

## George Smith

American, born 1941

### *Bandiagara, 1990*

Painted steel, 78 x 312 x 276 inches

University of Houston-Downtown

The Bandiagara Escarpment is a sandstone cliff that rises sixteen hundred feet above the Republic of Mali's central plateau. Its cliffside dwellings are inhabited by an ethnic group known as the Dogon, a people who claim celestial origins in ancestral, aquatic Nommos who arrived by interstellar ark from the system of the Dog Star, Sirius. In the twentieth century, their Afro-Futurist aesthetic has influenced successive generations of poets, musicians, and visual artists, among them Houston's George Smith, whose sculptural triptych *Bandiagara* overlooks White Oak Bayou as it winds past the University of Houston-Downtown.

These faceted black steel monuments reference the geometry of ancient Dogon architecture as well as the language of vanguard contemporary art. Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline was one of Smith's early favorites, and the artist would spend his formative years at the San Francisco Art Institute as a student







of Bruce Naumann, then at New York City's Hunter College as a graduate assistant to the renowned Minimalist sculptor Tony Smith. Breakout exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, and the Studio Museum in Harlem cemented his reputation nationally, as did a 1971 Guggenheim Fellowship and two major grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. After several years of teaching at SUNY Buffalo State, he arrived in Houston in 1980 to join the faculty at Rice University, where he remained until his retirement in 2010.

"Mythological form is foremost important," Smith once remarked, "what an object does is secondary."<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Smith's sculpture and drawings since his first trip to Mali in 1979 have been remarkably consistent. Titles like *Ancestral Star*, *Sunship Study*, *Kindred Spirits*, and *Journey to Sirius* indicate a conceptually unified body of work in which Dogon mythology and the close sense of community it engenders are never far from the artist's mind. However, the matte black of his sculptures' angled surfaces, their often-ragged welding joints, and the thickly applied oil-stick mark-making of his drawings give Smith's artwork a luxurious tactility.

*Bandiagara* came to the UHD campus after Smith won a university-sponsored design competition in 1989. Each of the three vectored, multifaceted forms is six feet in height and five and a half feet across on their widest sides. The piece was dedicated in March 1991 and situated on a modest strip of green space on the east side of the Jesse H. Jones Student Life Center, where it is most often seen by cyclists as they pass beneath the Main Street Bridge on the hike and bike trail.

In the years since *Bandiagara*'s installation, Smith's career has been celebrated with retrospectives at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in 2007, at UHD's O'Kane Gallery in 2016, and at the Art League Houston in 2018, when he received the organization's lifetime achievement award.

**Pete Gershon**

<sup>1</sup> Terry S. Rouse, *Architectural Sculpture by George Smith* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1980).