

Drawing inspiration from the surrealists

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Dynaton must rank as one of the smallest and shortest-lived of all modern art movements. It announced itself with a 1951 exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now Modern Art), and disbanded shortly thereafter.

Two of the group's three members, Lee Mullican (1919-1998) and Wolfgang Paalen (1905-1959), have work showing in San Francisco at the moment. The third, Gordon Onslow Ford (1912-2003), lived and worked in Marin for many years and had his work shown locally on many occasions.

Like Paalen, Ford, in the 1930s, had orbited briefly in the circle of André Breton (1896-1966), the martinet founder of Surrealism.

Paalen and Ford met in the early '40s in Mexico, where Paalen had already founded a publication called DYN, which took its name from the Greek "to dynaton": the possible.

DYN published only five issues in its two-year existence, but it boasted an impressive list of contributors, from Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Jackson Pollock to Henry Miller, Octavio Paz and Robert Motherwell. The journal considered the implications of the modern arts in wide cultural, geographical and theoretical perspectives.

For Paalen, DYN seems partly to have served the function of articulating his break with doctrinaire Surrealism, or so a reader of it suspects.

Motherwell (1915-1991) contributed an article in 1944 titled "The Modern Painter's World," one of many essays in which he tried to sort out the quandary of painters who wanted their work to have social meaning and impact, but rejected artistic means reflective of popular thought and taste.

"It is because reality has a historical character that we feel the need for new art," Motherwell wrote. But "the popular association with modern art is its remoteness from the symbols and values of the majority of men. There is a break in modern

times between artists and other men unprecedented in depth and generality. Both sides are wounded by the break. There is even hate at times, though we all thirst for love. ... The remoteness of modern art is not merely a question of language, of the increasing 'abstractness' of modern art. Abstractness, it is true, exists, as a result of a long, specialized, internal development in modern artistic structure. But the crisis is the modern artists' rejection, almost in toto, of the values of the bourgeois world. In this modern world, artists form a kind of spiritual underground," a situation both subjective and real.

Paalen and Mullican, before and after their brief collaboration, addressed the public from their own vantage points within the "underground" that Motherwell evokes.

Many of Paalen's paintings and drawings at Frey Norris look like classic Surrealism. Only one or two represent his Dynaton manner, though he never abandoned the Surrealist angle of vision completely. (Visitors must request access to the Paalen show in Frey Norris' second-floor annex.)

Paalen's "Ciel de pieuvre" (1938) exploits an "automatist" technique he invented known as fumage. It entailed carefully collecting the soot given off by a lighted candle on the surface of a canvas.

A couple of small pieces on view took form from this technique alone. But in "Ciel de pieuvre," he used oil paint to connect and elaborate upon the billows of soot, creating an organic-looking entity that floats against a skylike background without scale or obvious orientation.

From this painting and a couple of others at Frey Norris, we get the rare and true Surrealist impression of a mind trying to discover or invent a true mirror of its condition, one in which other minds will also recognize themselves.

Mullican's work on view at Berggruen seems to share less in the manner of that effort than in its frustration.

An Oklahoma native, Mullican was as American as Paalen, the son of a beleaguered Austrian aristocrat, was European. Whereas Paalen gave to and took from the Surrealists' outposts in Mexico and New York, Mullican felt the influence of exotica he encountered in Hawaii, Guam and Japan, during the World War II military experience that gave him training in mapmaking.

After the war, Mullican lived in San Francisco before settling finally in Los Angeles in 1952, where he taught for many years at UCLA.

His paintings reflect his interest in topography, American Indian art and in the quest, common to many American artists of his generation, for an abstract but emotionally effective symbolic language for painting.

We can see in works by William Bazotes (1912-1963) or Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974) something like the broken symbols in Mullican paintings such as "Passage Factor" (1953) and "A Run Through Paradise" (1958). But the surfaces of Mullican's pictures look like no one else's.

Mullican's Army buddy, renowned San Francisco printer Jack Stauffacher, gave him an ink knife, which he used to apply the fine ridges of color that rain through a picture such as "Southern California Landscape" (1958), where they connote rays of sunlight. This picture also insinuates a humor felt nowhere in Paalen's art.

The staccato rhythm of the ink knife strokes give a characteristic pulse to pictures such as "Southern California Landscape" and "Transfigured Night" (1962) and a faceted geometry to the outstanding "Santiago" (1968).

Though too small to count as a survey, Berggruen's Mullican show contains enough to make a visitor confident of recognizing a Mullican painting at a glance in the future.

-- Wolfgang Paalen: Implicit Spaces: Paintings and works on paper. Through July 12. Frey Norris Gallery, 456 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 346-7812, <http://www.freynorris.com/>.

-- Lee Mullican: Paintings, 1952-1968: Through June 2. John Berggruen Gallery, 228 Grant Ave., San Francisco. (415) 781-4629, <http://www.berggruen.com/>.

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