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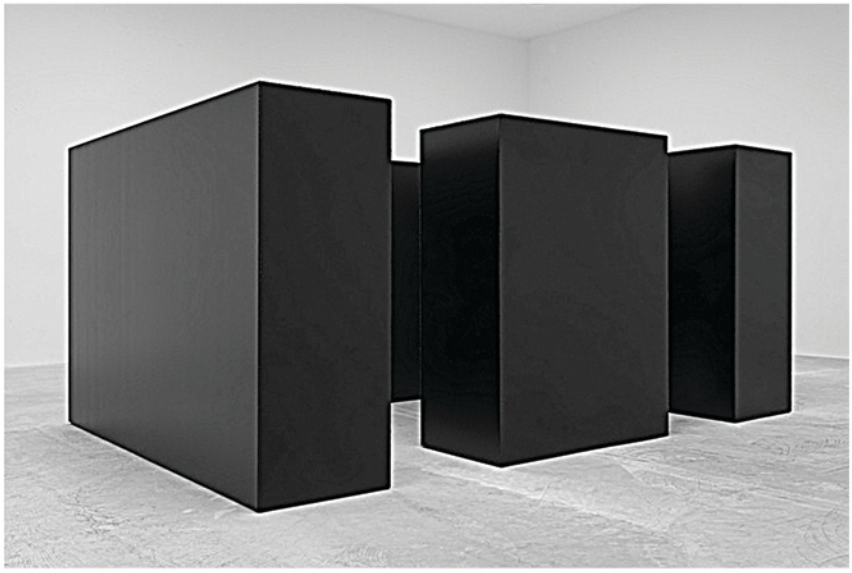
ART

Entering a 'Maze' of illusion



Trained as an architect, Tony Smith (1912-80) was adept at working with geometric structure in relation to the human body. In the 1950s, when he turned first to painting and then to sculpture, the interplay between the geometric and the organic became a leitmotif.

"Maze," a conundrum in welded steel painted dead-black, is the commanding centerpiece of a beautiful exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery. The 1967 sculpture consists of two pairs of rectangular forms, each nearly 7 feet tall. The composition nests the pairs inside a rectangular footprint, like equal signs placed at right angles to one another. The larger pair are horizontal, the smaller pair are vertical.

From either end, the sculpture appears to be just a single, flat-black plane. As you move around the seeming monolith it visually breaks apart, the horizontal and vertical planes trading two for three dimensions and tumbling in space.

Enter the sculpture's footprint, walking into its nominal maze, and the precision-placement of the component parts does two things. It creates an illusion of a complex arrangement of pathways and enclosures; and it prevents a visual grasp of all four units at once. A sense of dead-ends and paths not taken begins to accumulate.

Look closely, and the bottom edges of the steel forms do not quite rest flush on the floor; instead, the heavy blocks seem to hover a hair's-breadth above it. The weighty monoliths assume an unexpected lightness. Your body is very much present, but the sculpture recalls a cenotaph or "empty tomb," without actually being one.

The show also includes six oil paintings and three smaller sculptures in cast bronze, all abstract, dating from 1955 to 1968. To varying degrees of complexity, all play with rigorous minimal structure and the organic simultaneity of positive and negative space.

Matthew Marks Gallery, 1062 N. Orange Grove, West Hollywood, (323) 654-1830. Closed Sundays and Mondays. *www.matthewmarks.com*

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Knight, Christopher. "Review: Tony Smith at Matthew Marks Gallery," *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2013.