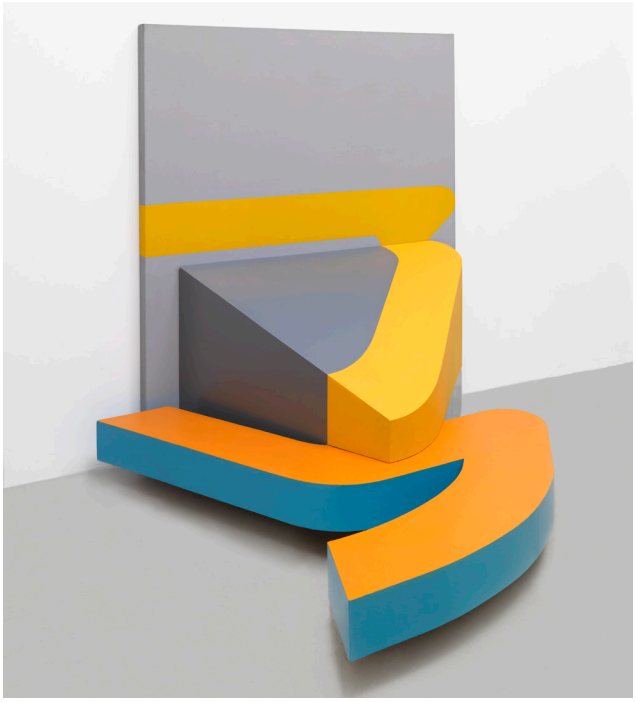
HYPERALLERGIC

The Soulful Insolence of Sven Lukin

by John Yau June 10, 2012



San Diego, 1966, acrylic on canvas and wood construction
72 1/4 x 76 x 72 inches

I.

I have been a Sven Lukin fan since 1970, when I first saw "Untitled" (1969) in one of the concourses running under the Empire State Plaza in Albany. Made for, and located in, a long recessed area — and playfully hovering between flatness and volume, the pictorial and the sculptural — Lukin's "Untitled," a three-dimensional, green, orange and blue squiggle, is over 11 feet high and nearly 120 feet long.

Like someone practicing penmanship, "Untitled" begins as a series of tightly compressed vertical folds — think u's and n's — that rise and fall, suddenly run along the floor, undulate once, and then extend straight along the floor again until it rises up again; it wants to stretch to its full length, which, as the recessed area makes clear, it can never do. Despite its physical imprisonment, "Untitled" is as irrepressible as a rubber snake.

One of the functions of architecture is to control our movements. This is particularly true of the wide underground concourses connecting the various buildings of the Empire State Plaza. Architecture is, in that sense, authoritarian and dehumanizing. Lukin's "Untitled" acknowledges architecture's repressive power, even as he thumbs his nose at it.

Lukin's irreverence is what distinguishes his shaped works from those of Frank Stella. Lukin recognizes that constraints are in play at all times, that society in fact needs them in order to survive, while Stella, as Katy Siegel points out in a recent essay, " doesn't want the viewer moving around in front of the painting — he controls our apprehension absolutely." Stella wants to be revered, while Lukin is after something else.

II.

I began reassessing Lukin's irreverence when I went to his second exhibition at Gary Snyder Gallery (May 24–June 30, 2012). His first exhibition with Snyder, Paintings, 1960–1971 (November 11, 2010–January 29, 2011), at the Gary Snyder Project Space (the gallery's name before it moved to its present location), cast a retrospective glance at the work that first gained the artist attention.

The current exhibition of paintings and drawings includes early pieces, as well as examples from two bodies of work that he made after he left Pace Gallery in 1972. It took him nearly forty years to show his work again in New York.

Lukin was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1934. Between 1940 and 1949, when Lukin immigrated to the United States, Riga was occupied by either the Nazi or Soviet army, with each imposing its destructive will on the populace. In 1949, four years after the end of World War II, the Soviet Union deported more than 100,000 Latvians to forced labor camps (gulags) in Siberia. I doubt the artist's childhood between 1940 and '49 was idyllic.

It is not hard to imagine that there is a connection between Lukin's childhood and his irreverence for authority. In fact, I think you would have to be pig-headed to believe that there is no connection between Lukin's life and his art, even though he never makes work that is autobiographical or tells a story.

I think the reason he chooses not to make himself or an "I" the center of his work is ethical. I suspect the artist realized early on in his life that it wasn't divine grace or fate that saved him from being sent to a gulag, but more likely luck. The

tension between flatness and form running through the early work seems to allude to the conflict between repression and freedom, conformity and individuality.

What you see in Lukin's work isn't just an inventive restating of flatness; it is also a pitched battle along every seam and edge, with the conclusion that borders are about conflict, rather than resolution.

III.

Lukin has a tragicomic view of life. This means he has more in common with writers such as Witold Gombrowicz and Roberto Bolano, than with artists such as Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, who work with shaped canvases.

In the "Piano Lesson" (1968), which is completely flat, a gray slab-like form with a pink edge is stuck trying to uncurl itself and become volumetric. It survives, despite the fact that all the air has been squeezed out of its body.

In "Disneyesque" (1970–71), a supposedly three-dimensional form — a perspectivally painted gray, red, and orange D that seems to be crumpling under its own weight–rests on a large, gray two-dimensional base.

It seems that achieving form only signals the inevitability of collapse.

IV.

If it were not for the work Lukin did after he stopped showing in New York, and which he is exhibiting for the first time, I don't think I would have grasped the tragicomic dimension of the artist's earlier pieces.

The new work will come as a surprise because Lukin seems to have lost none of his inventiveness, nor made something predictable. True to his rebellious disposition, he didn't know how to develop a style.

The first thing to strike me about the new work is the diversity — one group was made by wrapping a triangular structure of tree branches in burlap, which is sometimes painted with a monochromatic band or crosses, while the other group is made from a large irregular slab of Styrofoam which the artist gouges and paints in different colors.

The easy, most immediate response to these very different investigations is to decide that Lukin's three bodies of work have nothing to do with each other. Certainly, that would be your understanding of his career if your view of art is rooted in a formalist approach. (I also suspect that one reason Lukin stopped showing in the early 1970s was he didn't want to be constrained by expectation, that he was determined to go his own way without regard for what his fans might think.) However, once you take Lukin's tragicomic view into consideration, and start to zero in on the unrelenting tension between freedom and constraint, a different understanding emerges.

V.

"Untitled" (1998) is triangular in shape. It could be thought of as a shaped canvas in which a piece of burlap has been stretched over tree branches that have secured into a triangle. On the burlap Lukin has painted three dark red bands that seem to conform to the branches beneath.

In "Untitled," Lukin has collapsed aspects of Minimalism (the stripe of paint and the shaped canvas), Arte Povera (the burlap), and primitive art (the tree branches) while also reminding us that the structure and the canvas are distinct, that the visible and the hidden are always in dialogue. For even if, as Stella famously said, "What you see is what you see," that doesn't mean you see everything.

Even though "Untitled" evokes different postwar art movements, it is singular and to a large extent resists assimilation into the discourse. This is why I like it so much, why it speaks to me on a deep and personal level. It is part of its time, but it can't be absorbed into the mainstream. Certainly, any biracial child born around 1950, like I was, would understand that sense of not belonging. This is particularly true for someone who could not pass in either world.

VI.

In "Detour" (2002–12), Lukin flattens three-dimensional space onto the two-dimensional surface of a rough-edged piece of Styrofoam. The illusionistic view is of a recessed area, whose surface resembles a mesh in which ribbons and other strips of bright color have been caught. Two solid sections seem to extend forth from either side of the "mesh," while a shelf-like section appears to extend from the mesh-like area's bottom edge.

"Untitled" conveys a view of a shallow cul-de-sac, as well evokes a section of a concrete wall. It occurred to me that "Untitled" alluded to the Berlin Wall, which may have been broken down, but which, in a deeper sense, hasn't been completely removed.

The fact that a collector might want to display a section of the Berlin Wall as a souvenir, memento or trophy seems to me one of the keys of this work. Lukin's impertinence extends to his attitude toward collectors. At the same time, his tragicomic understanding of life and its inescapable absurdities give his work a gravitas that few artists are able to achieve.

Sven Lukin continues at Gary Snyder Gallery (529 West 20th Street, 10th Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) until June 30.