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Western Culture: Lee Mullican's Californian Abstraction

by Saul Ostrow

Lee Mullican at James Cohan Gallery

May 14 to June 18, 2016
533 W. 26th Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)
New York, 212 714 9500

Lee Mullican: *The Fifties* at Susan Inglett Gallery

April 28 to June 4, 2016
522 W. 24th Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)
New York, 212 647 9111

Undaunted by the challenge of the New York School, in the early 1950s on the West Coast there emerged an approach to abstract painting that did not participate in the conflicting vision of the Romantic (painterly) and Classicist (geometric) traditions. On the East Coast, this battle had led to the idea of an "abstract" art that was to represent nothing more than itself. The West Coast variant was instead rooted in a mystical tradition in which the task of the artist was to reveal the truth behind appearances. Using non-Western and Native American sources, Lee Mullican, and contemporaries such as Mark Tobey, was interested in the pictorial, and the imagistic power of abstraction, rather than the all-at-once-ness sought by their East Coast contemporaries. Two recent exhibitions of Mullican's work, at Susan Inglett Gallery and James Cohan Gallery, show his development of abstraction on the West Coast. The Susan Inglett show deals with Mullican's work of the 1950s, while James Cohan features work from the late '50s through the '60s.



Though there is a long history of transcendental abstract painting in the US, seldom is it as formally radical as Mullican's. What differentiates his approach from that of his East Coast counterparts, such as Richard Pousette-Dart, is that Mullican, rather than trying to give representation to the non-objective realm, sought instead to stimulate the sensations of reality as perceived by the senses and the mind. To this

end, Mullican employed the intense visual patterns associated with migraines, epilepsy, and altered states of consciousness — e.g. states that produce mind-numbing optical patterns and hallucinations.

Mullican didn't differentiate between abstraction and figuration and as such was mainly an abstractionist who distorted the codes of representation for expressive ends. Though aware of the importance of form, he comes to the abstract via his ambition at producing visionary images through which one could aesthetically experience the power and force of the world of mind and energy. Mullican's vision therefore, contrasted sharply with the existentialism of Barnett

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Newman, the Gothic vision of Clyfford Still, or the primordial imagery of Mark Rothko. All of these artists envisioned an external reality capable of overwhelming and dwarfing the viewer, an experience of the Sublime meant to remind viewers of the raw power of nature and human fragility. Mullican's sublime is objectless: fields of color and sensation, and his paintings are therefore intended to deliver up a sensory overload that will induce in the viewer an awareness of still another realm.

In San Francisco, where he moved following World War II, Mullican met the British-born abstract-Surrealist painter Gordon Onslow Ford, who is credited with making some of the first poured paintings in the late 1930s. Austrian Surrealist Wolfgang Paalen also had a significant effect on Mullican during this period. Mullican came to share these artists' interest in Eastern and Native American mysticism. Bound together by a desire to make works that would tap into altered consciousness that could serve as a doorway to infinite possibilities, they formed the short-lived Dynaton Group. Its name was derived from Paalen's influential journal called *Dyn*, published in Mexico City between 1942 and 1944.

Mullican's earliest works, shown at Susan Inglett Gallery, combine references to Aboriginal dream paintings, Native American iconography, and sci-fi-like cosmic explosions. Paintings such as *The Age of the Desert* (1957) are like colored drawings and consist of disjointed cosmic and landscape imagery, pictographs, as well as abstract patterns. Significantly, Mullican introduces into these works an aerial point of view, the source of which was his experience as a cartographer making maps from aerial photographs for the US military during World War II.

Formally more important than the ethnographic references, and the flattening effect of an aerial perspective, are the patterns of matchstick-like slivers of color Mullican began to use in the mid '50s. These short, raised lines of color — produced with the edge of the knife used by printers to ink rollers — were a distinctive feature of his work over the course of his career. Mullican distributed hundreds, if not thousands, of these colored striations across the surface of his paintings, forming a field of sensations that detached itself from the picture plane, creating a new dimension: an optical space that was divorced from the underlying imagery and abstract forms. At times, his striations lend themselves to creating tapestry-like effects that bring Gustav Klimt to mind. In works such as *The Arrival of the Quetzalcoatl*(1963), shown at James Cohan Gallery, Mullican shows one can be fearless when it comes to the decorative, in that it need not become a liability. In this work the tapestry effect and the multiple erratic zigzag patterns, intense colors produce a hallucinatory optical effect. An earlier artwork, *Transfigured Night* (1962), with its tonal sonorities, harmonic reds and oranges, and pattern of pictographs, is tasteful and hip to the point one can image it as album cover for the cool jazz of Dave Brubeck and Lee Konitz.

Only a handful of the works of the '60s and '70s are truly abstract and these, such as *Mediation on the Vertical*(1962), are predominantly monochromatic. Rather than creating spectral symbols or camouflaged figures, Mullican fills the plane with agitated and convoluted patterns, forming overall rhythmic fields of intense color and fluctuating densities. His signature matchsticks of color optically attach and detach themselves from the surface creating pathways, trajectories and patterns that float in the space between viewer and the painting's surface. These works are no longer dependent on graphic imagery but on forms that are a result of color and the density of marks. *The Arrival of the Quetzalcoatl*, with its aggressive field of jostling patterns and forms, and its greater spontaneity, is one of Mullican's most accomplished works. Though not included in these two exhibitions, Mullican's paintings from the same period — in which stylized ethnographic imagery dominates, rather than painterly effects — appear to verge on kitsch. Yet I wonder if this preference is a consequence of my viewing them with prejudiced eyes, schooled in the style and history of the New York School. Despite these limitations, Mullican's works still resonate, and demonstrate that during the '50s and early '60s, AbEx and New York were not the only game in play.