

Muchnic, Suzanne, "ART : Still Cosmic After All These Years : Four Decades after the Dynaton movement, Gordon Onslow Ford and Mullican haven't stopped seeking new paths to awareness," *Los Angeles Times*, 03 January 1993.

Los Angeles Times

ART : Still Cosmic After All These Years : Four decades after the Dynaton movement, Gordon Onslow Ford and Lee Mullican haven't stopped seeking new paths to awareness

January 03, 1993 | SUZANNE MUCHNIC

When they converged in San Francisco about 45 years ago, Wolfgang Paalen, Gordon Onslow Ford and Lee Mullican wanted nothing less than to be image makers of cosmic freedom. The purpose of art, they thought, was self-transcending awareness. Steeped in Eastern philosophy, inspired by the Surrealists' encounter with the unconscious and uprooted by World War II, the three artists shared a vision of art's possibilities when they translated their beliefs into a movement known as Dynaton--but they were an unlikely trio:

* Paalen, the group's theoretician and senior member, was a cosmopolitan European who was born in Vienna in 1905, fled Nazi Germany in 1939 and emigrated to Mexico, where he published *Dyn*, an avant-garde art magazine.

* Onslow Ford, a well-spoken British painter, born in 1912, left a career in the Royal Navy to become an artist. He joined the Surrealist art scene in Paris in 1937, briefly returned to London during the war, then emigrated to the United States and lived in Mexico from 1941 to 1947.

Muchnic, Suzanne, "ART : Still Cosmic After All These Years : Four Decades after the Dynaton movement, Gordon Onslow Ford and Mullican haven't stopped seeking new paths to awareness," *Los Angeles Times*, 03 January 1993.

Mullican, the wide-eyed kid of the group, was 14 years younger than Paalen and Onslow Ford's junior by seven years. A native of Oklahoma and an obvious misfit in a provincial art scene that equated culture with American Regionalist painting, Mullican claimed two artistic accomplishments: He was an abstract painter, and he had cultivated a deep interest in American Indian art during summer vacations in Taos, N.M.

Mullican had come to the Bay Area in the late '40s in search of an urban art center. Onslow Ford had chosen Northern California to get in touch with nature and the Orient. But the two artists hit it off immediately. When Paalen came to San Francisco on a sojourn from Mexico, the three artists nurtured each other's desires to take Surrealism to a more profound level of expression.

They joined forces in 1951 in a landmark exhibition, "Dynaton" (named by Paalen after the Greek word for "the possible"), at the San Francisco Museum of Art. But the artists eventually went their separate ways--Paalen returned to Mexico, where in 1959 he committed suicide; Onslow Ford settled in Inverness, north of San Francisco, and Mullican moved to Los Angeles and taught art at UCLA. Meanwhile, the Dynaton movement faded from view while retaining its status as one of the West Coast's bright moments of modern art history.

That moment has been revived in "Dynaton: Before and Beyond," an exhibition of 60 works by the three artists, at Pepperdine University's Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art (to Feb. 21) and a related presentation at the Herbert Palmer Gallery (to Feb. 28). The exhibitions also have reunited Onslow Ford, 80, and Mullican, 73, the surviving members of the Dynaton movement, which provided the philosophical foundation for their subsequent work.

Together again for an interview at Pepperdine, the two artists still appear to be a rather odd couple. Mullican, who towers above the diminutive Onslow Ford, lounges on chairs that are always too short for him while his old friend sits at attention. Mullican rambles softly and erupts into laughter while Onslow Ford listens intently to questions and delivers carefully worded responses that often begin and end with "Yes."

Muchnic, Suzanne, "ART : Still Cosmic After All These Years : Four Decades after the Dynaton movement, Gordon Onslow Ford and Mullican haven't stopped seeking new paths to awareness," *Los Angeles Times*, 03 January 1993.

But appearances are deceiving--in art as well as life--as the two artists point out in a wide-ranging discussion.

"Yes. All these images to a certain extent are images of ourselves; they're not something different from ourselves," Onslow Ford says, looking around a gallery filled with paintings and sculptures that might be called abstractions. Dots, spatters, spirals, starbursts and auras abound in Onslow Ford's paintings, while Mullican's work can be likened to energy fields. When human forms appear, they are radiant silhouettes, "guardians" or "personages," not representations of specific people.

"We're trying to find images we haven't seen before," Onslow Ford says. "To tell you the truth, we don't know what we look like yet. We haven't made an image of ourselves. I don't believe photographic images. They're quite unsatisfactory. They're very limited. Lee's 'Walking Man' is much closer because he's aware of the chromosomes and the inner structures," he says, pointing to a 6-foot-tall bronze that Mullican made in 1985.

"The Surrealists were interested in dreams, but we saw that the future lay in the realities behind dreams, which I call the inner worlds," Onslow Ford continues. "I'm more and more convinced that that's where art comes from. . . . The ideas, the insights come first. The matter--what you perceive--comes afterward. We're still making our way around how we see the world. The way we have been taught isn't very good, so we're having to change that."

The artists haven't come up with a term to describe what they're doing. "I talk about Inner Realism, but that's too boring," Onslow Ford says. "We have to find a word which is lively. Dynaton is a wonderful word, but that belongs to the past. Yes."

But is their art abstract?

Muchnic, Suzanne, "ART : Still Cosmic After All These Years : Four Decades after the Dynaton movement, Gordon Onslow Ford and Mullican haven't stopped seeking new paths to awareness," *Los Angeles Times*, 03 January 1993.

"Picasso said there's no such thing as abstract art, and I completely agree," Onslow Ford says. " Abstract is such a vague term it can be misunderstood. "(In my paintings) I'm talking about . . . something that is more real than what we can see, more real to me than what I can see."

"What I feel close to is abstracting , " Mullican says, noting that he prefers abstract as a verb rather than an adjective. "In other words," he continues, "I'm abstracting from, taking from . . . "

"From what?" Onslow Ford interrupts.

"From nature. Taking from nature and funneling it through me," Mullican replies.

"Taking from the appearance of nature?" Onslow Ford queries sharply.

"From nature as I see it. . . . I'm taking things from nature that are difficult to describe," Mullican says.

"Which are invisible?" Onslow Ford presses.

"Which are invisible," Mullican concurs.

"Now there we are. That I would agree with," Onslow Ford says, breaking into a smile, apparently relieved that he and his old friend are still on the same aesthetic wavelength.

Although they have pursued their work separately--Onslow Ford in a sylvan Northern California setting and Mullican in Santa Monica and Taos--the artists seem to delight in discussing their vision of art as a means to heightened awareness. And, as always, they focus on the future.

"I feel that we are getting into a new period. We've known that unconsciously for a long time, but it's becoming more and more clear," Onslow Ford says. "Modern art in the past tended to be revolutionary. They had manifestoes and all the rest of it. Now we realize much more that it's an individual thing, a growth of consciousness. We have to change ourselves.

Muchnic, Suzanne, "ART : Still Cosmic After All These Years : Four Decades after the Dynaton movement, Gordon Onslow Ford and Mullican haven't stopped seeking new paths to awareness," *Los Angeles Times*, 03 January 1993.

"It's not so much telling people what to do," he says of his and Mullican's work. "It's showing them new aspects of the world and ourselves. . . . We have to change to survive. We have to get more in harmony with the Earth and the cosmos, and that's what our art's about. This is not revolutionary. It's revealing nature. It's revealing the truth."

Despite their grounding in the mainstream of art history, both artists are essentially mavericks. Onslow Ford, who couldn't bear the strictures of an academic art education, is a self-taught painter whose life in art took off in Paris when he was associated with the Chilean artist Matta and other young emigres who composed the "second generation" of Surrealism. As art historian Amy Winter points out in the Pepperdine exhibition catalogue, Onslow Ford and his compatriots rejected the illusionistic, narrative Surrealism practiced by Salvador Dali while embracing and expanding the tradition of automatism established earlier by Jean Arp, Joan Miro and Yves Tanguy.

Mullican, on the other hand, studied art at Abilene Christian College in Texas, the University of Oklahoma and the Kansas City Art Institute, but his most memorable lessons came from art magazines, which provided a glimpse of the development of modern art in New York and Europe.

Academia provided one epiphany, however: "When I was at the University of Oklahoma, the head of the art school was a Scandinavian who did abstract landscapes with broad brush strokes," Mullican says. "When the time came for him to have a show of his works in the lobby of the art building . . . the school newspaper ran a reproduction of one of his paintings but they ran it upside down. The marvelous thing was, when he came in the next morning, the first thing he did was to turn that painting over. I thought, 'Now that's an attitude that I can adjust to and remember and make use of.' That meant more to me than all the classes I had taken."

As their art has evolved, Onslow Ford and Mullican have worked more and more spontaneously. To become aware, one must work intuitively to reveal the unknown, Onslow Ford says: "Once you become spontaneous, you get something new. It's just a question of being able to pay attention. When you learn from someone else you are distracted."

Despite their unflagging dedication to a view of art that inspired them several decades ago, both artists keep abreast of the latest developments in the art world. One of Mullican's primary sources of information is his son, Matt, whose postmodern work has been widely recognized. The veteran painter has no desire to isolate himself. "I want to know what's going on; I want to be in it," he says. But he worries about what he views as "deadly conformity" in the arts.

"So many artists really have come down to having a product," he says. "They want to have 30 paintings all alike. The gallery wants to show 30 paintings that all look alike. Everyone wants to buy one of those paintings that look alike and so forth. I just

Muchnic, Suzanne, "ART : Still Cosmic After All These Years : Four Decades after the Dynaton movement, Gordon Onslow Ford and Mullican haven't stopped seeking new paths to awareness," *Los Angeles Times*, 03 January 1993.
jump from one thing to the next, from this idea to that, and then I do ceramics too and then bronzes. But in the end they are all connected."

When creating their own work, both artists say, they remove themselves from the world of art journals and fashionable galleries. "I enter an enclosed space and just do it," Mullican says. Rising fresh in the mornings, Onslow Ford concentrates intensely and turns out paintings in as little as seven or eight minutes.

Their work doesn't get much attention in trendy art circles, but these elder statesmen don't despair.

"It doesn't matter," Onslow Ford says. "I'm dealing with certainties . . . and that's marvelous. Sooner or later more and more people will feel it. The painter can't worry about what other people think, because it's just distracting. . . . To a great extent I have lived outside (the art world) and I'm thriving. Yes."

The territory of their art is so vast that there's room for everyone to find something new, the artists say. And the mood of the '90s--including an increased concern about ecology and personal responsibility--may increase their following. "It's a preoccupation in the air. For the first time painting can have a major effect on the way we live," Onslow Ford says.

"Nature is revolting; it is being contaminated," he says. "There are all kinds of messages that we can't go on the way we are. . . . Painters have been feeling that for a long, long time. They've been dealing with primal subjects of space and matter and light and energy, in Impressionism, Cubism and Surrealism. We have to look at all these things in a different way. We can't just use them. We have to live in harmony and in so doing become more integrated and wise."