

Taking the Long View

Lee Mullican's abstract drawings, suggesting landscapes seen by air, lead the eye through an ever-shifting terrain.

Sometimes, coming across a hitherto unknown element of an artist's biography suddenly sparks new considerations of the art he produced. Care is needed in order not to reduce the work to a simplistic matter of cause and effect, nor to turn it into dull illustration of the merely personal. Still, artists draw from experience, and biography is its record.

"Lee Mullican: Selected Drawings, 1945-1980" is a small but intensely lovely show of 43 drawings newly opened at the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum of Art. Mullican, who taught at UCLA for 30 years and died in 1998 at the age of 79, is well known as a painter of cosmological abstractions. With Wolfgang Paalen and Gordon Onslow-Ford he formed the Dynaton Group, which in 1951 was the subject of an influential exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Their work was important to the transition from a European prewar Modernism to an American postwar version.

Mullican, like many American artists of his generation, served in the Army during World War II. He was assigned to a unit that drafted topographical maps in the Army Corps of Engineers. In the brief but insightful catalog produced for the UCLA/Hammer show, the artist is quoted as having told a 1992 interviewer, "I loved working with aerial photographs, which was a great influence on my painting." Because drawings tend to be the most direct record of evolving artistic thought, the show offers an illuminating take on his statement.

To be sure, there is often something of the look of landscape in Mullican's drawings, however abstract. Sometimes it's evergreens dotting rolling hillsides, sometimes webs of light like a nocturnal city seen from a high promontory. Among the earliest works in the show are three so-called "mineral drawings"--exquisite, tightly drawn rows of abstract shapes that recall stones, pebbles and boulders.

Yet, it's less the descriptive quality of topographical maps that seems important to Mullican's art than it is the altered point of view such maps require. Aerial photographs and topographical maps shift perspective and demand complex spatial reorientations. To see them, the eye takes in unexpected information that the mind must actively reform. In Mullican's mineral drawings, the stones and pebbles simultaneously adopt other demeanors: a pinto bean, a reclining nude, a caricatured face. Worlds inhabit worlds.

The precedent on which he built his art is certainly Surrealism, in which nothing remains exactly as it seems at first. What Mullican added to Surrealism's simultaneity of vision was a dynamism of gentle exuberance.

The descriptive spirals, whorls and swirling lines in "Quartette of Spider Sounds" (1950) register an urge to abolish stasis from the picture. Soon, Mullican added more visually sophisticated means for accomplishing that aim.

Los Angeles Times

A remarkable group of six graphite drawings from 1959 alludes to a variety of landscapes. "Shift West," for example, looks at once like an aerial view of rolling fields and like the variegated face of a stone cliff. Horizontal and vertical coexist.

The drawing is composed entirely of short, vertical, staccato pencil marks--some short, some long, some clustered, some dispersed, some heavy, some faint. It isn't the lines that create the shifting landscape allusions, though, in the traditional manner of a contour drawing; rather, it's the spaces between the lines that do the visual heavy-lifting.

The lines are like channels that cause your eyes to slip, slide and skip through the spaces, which constantly split and branch out into different areas. They force your eye to wander, but the final path it elects to take remains utterly random. The feeling is of a journey both guided and free.

Color is mostly subdued in the drawings chosen for the show, which was organized by the UCLA/Hammer Museum's new director, Ann Philbin (it represents her inaugural presentation). Grays, black and pale earth or sky tones predominate--until the mid-1960s, when oil pastels are used to make rich, jewel-tone drawings whose densely packed circles of highlighted reds, blues, greens and yellows yield the look of Indian beadwork.

Another early drawing ("No Title," 1948) incorporates the contour of a Hopi kachina, representative of a beneficent spirit. Dynaton, the name of the small group of artists to which Mullican briefly belonged, is said to derive from the Greek and to mean "that which is possible." Not only does an element of the unknown remain critical to Mullican's art, so does an element of faith.

Also new at the museum is an exhibition, through Sept. 26, of drawings collected by some of the most important contemporary American and European artists of the last 40 years, including Jasper Johns, Sol Lewitt, Elizabeth Murray and Ed Ruscha. "Drawn From Artists' Collections," which originated at New York's Drawing Center, whence the UCLA/Hammer's Philbin came, includes a wide variety of work, mostly Modern but also going far afield.

Some artists trade their own work (Murray and Ellen Phelan), others go for Chinese calligraphy (Brice Marden and Helen Marden) or Indian watercolors (Howard Hodgkin) of the 17th century, or for American "outsider" art (the late Roger Brown). A number of exceptional drawings will be found, including examples by Cezanne, Seurat, Brancusi, Schwitters and Picasso.

The collections of 16 artists are surveyed. Those of Helen Frankenthaler and Alex Katz, which were seen in New York and are represented in the handsome catalog, did not travel.