THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Sven Lukin

GARY SNYDER GALLERY MAY 24–JUNE 30, 2012

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN AUGUST 1, 2012

San Diego, 1966, acrylic on canvas and wood construction, 72 ¼ x 76 x 72"

Until this exhibition I had never seen a work by Sven Lukin, an artist who began showing in New York in the early 1960s and was widely recognized at the time for his innovative painting-sculpture hybrids. He was one of five painters in *The Shaped Canvas*, the 1964 Guggenheim Museum exhibition curated by Lawrence Alloway, that helped define a key feature of 1960s abstraction. Written about by influential critics (Judd, Lippard), and shown in prominent galleries (Martha Jackson, Pace), Lukin's work fused the Juddian "specific object" with hard-edge painting, geometric illusionism, the exuberant palette of Pop, and a feeling for sensual curving forms that exuded a playful eroticism. If this list of features suggests stylistic eclecticism, nothing could be further from the truth: Lukin's 1960s work possesses great internal coherence.

A follow up to Gary Snyder's winter 2010-11 Lukin exhibition (which I unfortunately missed), this show was the perfect primer for new viewers like me. It included six large shaped–canvas/sculptural works from 1963–1971, four paintings on Styrofoam made between 2002 and this year, and five smaller, but no less interesting, burlap-and-wood paintings from 1998–2012. The earlier works traced how Lukin modified his practice during the 1960s, moving from shaped paintings such as "Cheek to Cheek" (1963), where a subtle bowing in the stretched canvas complicates the curvilinear hard-edge image, to pieces such as "Trafalgar" (1965) and "San Diego" (1966) featuring canvas-covered sculptural elements that rest on the floor or project into the viewer's space. In the later 1960s, Lukin switched to enamel on Masonite, which carried him still closer to sculpture and even architecture. (The interest in architecture is perhaps not so surprising; Lukin studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1950s.) Two substantial enamel and Masonite pieces, "Piano Lesson" (1968) and "Disneyesque" (1970–1971), find him playing with spatial illusion and cultural commentary, high and low ("Piano Lesson" takes off from Matisse). Lukin's bold colors and big sinuous shapes evoke the era's love of supergraphics, while his increasing fluidity of contour reflects (and maybe even anticipates) the melting geometry that pervaded the LSD years.

Lukin's steady move into actual space culminated at the end of the 1960s in what is probably his best known work—an undulating 120-foot long wall relief in green, pink, and orange, permanently installed at the Empire State Plaza in Albany, New York. The next 30 years of Lukin's career are something of a blank, at least for now. If he was making work, he hardly showed it; this significant figure of the 1960s essentially disappeared from the art world (and New York), which may explain why I, and many other contemporary viewers, are only now discovering his work for the first time.

When the story (as told in this show) picks up again, it's with work that initially appears radically different from what came before: geometric shapes painted in acrylic on irregular pieces of burlap that have been stretched over lengths of thin tree branches and tied together into rough triangles, irregular polygons or, in one case, a pair of wing-like shapes. Equally evocative of Native American art and modernist abstraction (not such an unlikely pair, given their formal and spiritual affinities, and the serious debt that 20th century abstraction owes to American Indian culture), and also reminiscent of Peter Young's "stick" paintings circa 1970, these untitled works may seem funky and handmade next to Lukin's highly finished 1960s work, but the underlying concerns are the same: the relation of painted elements to the shape of the support, bent bands of color, and the interpenetration of painting and sculpture. What's different, obviously, is the explicit presence of nature. It's as if Lukin had turned away from the pop-modernist dream of the 1960s toward a conception of art that was more archaic, more ritualistic. In fact, Lukin has connected his post-1960s work to his Latvian grandfather who was, he told *People Magazine* in 1979, "once or twice removed from a shaman." (Lukin was born in Riga in 1934, and immigrated to the U.S. in 1949.)

The most recent body of work in the show—large slabs of Styrofoam two to nine inches thick and sporting a wealth of colorful abstract shapes, lines, and patterns—may be the closest that Lukin has come to conventional painting since the early 1960s. These works, begun about 10 years ago, also seem to reflect a reengagement with the urban environment, following the rusticated burlap paintings. Using an industrial product that one more readily associates with much younger artists such as Bruce Pearson or Rachel Harrison, and a palette that might have been borrowed from a well-stocked gelateria, Lukin has allowed into his work an unprecedented diversity of mark-making. Yet lurking in the background of these gaily-colored paintings are more ominous elements: small gouged-out sections that resemble bullet holes, honeycomb patterns that suggest steel mesh fencing. According to the artist, some of the Styrofoam works, which can resemble chunks of concrete, developed in response to the collapse of the Communist Bloc in 1989 (an event that triggered Lukin's memories of a childhood lived amid war and totalitarianism) and a subsequent visit he made to Latvia in the mid 1990s.

This impressive show was an occasion to appreciate a compelling artist and also to rethink a supposedly well documented period in postwar art. Rediscovering an artist like Lukin shakes up existing accounts with their neat stylistic classifications and teleological underpinnings. At this point, I'd much rather look at and think about mid-1960s works by Lukin or George Sugarman or Shirley Jaffe (not despite their compulsion to grapple with the legacy of Matisse but because of it; not despite their curiosity about formal invention but precisely because of it) than dutifully admire the canonical Minimalism of Judd or Stella; not only is the early work of Lukin, Sugarman, and Jaffe relatively (and refreshingly) unfamiliar to most of us, it also may have more to say to the present moment.