

Groundwork:
Jonathan Lasker's Early
Paintings and Drawings

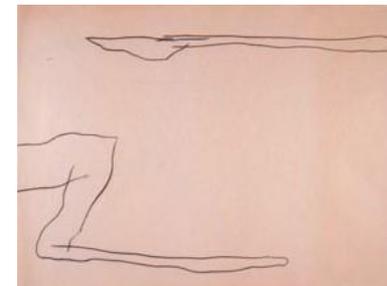
Jonathan Lasker's work, among the most influential in contemporary abstraction, has always seemed, for want of a better word, quirky. That term could use some unpacking. Often work that we view as quirky points away from the art object itself to the artist and that artist's personality — in the process underlining romantically appealing notions of individuality, obsessiveness, and unconventional ideas and behaviors. While this might make the artist admired, usually from afar, it doesn't necessarily render him or her influential. For that you need an adaptable methodology — one that has a clear and compelling conceptual and aesthetic basis, but without a style (Jackson Pollock's for example) that is too easily identified with that particular maker. Lasker has from the beginning cultivated just that — a complex process of disjunction, a calibrated instability that makes his work seem more idiosyncratic than it really is. The controlled process of dislocation between, say, figure and ground, form and outline, or flatness and extreme surface texture is a usable and ultimately adaptable strategy. Discord in painting — harder to pull off than one might think — is unsettling to the viewer. This is especially true in abstraction, where there is the implicit expectation of formal settling and resolution. To subvert that, to create a different order of visual closure, takes not only nerve and skill, but a deep working knowledge of the art of one's time.

Lasker's keenly observant, methodical, and focused approach to art has always been leavened with subtle humor and wit — not surprising, since humor and wit function by snapping together thoughts and forms that might seem incompatible or even impossible. That creative incongruity can be seen in his earliest paintings and drawings — work which lays out the path that he will follow for the next forty years. Lasker's immersion in art began in the late 1970s, beginning with his studies at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Moving to the west coast, he attended California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, just outside of Los Angeles, where he worked with Susan Rothenberg and Richard Artschwager. He spent some months in San Francisco after leaving CalArts before coming to New York,

where he found an apartment in the East Village and began his professional career.

In the late '70s and early '80s, pretty much everything was in play. Previous orthodoxies, particularly those involving abstraction – Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Colorfield painting, and the many shades of Greenbergian formalism – while still influential, had lost their hold on younger artists. Even though many of the key participants in those movements, both artists and critics, were still alive, active, and successful, other alluring paths were opening up. Referentiality, figuration, overt materiality and physicality, an interest in the decorative and the pictorial, plus a willingness to move beyond well-made paintings and carefully crafted objects, gave artists the impetus to explore new territories, to combine styles and materials, and to use whatever resources were at hand. New Image painting, Pattern and Decoration, the variants of a loosely structured and informal Postminimalism, and the coalescing elements of an updated take on expressionism and graffiti-based art provided a rich menu of choices for the serious young artist. Moreover for a painter interested in abstraction, if you were not bound to a rigid, delimiting critical approach, especially a Greenbergian one — a belief that abstraction did only such-and-such — things opened up considerably. Importantly you could avail yourself of pictorial strategies and forms used by artists who were looked at askance by strict abstractionists, especially Pop and pre-Pop practitioners like Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, David Hockney, or an artist admired by Lasker for his off-register drawing, the often disparaged Larry Rivers. In addition, while previously ignored by American painters, postwar Europeans like the multifaceted French artists, Simon Hantaï, François Morellet, and Claude Viallat were beginning to be reconsidered. Lasker, for example, was very much taken with the work of the British painter Peter Kinley, an underknown but innovative figurative abstractionist.

Lasker's earliest abstract paintings set the stage for the work that was soon to come. Relatively modestly scaled and sensitively painted, they were



Untitled 1978
(see p. 3)



Illinois 1977
(see p. 3)



Bedouin Backyard 1978
(see p. 45)

essentially softened, landscape-like fields — the sort of calm, subtly patterned, non-minimal abstract paintings that artists were supposed to do. They were in their way, perfectly fine, but clearly Lasker was not satisfied. In 1977, when he was in California he embarked on a series of quick charcoal drawings on newsprint that proved to be key to his development. Having no set orientation, these drawings featured loosely bounded forms, often bent at right angles, frequently beginning or ending at an edge of the paper. The forms hovered somewhere between the organic and the casually geometric, in the process setting up a give and take between the purely abstract and the loosely referential: was that shape something essentially unnamable, or was it a leg (table or a human), a chair, a person, a dog, a homemade plumbing repair? The “ah ha” moment seemed to come when Lasker combined the forms he developed in the drawings (executed loosely as before, but now done in paint) with the backgrounds of the previous paintings. With the painting’s well-knit unity disrupted, Lasker could push the backgrounds further, making the texture more insistent and the colors less well behaved. To further increase the compositional torque, those flattened or subtly modeled foreground forms, painted in a scumbled white, were casually and often partially edged with a dark line that echoed the forms but often did not perfectly match up with their contours. This created a disconcerting doubling effect as well as a shifting spatial ambiguity.

A work like *Illinois* (1977), the first of the new paintings, shows Lasker moving with confidence into this fresh and open territory. *Illinois*, an early touchstone for the artist, marks a conceptual turning point, bringing into focus his thinking about formal objectivity, the relation of figure to ground, the complex and malleable functioning of white in a painting, and perhaps most importantly, the process of layering with all its deconstructive potential. As he says in a 2005 essay:

At the time I painted *Illinois*, my idea was to stress the literality of form in painting by using layering to go forward into three dimensions in-

stead of painting my picture laterally onto a two-dimensional flat surface. Through this use of layering, I felt that my white forms became things which were on top of another thing, namely a painted surface. Therefore, I felt that my paintings were pictures which could be disassembled into component “things of paint.” If each element in a picture could be seen in this way as having an autonomous, physical presence, it would make possible paintings which created illusionistic space yet always grounded the viewer with respect to what he or she was literally viewing.

Grounding the viewer this way was especially important to Lasker, both theoretically and aesthetically. He felt that it was necessary for painting to counter Minimalism’s endgame; that is its aim of eliminating all pictorial metaphor in order to stress the artwork’s object literalism. Lasker’s goal rather was to make a painting that could function simultaneously as both a picture and a literal object.

A mid-sized vertical work (60 × 47" 152 × 119 cm), *Illinois* sets three forms against a mottled, closely valued, greyed-out teal background: a large, white, irregularly serrated vertical shape anchored to the bottom of the canvas, a somewhat smaller angled white form attached to the top, and coming out of the upper right side of the canvas, a solid black horizontal form with a flat bottom and a wavy top. The white shapes are defined and given depth by loosely drawn black lines of varying density and width. Compositionally it should not work – having all the internal elements stuck on to the edges is a risky move (and one traditionally warned against by art teachers) – but Lasker pulls it off, and the painting strikes a fine balance between the static and dynamic.

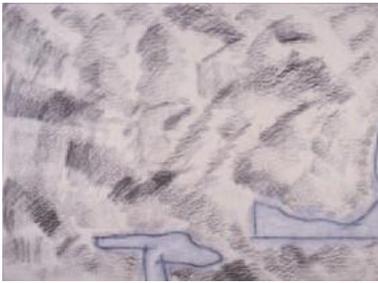
In *Bedouin Backyard* painted the next year, many of the same compositional tactics are employed, but the background is more complex and evocative – yellow and green brushstrokes on a worked reddish ground – and the foreground elements, also attached to the edges of the horizontal



Five of Spades 1978
(see p. 45)



View from Home Plate
1978 (see p. 43)



Gulch 1979
Conte on Paper.
22 × 30 in. (56 × 76 cm)



Land O'Goshen 1979
(see p. 53)

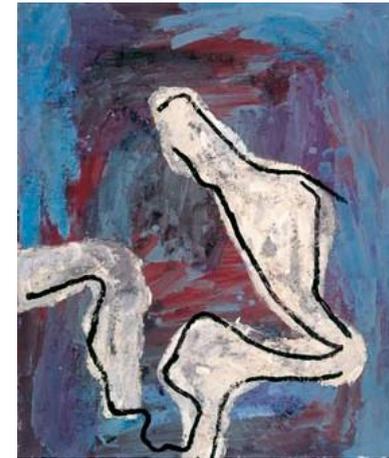
canvas, call to mind a house, a tree, and a wall. It feels like a landscape painting, but a very unfamiliar one indeed. Those motifs and formal strategies were continued in other 1978 paintings like the witty *Five of Spades* – which echoes the order of a playing card but substitutes a television, a couch, a chair, and a human figure for four of the pips (the fifth is a normal spade); or *The View from Home Plate*, a 67” (170cm) square that places an ambiguous wall-like element, two tree forms, and a pentagonal shape that resembles a baseball home plate, against a burnt orange ground overlaid with vigorously hatched yellow-green lines. Those lines bring to mind Jasper Johns’ *Crosshatch* paintings of the ‘70s – work that was looked at with great interest by painters at the time.

In 1979 Lasker upped the level of disjunction with a series of assured, highly worked, full sheet Conté crayon drawings – *Gulch* is a fine example — and a group of smaller, concentrated paintings like *Land O’Goshen*. That work, a 24” (61 cm) square pits an articulated partially framing white shape against a greened ochre field overlaid with joined patches of bright orange. This seemingly simple painting, one of his most daring early works, challenges the conventions of good composition and properly mannered color, and is held in place by the pressure of the edges; that pressure reinforced by the greater proportion of edge to center area that a small painting has naturally. *Land O’Goshen’s* ordering calls to mind the Colorfield painter Jules Olitski’s assertion (well known in the ‘70s) that drawing happens at the edges of a painting. It is interesting to note that near the end of his long career, Olitski, the archetypal Greenbergian painter (and thus the ostensible enemy of the new painting), produced two major series of paintings, *With Love and Disregard* (2002) and *Embraced* (2005) that were chromatically jangly and discordant, filled with odd bulbous forms and detached expressionist drips — the whole concoction tentatively held in place by overt framing devices. They strangely echo Lasker’s early period work.

By 1980 Lasker was hitting his stride, increasing his production and upping the scale of his paintings. The backgrounds were becoming either

more thickly painted (sometimes with wax-based encaustic or oilstick), or spread over with pattern-like (but non-repeating) forms. In *Confessions of a Groundhog Fancier* (72x48" 183x122cm) Lasker fills the background with reddish-black zebra striped shapes interlocked with similar forms painted in a contrasting rusty orange. A semi-transparent white element looking like an oval with a flattened top and bottom and a bite taken out of its left side is anchored to the edge by a strip of white. As with the earlier paintings, the white overlaid form is partially bounded by a black line, but a line that takes on an object form of its own – a fruitful move that will be echoed in much of Lasker's later work. Rather than being simply a delineator, the line spreads, curves, and swells, and then near the center of the painting, narrows to a sharp, spear-like point. Something similar happens in *Scepter*, a slightly shorter vertical painting. There are four distinct layers – each resting on top of the other – a medium ochre ground, followed by a field of brushy golden yellow, then clusters of cadmium red strokes, topped by two white and gray loosely modeled forms attached to the edges, and finally two black, elongated and articulated forms that both cling to and drape the white ones. These black elements define a perspectival space that amplifies the dimensionality of the white and gray forms. Each layer has a different and assertive read, and connects only provisionally to the other elements; but rather than careening off into unintelligibility, the painting comes together, its disparate voices speaking as one.

The following year marks a real dividing line between Lasker's formative work and the early phases of his mature oeuvre. 1981, with thirty-nine paintings made, proved to be Lasker's most productive year to date. His confidence shows, and he is willing to push out in different directions to see what he can come up with and what he might be able to use. Some paintings, like *Black Widow* and *Scream's Echo* (the title a take on David Alfaro Siquieros' iconic *Echo of a Scream*, long in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art), employ the parallel color bars in thickened paint



Confession 1980
(see p. 56)



Black Widow 1981
Oil and Alkyd on Canvas
48 × 62 in. (122 × 157 cm)

that Lasker was to use so frequently in the following years. Others, like a sizeable group of small horizontal paintings, dubbed “The Motel Paintings,” by Keith Haring when he and Lasker exhibited together at the opening show at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, feature a two color background executed in thinned, horizontally applied swipes and overlaid with streaky black and white forms troweled on with a palette knife. They are fascinating works in themselves, but their direct influence is rarely visible in later paintings. Still, paintings like the bubble gum pink and stormy sky-blue *Romantic Gulf*, and the egg yolk yellow and pine green *Pre-Fab View* are especially edgy, pushing hard at the boundaries of taste without descending into kitsch, an aesthetic stance that Lasker is to pursue diligently.

By 1982, the paintings, while generally more roughly-hewn than his later work, inhabit the main line of Lasker’s development: they are unmistakably his. The disjunction, indexing, chromatic daring, and formal and semiotic inventiveness are all set in place. The next decades will see work of increased scale and reference as well as growing international success and influence, but underlying the work to come is the foundation laid in those earliest years. It is instructive to chart the beginning of a career, to see the choices made, the paths taken and those abandoned or left until later. The developmental logic is always there in retrospect, imparting an inevitability to something deeply contingent. This is understandable. But the desire for coherence, laudable as it is, comes at a price. What is obscured is that combination of excitement, uncertainty, perseverance, and sheer fortuity — the very things that mark the start of an artist’s life’s work.

richard kalina



Romantic Gulf 1981
(see p. 86)



Pre-Fab View 1981
(see p. 87)