

Yau, John. "Restless and Rigid", *Hyperallergic*, 12 June 2016.

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Restless and Rigid

by **John Yau** on June 12, 2016

I have to admit to being negligent because my original intention was to review two exhibitions, but now, sadly, one of them is closed. Together, the exhibitions, *Lee Mullican: The Fifties* at Susan Inglett (April 28–June 4, 2016) and *Lee Mullican* at James Cohan (May 14–June 18, 2016), which spanned from 1957 to 1965, add to what we first learned from the revelatory exhibit, *Lee Mullican: An Abundant Harvest of Sun* at the Grey Art Gallery (April 25–July 15, 2006) which concentrated on the decade of 1945-55. The work of Mullican (1919 – 1998) and others, including his friend Gordon Onslow Ford (1912–2003), shatters the myth that the only radical art being made in America in the 1940s and '50s was by the Abstract Expressionists. It is a lesson worth remembering.

Ten of the eleven paintings in the exhibition at Cohan were done between 1962 and '65, overlapping with the art world's further shift away from Abstract Expressionism as it embraced Minimalism, Pop Art, and Color Field painting. Although these movements were very different from each other, they rejected anything that smacked of metaphysics, mysticism, and otherworldliness. This is where Mullican parts company from his Abstract Expressionist counterparts, as well as from those who superseded them. By this time, Mullican had long perfected his use of the thin edge of a printer's ink knife to make a ridged line about two inches in length. This technique – to which he rigidly adhered to for the rest of his career, but, surprisingly, did not become rigid in – evokes comparisons with the craft of weaving, drawing with toothpicks, Vincent Van Gogh's swirling cosmos in "The Starry Night" (1889) and the pulsating lines of the American visionary artist, Charles Burchfield.

Although the Cohan selection largely comes from work that Mullican did in a span of four years, using the same inflexible technique, with a palette dominated by either red or yellow, it is apparent that he was able to achieve a wide range of visual effects. For all its constraints, Mullican's method seemed to open doors rather than close them. In "Threaded Red" (1962), which consists of different hues of red, the patterns shift seamlessly from different-sized, cellular ellipses nested within darker or lighter ellipses to jagged zig-zag bands stretching across the surface, to a large elliptical red orb floating on the painting's upper left side, like a birth-giving planetary presence.

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There is irresolvable tension between the painting's many different focal points and its surface covered (or threaded) by insistent, tactile lines, which complicates the viewer's experience. I quickly discovered that there is no ideal place to stand and look at Mullican's paintings, especially the ones done in closely related hues. As I moved back and forth, from having my nose practically pressed against the scarified surface to standing quite some distance away, I realized that my movements echoed the painting's oscillations between figure and ground, between the physical lines that buzzed across the painting's surface and the entire visual experience. I also realized that the optical vibrations convey the form's midway state; the form exists between a past and a future, between coalescing and dissolving. Change and transformation are central to any understanding of Mullican's work.

There is little or no stillness to the pulsating paintings. More importantly, as I went from scrutinizing a field of ridged lines to seeing the jagged shapes they become, I found I got a different satisfaction in each view. At the same time, the ridged lines and vibrant shapes established a continuum connecting the tactile to the hallucinatory, a material state of things to a state of seeing that approaches the vertiginous. Can rapture be far behind?



Lee Mullican, "Caravan to the Sun" (1957), oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in.

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Mullican's paintings swirl, shimmer, vibrate, and seem capable of breathing. They bring the molecular, the wave-like, and the cosmic together. Made between the late fifties and mid-sixties, during the rise of the Hippie subculture and the growing use of mind-altering drugs, Mullican's paintings reject the formalist and materialist art being made and celebrated at the time. His art belongs to what John Ashbery, in another context, called "the other tradition." I would call it the occult or hidden vein of postwar art history, that which is anti-rational and given to employing non-western beliefs and perceptual systems – more likely the coins needed for the I Ching than the color theories of Josef Albers.

In the largely yellow, square, abstract painting, "Meditation on the Vertical" (1962), I encountered a field of subtly shifting, vertical yellow lines with a few lightning-like clusters of orange ones interspersed throughout. The unrelenting verticality of the lines conveyed an unstoppable passage from the lower depths to the upper limits. Always on our way to somewhere else, and to some other state, are we ascending, or descending, or both? Although it was probably not Mullican's intention, I thought of "Meditation on the Vertical" as his response to Clyfford Still's jagged lines and his use of yellow, often in conjunction with red and black. Mullican's palette consisted almost solely of either red or yellow, occasionally punctuated by oranges, blues, greens and blacks. Both men used a knife-like tool to apply the paint. The skin of Mullican's paintings is scarified, while Still's is impasto, somewhere between rock face and skin. What might we learn from a smartly curated show of works that Mullican and Still made in San Francisco during the years both men lived there? If done right, I suspect that Mullican hold his own.

Although Mullican could make what many would consider a purely abstract painting, such as the nearly monochrome "Meditation on the Vertical," he could also be semi-figurative, as in "Caravan to the Sun" (1957), or evoke an otherworldly landscape, as in "Meditation on a Southwestern Landscape" (1962), or be inspired by improvisational music, as in "Meditations on a Jazz Passage" (1964). He was inspired by many different sources – many of them non-western – and though he proceeded incrementally, linear stroke by linear stroke, he wasn't afraid that he would either lose his way or get bogged down.

Mullican's rigorous method of drawing in paint, of making one line at a time, kept him connected to automatic drawing, to moving faster than thought. Despite what appears to be a slow and even tedious process, the artist apparently laid down the lines quite quickly, without thinking. It was all improvisation, done while the artist was in a trance-like state. The fact that Mullican was able to achieve as much as he did using a rigidly narrow and potentially boring approach is something to behold. His achievement helps widen and deepen our understanding of what happened in art in the first decades after World War II.

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Obviously, there was much more going on during those decades that we still need to recognize.

Mullican was born in Chickasha, Oklahoma, in 1919, thirteen years after Leon Polk Smith was born there. Growing in the Midwest, he knew there was something called modern art, and was never interested in Thomas Hart Benton and other regionalists. He started reading Gertrude Stein while in his late teens. He was drafted into the army in World War II as a topographer, which required him to look at hundreds of aerial photographs with an eye to gleaning information from the abstract patterns. He served in Hawaii and Japan. While in Hawaii, he chanced across a copy of Wolfgang Paalen's magazine *Dyn*, which greatly influenced him. (He would meet Paalen and Onslow Ford in San Francisco, after the war and they would show together). Later in his life, he collected non-western art, including folk art, textiles and pottery. He taught art at UCLA from 1962 until 1990. Lari Pittman was one of his students and Peter Young met him and his wife, Luchita through his parents because of their shared interest in tribal art. Mullican seemed to have started applying paint with a printer's ink knife around the time Jackson Pollock began pouring paint. One approach is tight and linear, while the other is expansive and fluid. They seem to represent the limits of what could be done in radical painting at that time, as the work of Jean Ingres and Eugene Delacroix did in an earlier age. While Pollock's form of applying paint led to stain painting, Mullican's reductive application did not exert a similar influence. However, to focus on whether it did or not misses a larger point, which I have previously stated in a review of Juan Usle's exhibition at Cheim & Read: not everything has been done with paint. Pollock's pouring was not a culmination for everyone working in paint. This singular fact makes Mullican an important part of our incomplete art history.

Lee Mullican *continues at James Cohan (533 W 26th St, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 18. Lee Mullican: The Fifties was on view at Susan Inglett (522 W 24th St, Chelsea, Manhattan) April 28–June 4.*