

FOUR AMERICANS:

Manny Farber • Sven Lukin • William Tunberg • Camille Utterback

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Marlborough Chelsea

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FOUR AMERICANS: Post-Spiritual Abstraction

Around 1910 groups of artists, working independently of each other, moved away from representational art toward abstraction, preferring symbolic color to natural color, signs to perceived reality, ideas to direct observation. Without exception these artists attempted to draw upon deeper and more varied levels of meaning than those afforded by visual scrutiny. The most pervasive of these approaches to true reality were those pertaining to those patently spiritual experiences, in particular the belief systems of the mystic and the occult.

In the catalogue for *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1895*, an exhibition organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986, I described the nexus of ideas common to these world views: the universe is a single living substance; mind and matter also are one; all things evolve in dialectical opposition, thus the universe comprises paired opposites (male-female, light-dark, vertical-horizontal, positive-negative); everything corresponds in a universal analogy with elements above as they are below; imagination is real; and self-realization can come by illumination, accident, or an induced state; the epiphany is suggested by heat, fire or light.

Abstract painting by circa 1960 had developed over the half century since its inception into a full-fledged vocabulary of form, a veritable new language that had evolved pictorially. For artists taking up abstraction with knowledge of all that had gone before in this realm, the search for authentic expression was no longer dependent on ideological or crypto-religious belief. A certain confidence in the power and the certainty of abstraction is reflected in Sven Lukin's experience in New York as a young artist in 1960, when he recalls, "I wouldn't talk to the figurative painters at the Cedar Street Bar. I thought they were infidels. They were whistling Dixie and had no idea where it was at."

Belief in the validity of pure abstraction is the hallmark of the four artists on view in this exhibition. There is no sense of erratic striving; the viewer feels, to paraphrase Picasso, that this artist does not seek, he or she finds.

Having said this one notes nevertheless that many attributes of spiritual alliance described above still clearly reverberate in the current work. Manny Farber's bifacial canvases, Utterback's evocation of epiphany, Tunberg's insistence on a single unifying material substance, Lukin's search to make imagination real and to harness accident for self-realization.

Regardless of the inspiration, their fresh creations do homage to Abstraction's pioneers while being true to the realities of the present day.

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Sven Lukin's recent paintings recall his shaped canvases of the 1960s, included in the show, but they replace the latent Minimalism of the earlier period with complexity, calligraphy and a sense of the actually seen. He has commented about his interest in the boundaries between painting and sculpture and his transition phases:

Once the frame was discarded and you had all these beautiful shapes, you had to wonder, "Why not cut out the shapes? Why have a square canvas with a shape? You can just cut the beautiful forms out and then take it to its logical conclusion."

In the catalogue for Manny Farber's retrospective show, Sheldon Nodelman

writes about the artist's extensive series of abstract paintings on paper made between 1967 and 1975.

The painting surfaces were built of craft paper, available commercially in rolls of three- or four-foot width, which Farber would cut into uniform lengths and carefully assemble for maximum strength. For added strength and to counter the natural warping of the unrolled paper, he alternated segments in "header" and "stretcher" fashion, setting the directions of their weave perpendicularly to one another Among the most remarkable features of these works is their bifaciality. Freed of servitude to the external support apparatus of a stretcher, the "back" surface of the painting becomes available as a field of pictorial display on the same terms as the "front."

Camille Utterback comments on her work:

My interactive installations create situations where viewers experience a revelatory process of visual and kinesthetic play. In my *External Measures* series, a projected composition changes dynamically in response to viewers' presence and motion in the gallery space. Inspired by Calder's mobiles, the goal of these interactive installations is to create an aesthetic system that responds fluidly and intriguingly to the physical vagaries of the space it inhabits. Unlike objects composed of physical materials, my work is composed by a set of rules (the software code I write) that describes how the system should draw lines or shapes in response to physical presence or motions. In Happenings and works by Fluxus artists, artist-written sets of rules also describe systems for generating unique experiences. In these works, however, the rules are enacted by the people involved. Conversely, in my work, the rules are never explicitly revealed to the participants, and the system itself executes the instructions. Participants in my work can only discover the internal structure and composition of the pieces through a process of kinesthetic exploration. Engaging with my work creates a visceral sense of unfolding or revelation, but also a feeling of immediacy and loss, as none of the imagery created by one's motions is permanent or reproducible. The experience of this work is the experience of embodied existence itself -- a continual flow of unique and fleeting moments.

William Tunberg states:

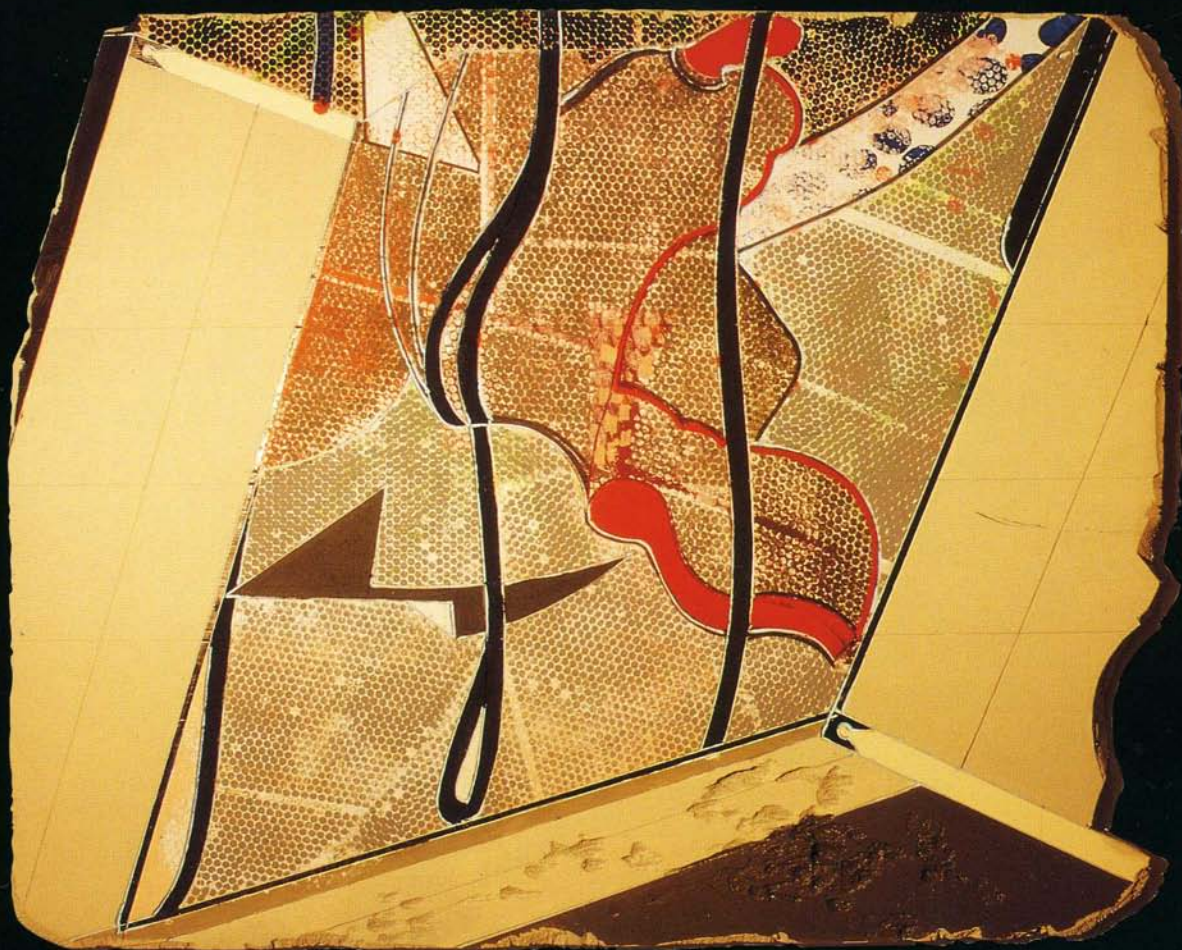
Fifteen years ago I introduced marquetry into my sculpture; communicating then through the marriage of inflexible, unforgiving veneers and three-dimensional form became irresistible. Marquetry has a quality that transcends its own limitations -- the art is demanding and restrictive and requires a great deal of focus and skill; but, the difficulty and frustration of implementing sculptural concepts through marquetry is counterbalanced by its eloquent and expressive nature. I develop an intimate relationship with each piece of marquetry sculpture, as I am the referee in the tug-of-war between dimensional form and surface application. This relationship allows a conceptual empathy and dialogue to flow back and forth between the sculpture and me.

Maurice Tuchman, January 2004



MANNY FARBER

Untitled (recto/verso), circa 1970
collaged paper, 96 x 142 in., 243.8 x 360.7 cm



SVEN LUKIN

Fusama, 2003

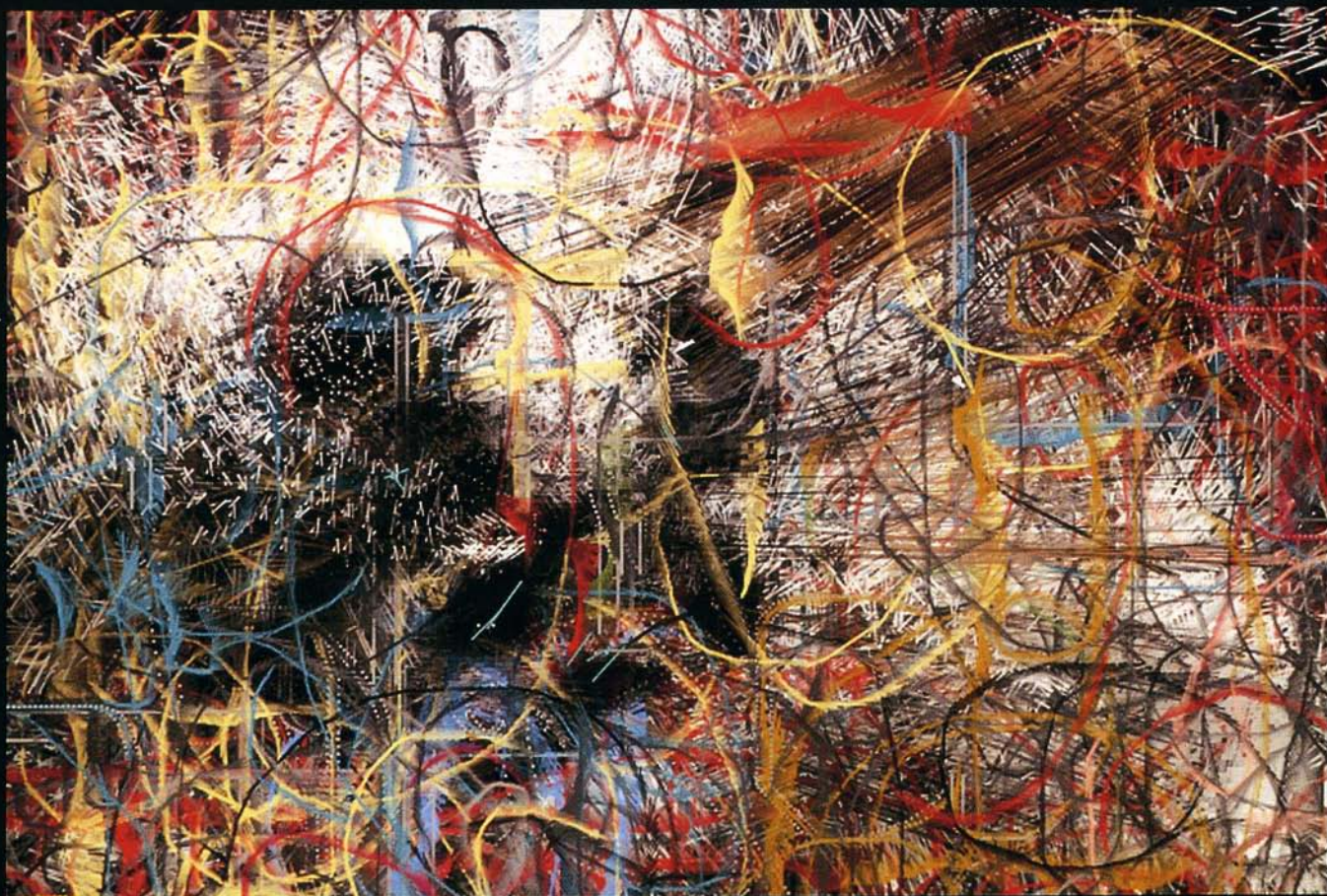
acrylic on styrofoam, 48 x 60 in., 121.9 x 152.4 cm



WILLIAM TUNBERG

Medallion, 2003

marquetry, 42 x 42 x 5 in., 106.7 x 106.7 x 12.7 cm



CAMILLE UTTERBACK

Untitled 4 (screen detail), 2004

From the *External Measures* Series

custom software, computer, video camera and projector, 20 x 20 in., 50.8 x 50.8 cm