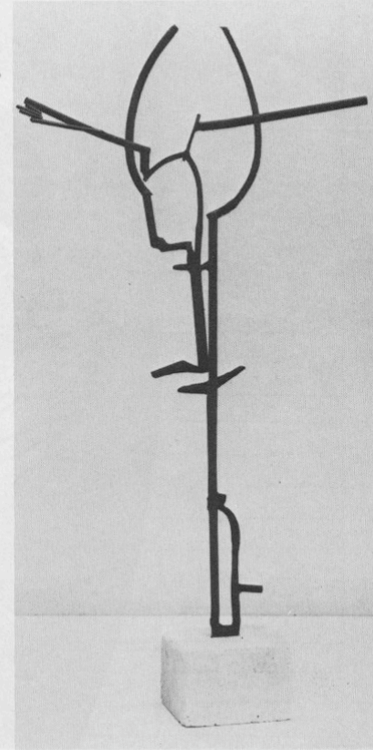
Gonzalez: *Head with Halo*, 1930–33, iron relief, 8 3/4 inches high. Photo courtesy Galerie de France.



Gonzalez: *Gothic Man*, 1937, iron, 19 3/4 by 10 1/2 by 5 1/8 inches. Collection Hans Hartung, Antibes.



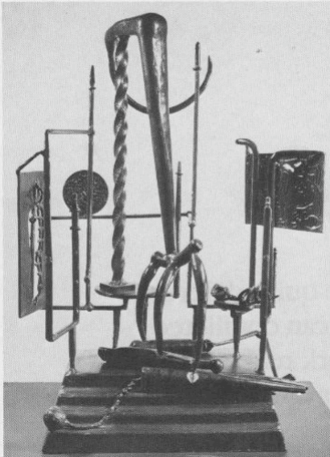
Gonzalez: *The Dream, The Kiss*, 1932–33, iron, 23 3/8 by 11 7/8 by 9 1/4 inches. Centre Georges Pompidou.



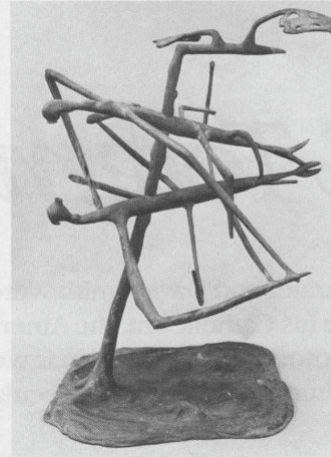
Gonzalez: *Large Standing Figure*, ca. 1935, iron, 50 3/8 by 27 1/4 by 15 3/4 inches. Maeght Foundation.



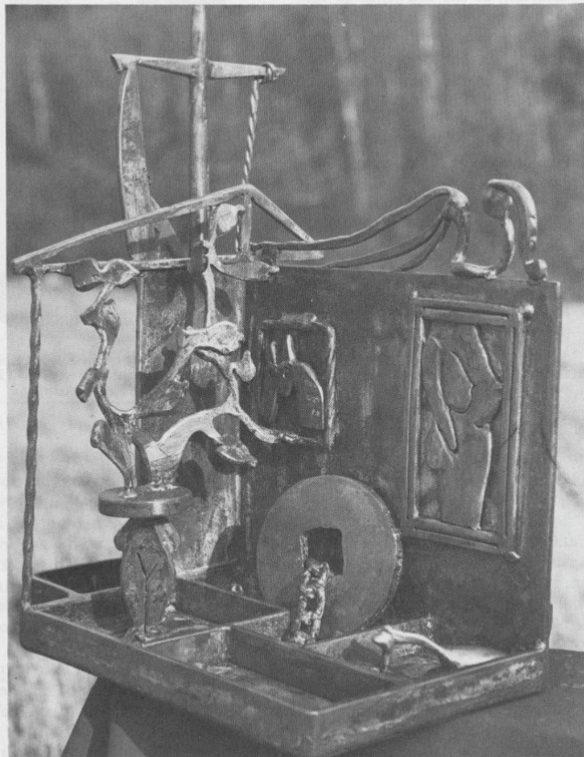
Smith: *Spectre of Mother*, 1946, steel and stainless steel, 20 3/4 by 20 by 9 1/2 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Sidney M. Feldman.



Smith: *Cathedral*, 1950, steel painted brown, 34 3/8 by 24 1/2 by 17 1/8 inches. Private collection.



Smith: *Maiden's Dream*, 1947-48, bronze, 27 1/2 by 19 3/4 by 20 3/8 inches. Estate of David Smith/Knoedler Gallery.

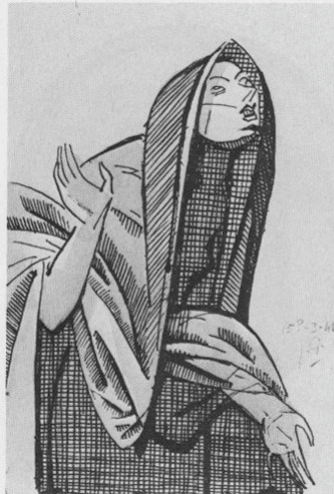


Smith: *Home of the Welder*, 1945, steel, 21 by 17 3/8 by 14 inches. Collection Candida and Rebecca Smith.

at least, from the secular bias of modern planar sculpture.

There are, of course, more properly sculptural differences between these two artists. In a Gonzalez sculpture like *The Dream*, *The Kiss*, 1932-33, there is an oniric dimension, a lightness that derives from the abstract way in which the iron rods penetrate the circular and spherical forms, evoking an evanescent and immaterial world. The work attracts rather than repels the viewer: it is "like a dream." The opposite is often the case with a Smith sculpture. His "Tanktotems," for instance, are evocative precisely of totemic signs of prohibition; their verticality asks the viewer to assume a distance from them. In this regard, one can compare Gonzalez's *Large Standing Figure*, ca. 1935. For all its verticality (underscored by the presence of a phallus), the elegant, open composition of this work is inviting: indeed, the clean lines of its naked metal are an invitation to touch. Smith's sculptures, on the other hand, suggest a puritanical inhibition against touching. "I think sculpture along with any art is strictly a visual response," he once said. "I don't touch, I touch with the eye."²²

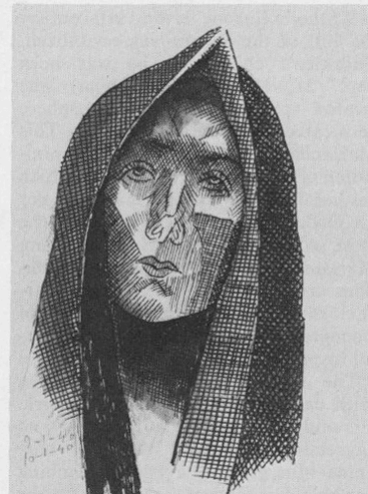
In a Catholic perspective, as historian Louis Réau has written, a religion without woman is unnatural, even against nature. This judgment may help us understand the particularly Catholic personality of Gonzalez and its consequences for his work.



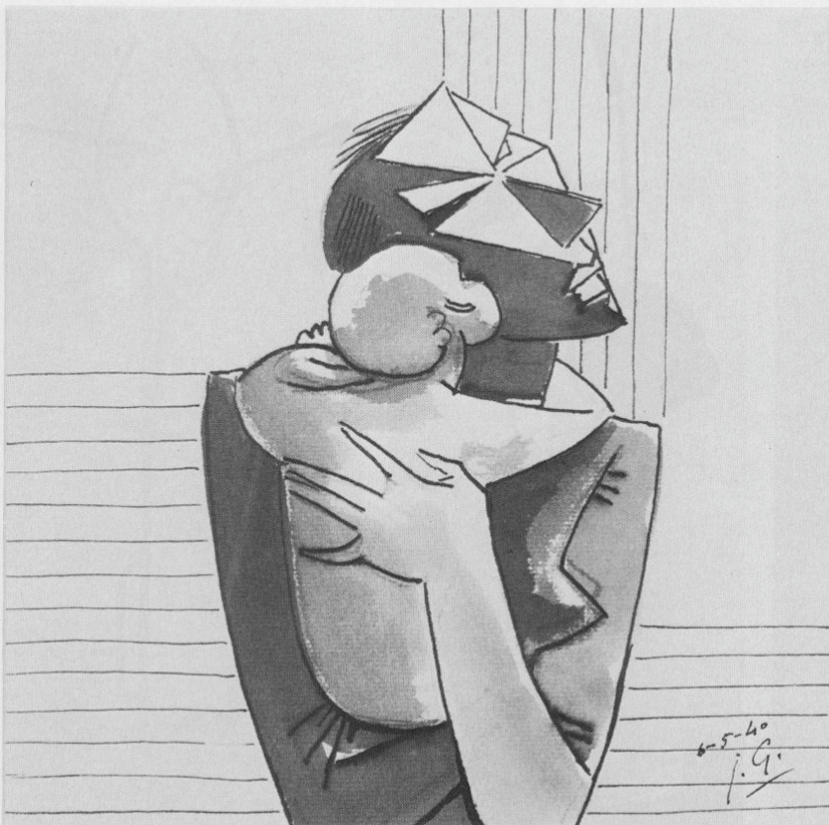
Gonzalez: Vierge au quadrille,
1941, pen and India ink on
paper, 9 3/4 by 6 3/8 inches.



Gonzalez: Marie-Thérèse en vierge,
1940-41, pencil on paper, 8 by 6 1/4
inches. Photos Galerie de France.



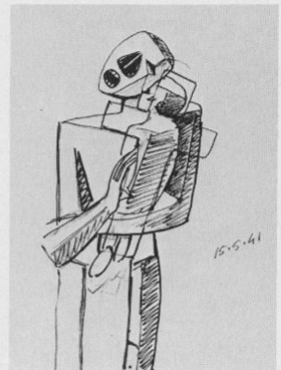
Gonzalez: Vierge austère,
1941, pen and India ink on
paper, 9 3/4 by 7 1/2 inches.



Gonzalez: Maternité mystique,
1940, pen and India ink on
paper, 9 5/8 inches square.



Gonzalez: Maternité à la Croix,
1941, pencil on paper, 8 by 6 1/4
inches. Private collection, Madrid.



**Gonzalez: Maternité à l'enfant et
à la Croix,** 1941, pencil, pen and
India ink on paper, 8 by 6 1/4 inches.

austère, 1940, *Vierge criant*, *Tête de vierge*, *Vierge au quadrille*, all 1941). In other, related drawings Gonzalez represented his love for his wife in religious terms (e.g., *Marie-Thérèse en vierge*, and *Marie-Thérèse au voile*, 1940–41). But finally, he enlarged Christian iconography as much as he submitted to it: in the Cubistic *Maternité mystique*, 1940, and *Maternité à l'enfant et à la Croix* and *Maternité à la Croix*, 1941, he even included the Cross in an interpretation of motherhood, no doubt to express his sense of its almost mystical sufferings.

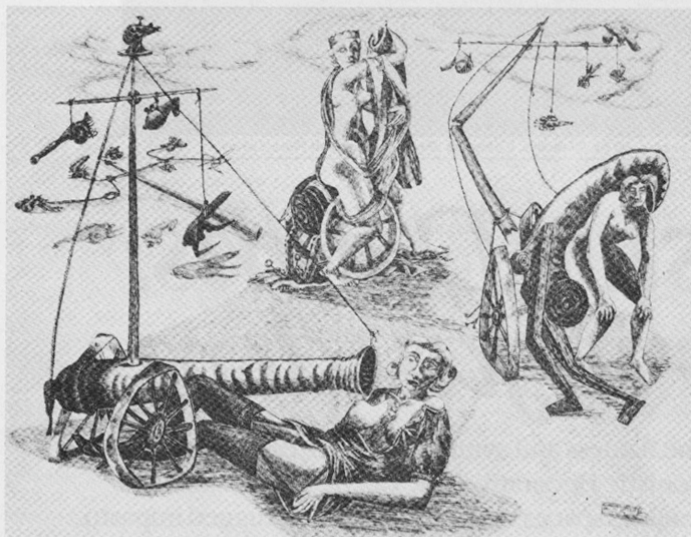
Julio Gonzalez drew on religion and mystical love for many aspects of his imagery: his art appears as an act of sublimation, a quest toward spirituality through a specific religion. David Smith trusted and relied only on his own identity, his faith in art and in himself. Whereas Gonzalez was at ease with his origins, Smith struggled against them: indeed, for Smith, to be a sculptor meant that he had to transgress them. True to his iconoclastic Protestant background, Smith held that Christianity and art were in opposition. "The truly creative art of our time," he once said, "cannot play an important part in organized religion because the traditions are diametrically opposed."³ But for the Catholic Gonzalez, Christianity and art

were in profound sympathy, and his many drawings on religious themes (which the recent Guggenheim show tellingly did *not* include) figure as importantly in his oeuvre as his drawings for his formal sculptures.

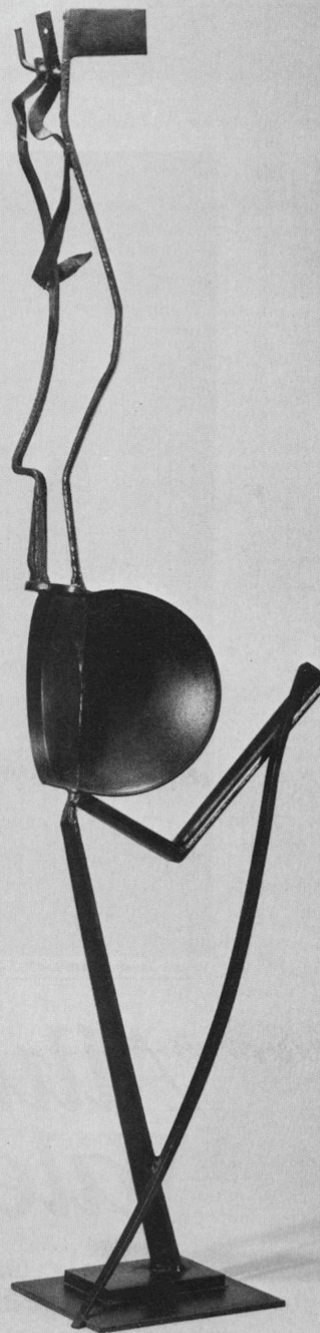
In his fury to create, Smith reached an epic power rarely equalled in 20th-century art. Gonzalez's genius was of a more gentle, mystical sort. But both sculptors, through their love for the medium, were able to express profound issues related to ethics, sexuality and religion. Perhaps it is in their very different responses to religion—which is too often today considered irrelevant to contemporary art—that we can locate their positions in the history of modern sculpture. Smith's Protestant personality made him sympathetic to a secular, formal view of modernism, whereas Gonzalez's Catholic nature allowed him to produce work that, though modernist in principle, was largely religious in feeling. □

1. This interview appears in *The Secret Letter*, a catalogue for a 1964 David Smith show at the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, New York.
2. This statement is from a 1964 radio interview on WNCN, New York.
3. "Art and Religion: a Symposium," *Art Digest* (Dec. 1953), p. 11.

Author: Alain Kirili is a French sculptor based in New York.



Smith: *Fascist Royalty*, 1943, pen and ink on paper, 19 1/2 by 25 inches. Estate of David Smith/Knoedler Gallery.



Smith: *Running Daughter*, 1956, painted steel, 100 1/2 by 36 by 17 inches. Whitney Museum.