

## Frozen Spontaneity

The gradual development of Jonathan Lasker's highly original body of work over the past twenty years or so has charted a steady course with clearly defined stages. Initially Lasker's work received little attention from the public, but it has received widespread recognition for a number of years now and been shown all over the world, as a glance at the list of exhibitions and publications devoted to his art will confirm. Uncompromising, often controversial and even shocking, his work always succeeds in eliciting curiosity and pushing the limits of what is acceptable. Rarely greeted with indifference, Lasker's art is regarded as groundbreaking by many younger artists, who cite him as an important influence on their work.

In the 1940's and '50's, painting was dominated by a "mainstream" wholly committed to the international modern style of a self-proclaimed avant-garde. During this period, the gestural, subjectivist abstraction that had developed in reaction to the figurative style of the 1930's culminated in the international supremacy of American Abstract Expressionism. The direct expression of artists' "genius" and characteristic brushstroke reigned supreme as *the* artistic position of the post-war period. Then, when a younger generation of artists deemed the potential for expression within the prevailing system exhausted, the tables turned. Intuition was replaced by reason; the once glorified artist's "hand" gave way to cool planes of color and to the strict formalization of grids; the pathos of the existentialist gesture disappeared and conceptual, reduced – Minimalist, in other words – art took its place.

Young painters like Jonathan Lasker and his contemporaries at the beginning of their artistic careers found themselves in a kind of vacuum, as the creative potential of Minimalism seemed depleted. Even worse, perhaps, the general attitude was that painting had no future. It was hard to overlook the fact that photography was – deservedly – receiving increased recognition as an art form; many artists were virtually euphoric about the possibilities of new technologies such as video; a wave of neo-Duchampian object art was inundating the art world; artists were increasingly concerned with social context in relation to art. In the midst of all this, how was painting – which even today is often saddled with the label, at times even the verdict, of traditionalism – to assert its claim to relevance? Indeed, it was widely agreed that the time of painting was past, that it had lost its preeminent position in the competition between the artistic media.

At the time, the only chance for a young artist like Jonathan Lasker who wanted to paint was to take the bull by the horns and make the best of the situation – by viewing the prevailing state of stagnation and confusion in his chosen medium as a challenge to go down new roads and open up unorthodox perspectives hitherto unknown in painting.

It was evident that none of the numerous "isms" that still ruled in the field of painting would serve his purposes. Rather than falling back on patterns

of thinking and painting that had become hollow and stale in the face of the crisis, it was imperative to develop a system of painting that could provide its own legitimization. Thus, it was crucial to leave as little to chance as possible without altogether precluding fortuitousness in the sense of intuitive spontaneity, in order to avoid falling into the trap of rigid, reductive Minimalism only so recently left behind for good – or so it was believed.

In other words, to stake a claim in the wasteland that was painting and be taken seriously as an artist, it was necessary to develop an unassailable strategy that would do justice to both the intuitive and the rational aspects of painting. Rather than artificially reviving the tendencies and movements of the past, the aim was to lend new impetus to painting and restore it to its rightful position and full range of possibilities – as *peinture* – without embracing the principle of *l'art pour l'art*.

In retrospect, the step taken seems absolutely inevitable and logical: Namely developing an approach to painting that – as consistently as possible – examines the nature of art itself (and not only painting) on all levels of meaning and content. Conceiving art that takes as its central theme the self-reflective examination of its own significance and the context in which it is developed – while at the same time maintaining an open relationship to the world at large and meaning in general – is almost like trying to square the circle.

The American art scene prefers explicitness and clear-cut positions to ambivalence and tentativeness; from a European perspective, at least, unambiguous statements seem to play an important role in the United States. Lasker cleverly used this fact to his advantage – and at the same time permitted himself to play with it. His work fulfills the criterion of a clear pictorial language. His style is easily recognizable; a Lasker is immediately identifiable as such. On the surface, he satisfies the implied demand for "coolness," and even bold simplicity. In other words, he meets the ostensible goal of clarity.

Yet directly under the surface Lasker introduces a complex ambiguity into his painting and takes back the putative "coolness," exasperating those whose prefer to keep things clear-cut. Though his paintings are meticulously executed and worked out in advance down to the minutest detail, they reveal the dynamics of the production process and the potential for choice on various levels inherent in this process. In this sense they are "open," despite their formal cohesiveness.

The form of Lasker's paintings is a product of their content, and their content results from their form. They convey more than their inner structure. They are not merely what they are; they refer to the outside world. Lasker achieves this not only by means of various signifying shapes, but also by the titles he gives his works; these are often full of delicate, cryptic irony, and do not shy away from societal subversion.

Jonathan Lasker's painting is plain and clear; it conceals nothing and thus remains intelligible to all. In a way, it is like language: It can be read and is constructed from a vocabulary of shapes and colors which can be combined into an infinite number of different syntactic variations.

Lasker's paintings appear unconditionally "honest" and "sincere." Their plainly revealed structure convey the impression that Lasker subscribes to Frank Stella's idea, "What you see is what you see." However, this is only true on the surface. For rather than eliciting the puzzled reactions that inevitably follow when viewers are confronted with a lack of content, Lasker's canvases have a profoundly disturbing effect. Many of these pictures are almost painfully immediate, and their violent colors take getting used to.

Even viewers approaching these paintings without normative standards of color are repeatedly submitted to jarring assaults on their sensibilities. In addition, they sense – without initially being conscious of the fact – that the forms are not actually unpremeditated expressions, as they purport to be, that they are not genuinely simple, let alone primitive. The initially vague sense of unease viewers feel in the face of the concentrated force of this "frozen" spontaneity probably lies at the root of the powerfully provocative effect of Lasker's art.

A closer look at Lasker's entire oeuvre reveals that the pictorial language of his early paintings is more organic and subjective than in his later work. But more important in the overall view is that the individual pictorial elements in Lasker's work have always been conceived discursively. The generic concept has changed very little – merely its concrete expressions have changed over the years. A detailed analysis of this rich body of work as a discursive system of interrelationships has yet to be undertaken. However, notwithstanding the continuity of Lasker's work, it is evident that sometime around the mid-1980's there was, if not an actual break, a noticeable condensation in the sense of a stronger focus on the individual pictorial elements and the ways in which they relate to one another. During this period Lasker's paintings become more confident, more uncompromising, and also bigger – even bolder and more powerful. Regardless of their size, the pictures generally seem more massive, the painting more luxuriant than before. Their composition is terse and incisive; now even the most minor fortuities and subjective gestures seem to have been eliminated.

Perhaps the even more conscious nature of these paintings is related to the fact that Lasker introduced a significant intermediate step into his *modus operandi* in the mid-1980's. Before this time he had always commenced on the final execution of a painting directly upon drawing the preliminary sketch; now he assumed a more systematic, methodical approach and first completed a small study in oil. These oil studies already contained all elements of the planned painting down to the last detail (for more on this, see the interview with the artist). The introduction of this step is a clear indication of a conscious move on the artist's part toward even greater rational control of his work. This does not entail the wholesale suppression of spontaneity and thus of the subconscious – the source

from which Lasker ultimately drew his signifying forms and cryptic markings (reminiscent of those encountered in Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism). It is simply one more built-in mental filter on the way to the finished picture that lends additional extra-individual and extra-subjective support to the subjective cipher.

The process of transferring the motif from the oil study to the larger canvas confronts the artist with the model and thus forces him to continually reassess whether the artistic repertoire he draws on – his vocabulary, so to speak – is still valid and appropriate. After all, he works with ambiguous forms whose content is not clearly defined, that only take shape during the actual course of painting or drawing. The studies in oil represent an additional check in the process of giving form to images initially only vaguely outlined in the artist's imagination. Lasker makes a mental note of each individual "phrase" devised in the process of painting or drawing and takes them up or "references" them again later. These "self-quotes" of the artist's own subconscious are continually repeated, varied, and rephrased in other contexts and are thus subject to constant reexamination. It is almost as if the artist had to assure himself as to whether he can trust his own inner voice and of the general validity of its expressions. These are the questions Lasker seeks to answer in his painting.

In varying the shapes and colors originating in his subconscious and – quoting himself – reworking them, he also in a sense conquers them by revealing them as ultimately sublime or banal, comical, brutal or whatever. Anything with the potential for emotional urgency or discomfort is effectively moderated and put in perspective by this intellectual intervention, this mental filtering process, and finally presented in "frozen" form. Despite all these "precautions," many of Lasker's paintings are of an uncompromising brutality, while others seem charged with obsessive rituals and secret magical codes. The combination of these dark, highly subjective elements with a radical exposure of the painting process and the coolly objective "look" of the pictures contributes significantly to their impact.

Though Lasker's artistic vocabulary is comprised of abstract shapes, its function is not reduced to the minimum one might expect. There is more than meets the eye to what at first glance is merely the decorative variation of a multitude of patterns. The meaning of the shapes Lasker uses extends through a gray zone ranging from cipher-like marks of the kind cultivated in the *écriture automatique* of Surrealism to vaguely signifying forms to which no definite meaning can be attributed. Furthermore, they always occur in "communicative" clusters whose internal structure is often quite dissimilar. These shapes are placed in relationship and linked to something – even if that something eludes definition. However, they always also refer to themselves – and thus to painting itself. Painting itself is the central theme of Lasker's works; he conjugates its syntactic possibilities by presenting the wealth of different possibilities contained within the medium in formally unambiguous images.

Lasker's painting technique is akin to drawing, while graphic elements are often executed in a painterly manner. By approaching surfaces with the methods of drawing and using the resources of painting to interpret lines, he explores the question of what painting and drawing really are. In doing so, he does not negate the distinction between the two terms. Instead, he blurs them and relates them to one another; the transitions and intersections between them only highlight the huge range of possibilities contained in both. In general, his treatment of the background is not very painterly; he usually keeps it monochrome and undifferentiated. His "graphic" spectrum ranges from pseudo-nervous, scriptural, almost involuntary-seeming scribbling to broad, solid impasto with a rich, sensual three-dimensionality that stands in sharp contrast to the flat treatment of surfaces. He also frequently plays with the figure-ground relationship, undermining the two-dimensionality of the picture through the skillful creation and exploitation of the illusion of depth. Often his figurations are built up of several partially overlapping layers, intertwined in such a way that the figuration as a whole nevertheless stands out clearly against the background.

Lasker's paintings betray a highly deliberate, rigorous, and intensely focused construction. Nothing is left up to chance; everything is intentional, structured, and thought out in advance. Every line, every shape, every surface is defined and executed with meticulous clarity and precision. The individual pictorial elements stand in stark contrast to each other and at the same time form an integral whole; even the most minute ambiguity is avoided. Even the colors, whether of the monochrome background or of the various signifying shapes placed on that background, seem synthetic and artificial. The chromatic syntax of the majority of Lasker's works is defined by five shades – rarely fewer, hardly ever more.

The explicit formal precision of Lasker's work is unsettling because it does not go hand in hand with an analogous explicitness of content. Highly cohesive in both conception and execution, Jonathan Lasker's works consistently refer to the inherent potential of being different. Though as paintings they are static, their dynamic potential is always manifest, so that we can never quite be sure what we're contending with.

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