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by Christopher Knight

Think of American abstract painting in the 1950s and you're likely to think of the New York School. After World War II, varieties of Surrealist and Expressionist art emerged simultaneously in the West, Midwest, South and East, but New York had something the other regions didn't: New York had establishment power, socially and economically. Because of it, the New York School has been central to art scholarship ever since.

Lee Mullican (1919-1998) was among the relatively small but growing band of progressive artists working in postwar America. He was born in rural Oklahoma but stationed in California for part of the war and began making art in San Francisco following his discharge. In 1952 he moved to Los Angeles, where he worked for the rest of his life. Walk through his retrospective exhibition newly opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and you will find something that might surprise you.

Thirty-five of the 46 paintings date from 1946 through the 1950s, which is when he made his principal contribution. Among them are canvases that are equal -- or even superior -- to anything from that period by Milton Avery, William Baziotes, Adolph Gottlieb, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Theodoros Stamos, Bradley Walker Tomlin and other estimable second-tier painters of the New York School.

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Pictures such as the "Agawam Triptych" (1950), "The Splintering Lions" (1950), "Space" (1951) or "The Ninnekah" (1951) will knock your socks off. "Pendulum Factor" and "Asia Minor" (both 1953) and "The Chalk Garden" and the untitled white paintings, all from 1958, are marvels. For conceptual resonance and formal invention, these and other works are nothing short of dazzling.

Mullican, like many other artists of his generation, was consumed with the question of how spirituality could be effectively represented in art. He had been stationed with the Army in Guam when atomic bombs landed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, with thousands of other American soldiers in the Pacific, he was sent to occupy Japan immediately after.

Faced with the unprecedented potential for nuclear annihilation, and soon given the emerging truth about the Holocaust in Europe, matters of life's sanctity were pressing in the years following the war. Creativity itself held profound intrinsic value -- and in a measure unmatched in American culture before. History had brought the world to the brink. Artists, many of them returned from the battlefields, reasonably surmised that a reconsideration of prehistory might provide a platform from which to start over.

For Mullican that meant at least two things. One was cultural, the other natural. Without being descriptive or realistic, his pictures recall the interlocking forms in pre-Columbian artifacts, Native American pictographs, tribal masks and prehistoric petroglyphs -- all of them pointedly outside traditional Western sources in Rome, Greece or Egypt. Their imagery is lodged squarely between figurative representation and pure abstraction.

As for nature, space in his work is at once intergalactic and intracellular, suggested by organic tracery, sunspots, whorls, comets tails, amoeboid shapes and other such forms. Modest yet joyful, his paintings assert themselves as the physical embodiment of a plane of human activity where the microcosm fuses with the macrocosm.

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The most peculiar feature of Mullican's paintings is their textured surface, made from ridges of paint. Collectively these striations function like force fields, bustling your eye around the picture plane.

The underlying compositions seem to have been laid out in flat fields and two-dimensional shapes painted in a traditional manner, with a brush or palette knife. But like cornstalks in a plowed autumn field or the rough warp and weft of a woven blanket, the surfaces are enlivened with thousands of short, spiky, bristling lines. The shower of uniform marks adds dimension to the flat canvas.

Mullican made the paint ridges with the type of blade used by printers to apply ink to rollers. (His friend Jack Stauffacher, who ran Greenwood Press, gave him the tool.) It looks like a spatula or putty knife. He dabbed at the canvas with the blunt end to make linear marks of uniform size and length. The technique, even on modestly scaled easel paintings, asserts itself as methodical and repetitive -- almost ritualistic.

Mullican often described his painting process as meditative, but visually it creates a peculiar sense of drawing. Forms seem to emerge between the lines -- literally and figuratively.

Phantoms and phantasms dart about the pictures. Even though everything is laid out clearly and succinctly, right before your eyes, you're never quite certain what's there and what's not. His imagery is simultaneous, existing as equal parts positive form and negative space.

The earliest works in the exhibition are a provocative group of Surrealist ink drawings in which Mullican used feathery or web-like marks to compose delicate, mysterious totems.

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(Looked at one way, "Personage" is like a trip inside an alimentary canal; looked at another, it's an X-ray of a stone cliff.)

His inspiration for becoming an artist grew out of his work as a draftsman in the Army. Handed aerial photographs of assorted terrain, Mullican had to convert the imagery into usable topographical maps.

The process involved a distinctive kind of mental projection -- a point of view seen indirectly by the artist's eye and filtered through his consciousness to create a two-dimensional representation of the material world. Without gimmickry, the linear knife-technique he later developed for his paintings banished types of illusionism common to traditional Western art.

Instead, images are assembled from flat planes and lines of color. The tiny ridges catch light and cast shadows, acknowledging the third dimension in a subtle and unexpected way.

Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of the show concerns the role of color in Mullican's art. In the first several rooms you'll be hard-pressed to find a pure red, yellow or blue in any painting, or even a familiar secondary hue. Rather, Mullican chose tertiary colors to paint primal forces.

Yellow-greens, orange-reds, blue-violets and other exotic combinations come into play with a variety of neutral tones, as well as black and white. Using these tertiary hues might at first seem a strange tack to take for primordial interests -- especially given the history of Modernism, where the purity of primary colors often assumed an exalted position. But the abolition of purity seems part of his paintings' point.

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And given Mullican's striation technique, the choice is acute and meaningful. Mysterious shapes and suggestive figures are read between the lines, so employing a range of "in-between" colors only enhances the evocative conundrum. The mysterious life of the human spirit, these paintings affirm, is something best approached from an oblique angle.

In this, Mullican's closest artistic compatriot may be the slightly older Mark Tobey (1890-1976) -- another radically inventive, spiritually inclined yet underestimated artist whose decision not to live and work in New York during his most productive years had an effect on the wider influence of his art. (Tobey, like Mullican, showed at Manhattan's Willard Gallery.)