

Eastern Influence



In the middle of the last century, there were several American painters—most famously Myron Stout and Mark Tobey—who sought to incorporate in their work their understanding of the wisdom of the East. Eschewing the bombast of Abstract Expressionism, they yearned for a more meditative art.

Lee Mullican (1919-1998) was a relative latecomer to the longing. Stationed by the Army in Japan for a while, he later fell into a small circle of artists in San Francisco who were attracted to

an Eastern-influenced hybrid of Surrealism and abstraction. The Dynaton Group (derived from a Greek word meaning “possible”) included Mullican, the Austrian Wolfgang Paalen and the British painter Gordon Onslow Ford. In 1951, they mounted a now-legendary exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art under the Dynaton banner.

Divorcing the look of a painting from the intent of its creator is often counterproductive, but sometimes it’s necessary. The pictures of Paalen and Onslow Ford, for example, appear a little mawkish if not seen through the lens of the painters’ spiritualist intentions. Mullican (who moved to Los Angeles and taught at UCLA for nearly 30 years), by contrast, made visually louder and more crisp paintings that stand alone without the need for a backstory.

Mullican’s technique of covering the canvas with thousands of blade-like impasto marks that he made by dipping the front edge of a printer’s knife into viscous oil paint, and then touching it to the canvas, can get a little wearying. But considered slowly, one at a time, the best paintings sing.