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Lee Mullican's Countercultural Vision at the Grey Gallery

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by Roberta Smith

Lee Mullican's paintings, the subject of a sparkling survey at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, have the unusual distinction of being both period pieces and, apparently, ahead of their time.

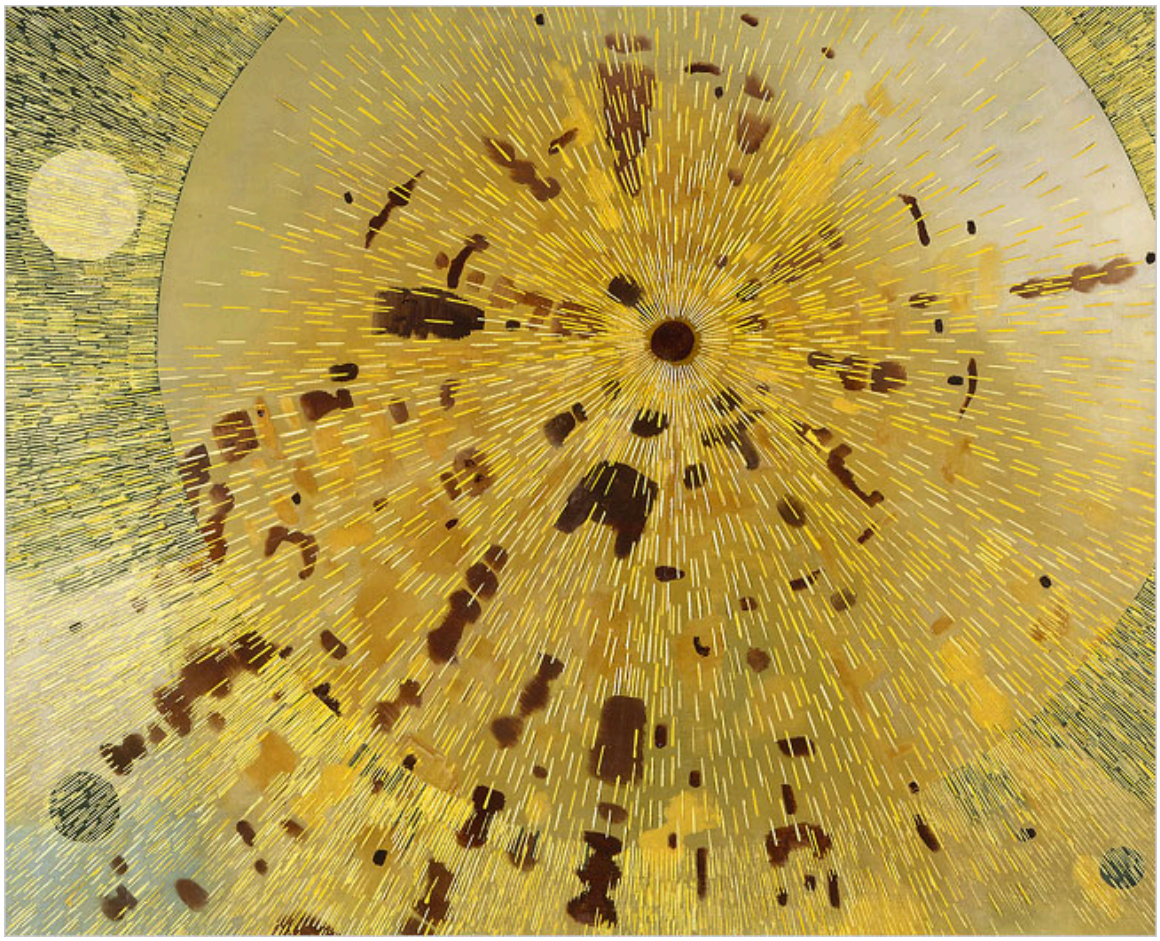
You may look twice at the dates of these works, with their sunbursts of needle-thin lines radiating from small-planet-like orbs or forming large partial spheres that suggest that you'll be landing on the moon momentarily. They combine a slightly fussy sci-fi aura with counterculture Zen and a post-Color Field crispness. To a great extent, they seem almost frozen in the 1960's.

But of the 70 drawings and paintings and 10 sculptures in the show, 54 date from 1945 to 1955. They were made in California, when Mullican was in his late 20's and early 30's, and they are exactly contemporary with the heyday of Abstract Expressionism.

Organized at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art by Carol S. Eliel, the museum's curator of Modern and contemporary art, this exhibition is an eye-opener. It reminds us that the history of art only gets larger and more interesting, and that as it expands, cracks appear.

Mullican's art is the latest crack in the facade of the mythical 1950's, a decade that looks busier all the time. He spent most of his career in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and started teaching at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1961. But he had six shows from 1951 to 1967 at the Willard Gallery in New York. Willard also represented

Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, West Coast artists who shared Mullican's attraction to Eastern thought.



While Pollock dripped, Mullican devised his own form of hands-off technique, applying paint with the thin edge of a printer's ink knife, for an effect that often suggests weaving. Throughout his life, he made exquisite drawings of surreptitiously natural forms. Some present multiple irregular spheres that often resemble — and sometimes actually are — collections of small rocks. Others were more fanciful. An especially wonderful one titled "Sage Series Five," from 1979, suggests an expanse of rolling cloud whose serrated edges bring to mind mountain ranges, nipples and the bumps on cactus.

Mullican was a meditative neat freak on the order of such masters of the tiny brush and the obsessive surface as Myron Stout and, especially, Steve Wheeler, who, like Mullican,

was immersed in non-Western cultures. Each of their careers was overshadowed by Abstract Expressionism, but also limited by distinct internal checks and balances.

Mullican was born in Chickasha, Okla., in 1919, just 15 years after the town produced Leon Polk Smith, who would become another odd-painter-out of the 1950's. Mullican's mother was a Sunday painter; her son was drawn to art — Modern art — at an early age. He passed through three schools, and got a degree from the Kansas City Art Institute, without finding what he was looking for. But after that, his path to maturity seems to have been full of serendipitous turns: so many of them dovetailed with his developing sensibility that he seems never to have encountered an influence or an experience he couldn't use.

Drafted into the Army in 1942, he was sent to topographic school and spent the rest of the war drawing maps, becoming familiar with the aerial spaciousness, abstract patterning and meticulousness of cartography. Map-making fit with an inclination to intimate the immensity of the cosmos by working in small and controlled ways. His knife marks accumulated in two-inch increments into rays of light similar to those in a Russian icon, except saints have been eliminated in favor of a vertiginous sense of intergalactic space and voluptuous contrasts of color. Orange rays are different when knifed onto ochre than onto bright yellow.

Although the sheer decorative glimmer of these works can sometimes bring to mind Gustav Klimt — if Klimt had been mad for the Big Bang theory — Mullican's hero was Paul Klee, who accomplished so much, as Mullican put it, "by making a mark and then making another mark." Klee's calm, inflected refinement is echoed by one of the earliest works in the exhibition — the first drawing in the show is an Arcimboldo-like head made of vegetation that could easily be by the young Klee.

Mullican's next big discovery was pre-Columbian art, which he came across in an issue of Dyn, a short-lived little magazine that Wolfgang Paalen, the youngest member of the Paris Surrealists, published in the early 1940's in Mexico. In the late 40's, Mullican crossed paths with Paalen and the English Surrealist Gordon Onslow Ford in San

Francisco. The three became close and organized a show of their work called "Dynaton" in 1951 at the San Francisco Museum of Art, then went their separate ways. (Things were undoubtedly complicated by the fact that Mullican and Paalen's wife, Luchita Hurtado, fell in love and eventually married.) But the Olmec masks in Dyn set Mullican in motion, and eventually his knowledge and, to some extent, his collection would encompass indigenous American cultures, African art, folk art and Indian ikat textiles.

The Abstract Expressionists were partly inspired by tribal art when they set sail for pure abstraction; it gave them license to be wild and primal. Mullican skirted the primal, concentrating more on technique, motifs and philosophy. In works like "Luminous Loot" (1948) and "Happily the Chiefs Regard You" (1949), the splintering golden lines more than hint at shamans in full regalia. His knife technique conjured up careful, repetitive activities — not only weaving but also basket-making and embroidery — and works like the large, handsome "Dynaton Triptych," from around 1952, might almost be ornate tapestries. But most important of all was Mullican's conviction that Modern painting should aim for non-Western art's seamless combination of abstraction and representation in ways that reveal the underlying order of the universe and the richness of man's relationship to nature.

In this sense, he was unafraid of discernible subjects, of having his paintings take us to a faraway corner of the galaxy or into the earth's strata, or having them suggest battling constellations, as in the golden swirls of the splendid "Splintering Lions" (1950).

This show skims across the last several decades of Mullican's career (he died in 1998), and you can't help feeling that, like Pollock's, his signature technique eventually became a limitation he could not move beyond. You sense his restlessness. In the early 50's, he turned to making elegantly attenuated sculptures that suggested refined facsimiles of tribal masks and figures. It is significant that "The Measurement," from 1951, is one of the best paintings here and makes the least use of the knifed-on lines. Unlike Pollock's, Mullican's technique had the added constraint of being, in itself, intensely constraining. It is this more than anything else that freezes his work in time.