

## *Lee Mullican: Computer Joy*

During his long and storied career, Lee Mullican (1919-1998) drew his inspiration from sources outside the dominant canons of his time. While studying art in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Mullican expressed an early interest in abstraction in opposition to the dominant Realist aesthetic of the moment. After serving as a cartographer and graphic artist in World War II, he invented a meditative painting form and process he referred to as “striation,” — a rhythmic yet un-planned pressing of a palette knife against the canvas surface. An exact, repetitive line of the knife’s edge combined with the intuitive movement of the artist’s hand resulted in woven patterns, bursting light beams, and abstracted representations of outer and inner-space. These structured yet transcendent canvases attracted the attention of two renegade Surrealist painters, Wolfgang Paalen and Gordon Onslow Ford<sup>1</sup> working just outside San Francisco.

Mullican joined them in Mill Valley, California where the collective invented a divergent new vein of Surrealism under the name ‘DYN’ (the Greek word for “possible), previously the title of a journal produced by Paalen). Although this meeting of minds was short-lived, culminating in the 1951 *Dynaton* exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art, the ambitious collective made a conceptual impact, montaging ideas culled from art theory, physics, anthropology, and archaeology to form a new composited sensibility. This is not the last time Mullican’s forward-thinking output actively contributed to bridging tradition and innovation.

Well into his teaching tenure at the University of California Los Angeles, at age 67 Mullican began to explore how to translate his painting style into the emerging digital imaging technology of the day. Bringing with him a fascination with ancient histories and imagined futures, the refined techniques of an established painter, and a zeal for exploring new media, Mullican participated in UCLA’s Advanced Design Research Center’s Program for Technology in the Arts to create experimental digital compositions made possible by the new visualization capabilities of computer graphics. Following military and scientific advances in the 1960's and 70's, cultural initiatives pairing artists with engineers were a primary catalyst for the integration of art and digital

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<sup>1</sup> While painter Luchita Hurtado and writer Jacqueline Johnson were part of this discourse and making work to similar ends, the two women were never recognized as members of the collective.

technology. Alongside the development of user interfaces, digital technology became more compact, affordable, and widely available in the 1980's. The integration of color became possible when IBM introduced a 16-color scheme (four bits—one bit each for red, green, blue, and intensity) with the Color Graphics Adapter (CGA) for its first IBM PC in 1981 and later improved with the Enhanced Graphics Adapter (EGA) in 1984.

In 1986 Mullican started working with the IBM 5170, equipped with the Truevision Advanced Raster Graphics Adapter (TARGA), and a Summagraphics Summasketch stylus to experiment with painting and drawing on a computer. He found inspiration in the similarities between his painting style and a computerized matrix, particularly the dark background paintings he began to produce in the late 1970's; "I examined why I thought the computer was for me. Even in my paintings, I was always working with pattern and line and color. I've had a built-in computer ever since I've been doing art."<sup>2</sup> Replacing his brush and signature palette knife striations with a clickable mouse and pen-like stylus, Mullican merged the late Surrealist method of automatism with the computer's instant and precise replication of marks, stating; "I found that beyond what one thought, the computer as being hard-lined, analytical, and predictable, it was indeed a medium fueled with the automatic, enabled by chance, and accident, discovery of new ways of making imagery."

The possibilities of new technology paired with Mullican's advanced painting practice, resulted in buzzing and dense digital compositions of complex color palettes and illusions of depth. He elaborates; "physical components offer programs that allowed an artist to draw with line, pattern, geometric shapes, as circle, oval, rectangles, or immediately change color for freed shape, line. What was there could be replaced in an instant." While he observed demonstrations of the new technology, Mullican worked independently with his new found tools. The resulting images show a painter's mind at play, experimenting with never before possible visualization capabilities frozen in time. "Imagine being able to paint in sweeping gestures with a pattern, throwing out thousands of dots and blots of color that could be cured or erased or changed or kept on a disk to be brought back for further change in an instant or in a matter of weeks or years."

Over 100 image files created by Mullican were saved as .TGA files and stored on floppy disks. These TARGA generated files were the native format for VISTA boards, the first

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Ballatore, Sandy. "Mullican and Mullican: Living the Modern-Postmodern Continuum", Artspace, July-August 1989, p.51-55

graphic cards for IBM-compatible PCs to support Highcolor/truecolor display, meaning that computers today still support the artwork's native file format.

Mullican photographed and printed a small selection of computer works for the 1987-1988 traveling group exhibition *Computer Art*, mounted at the Everson Museum in Syracuse; Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center; IBM Gallery of Science and Art, New York; and the Center for the Fine Arts, Miami. In the late 1980's, descriptions of digital visualization technologies were as inventive as they were clunky, translating physical materials and tools into a burgeoning technological language. The exhibition's curator, Cynthia Goodman, writes; "Artists as diverse in their styles as Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Lee Mullican Jennifer Bartlett, and Phillip Pearlstein have experimented with electronic paint."<sup>3</sup> In an accompanying 1987 publication, Goodman foresees with uncanny clarity our lived reality of "calling up a painting on a computer screen may well become as commonplace as going to a museum"<sup>4</sup>

Without attempting to draw formal comparisons between today's crypto artists and the pioneers of Modernism, it can be argued that both groups share an initially marginalized status. As we round out 2021 with non-fungible digital artworks offering radical possibilities for creator autonomy, Lee Mullican's visionary enthusiasm for the digital medium continues a dialogue with the history of painting, the emergence of visualization technology, and the future of computer generated aesthetics.

By pairing Mullican's digital works with his canvases spanning 1966-1985, *Computer Joy* bridges the history of mid-century painting with 21st century digital technology. Projections of Mullican's digital works will be displayed in their native digital format for the first time alongside the artist's paintings. Through the adoption of an abstracted modernist sensibility in the 1940's and his embrace the emerging technologies of the 1980's, Lee Mullican lands in the rare position of having participated in two of the most significant upheavals of cultural value within his lifetime.

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<sup>3</sup> Goodman, Cynthia. *The Digital Revolution: Art in the Computer Age*. Art Journal Vol. 49, No. 3, Computers and Art: Issues of Content (Autumn, 1990), pp. 248-252. Published by CAA.

<sup>4</sup> Goodman, Cynthia. *Digital Visions: Computers and Art*. Harry N. Abrams, 1987.