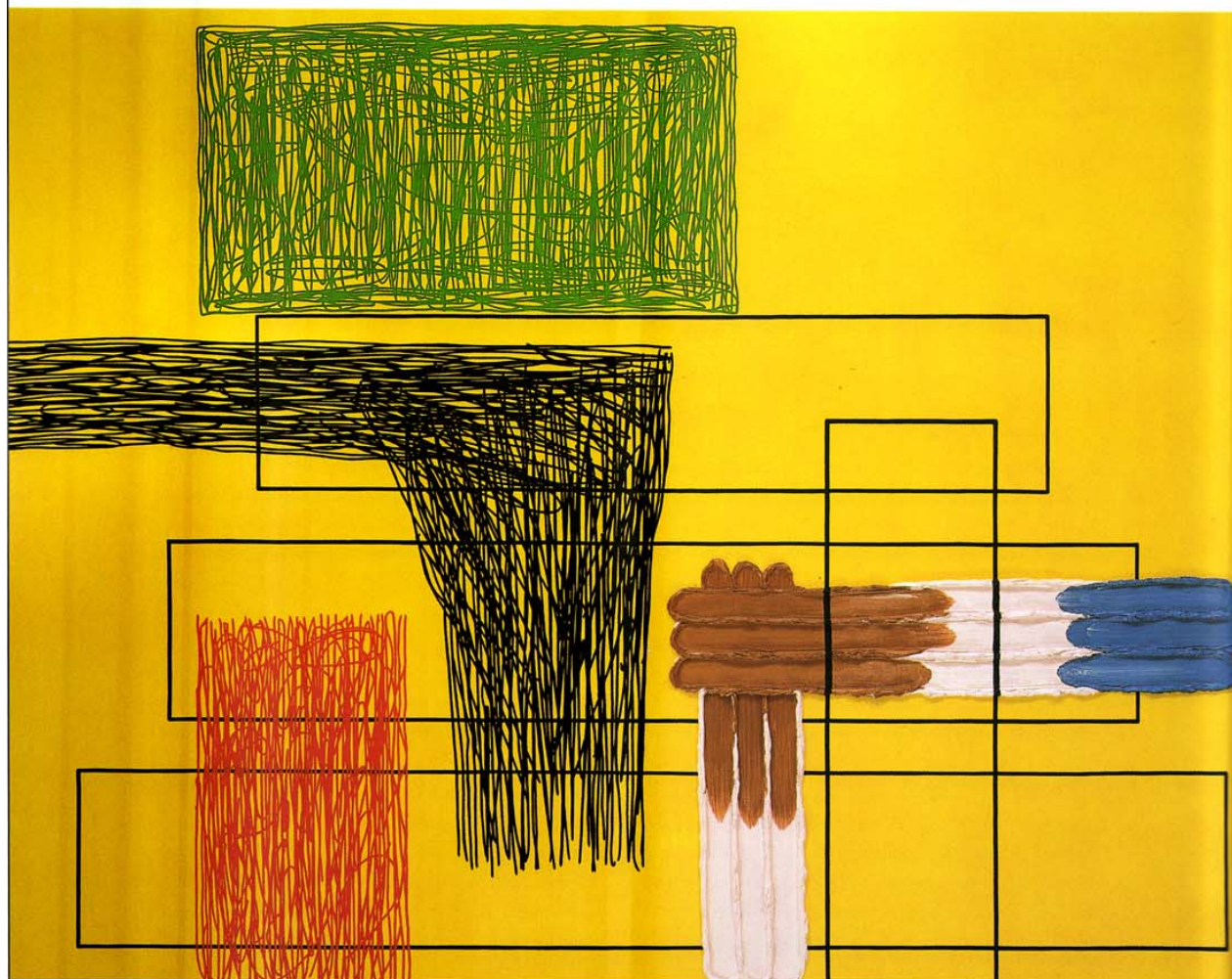


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Jonathan Lasker: the



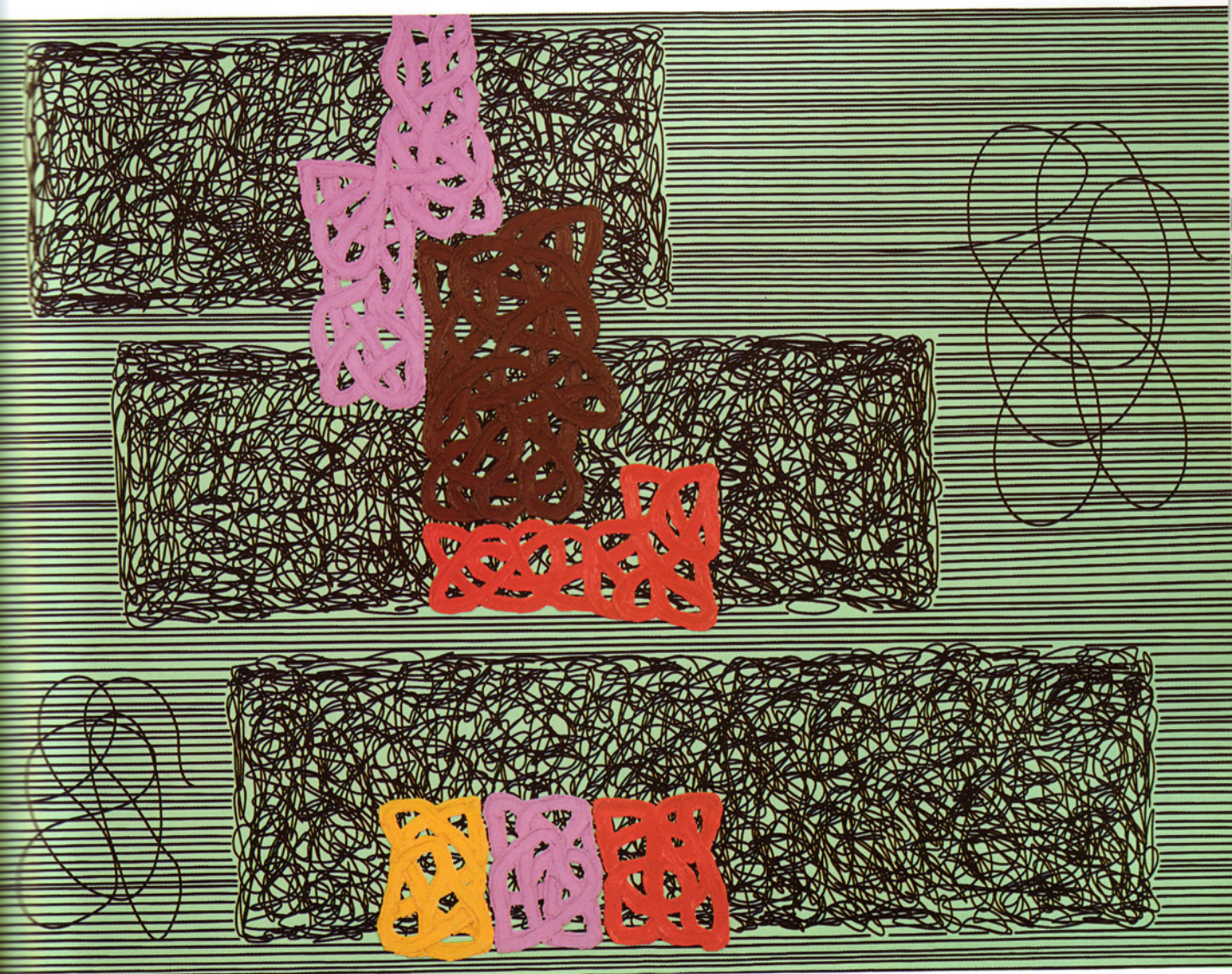
Jonathan Lasker's paintings are intriguing paradoxes: they are witty but have ~~grates~~ ^{grates}; they are elegant but seem somehow scurrilous; geometric, but anti-geometric; cybernetic, but humanist.

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dialectics of touch

by Tony Godfrey



opposite: JONATHAN LASKER, *An Explanation of Ice for a Summer Insect*, 1999, oil on linen, 178 x 244 cm. Courtesy: Sperone Westwater, New York

above: JONATHAN LASKER, *When Dreams Work*, 1992, oil on canvas, 229 x 305 cm. Courtesy: Daros Collection, Switzerland



Lasker began his career in the late-seventies at the time of New Image painting, when artists such as Susan Rothenberg (who was briefly his teacher) and Robert Moskowitz were seeking to reanimate American painting by injecting its surfaces and gestures with figurative gobbets: horses, bodies, houses, fragments, etc.¹ How to paint after abstract expressionism had faded, its canvases becoming the expensive darlings of the New York auction rooms, signifiers of value, not of struggle? At Cal Arts where Lasker was a student in 1977, Rothenberg and another visiting tutor, Richard Artschwager, would talk of image, surface, abstraction.² Not of gesture. How could the hand then mark itself on the

canvas? If gesture was suspect – invalid, even – how could the painter write or inscribe presence on the canvas?

A painting of Lasker's from the mid-eighties – *To Regain Virginity* (1986) – shows how he translated that drive to locate figurative elements, with their myriad associations, in an abstract space. Do we see the title as a wistful hankering after the forever-lost purity of classic abstraction? Do the two more modelled forms floating across the geometric bars represent viruses infecting the system or figures? Dante and his guide, Virgil, at the gates? Certainly the shapes in these early paintings seem like actors. Actors with fragmented bodies; lost wraiths. Such theatrical metaphors are inherent

in American painting: Rothko wrote in 1947, 'I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers. They have been created from the need for a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarrassment and execute gestures without shame'.

How to operate between the impossible dream of Rothko and the too possible dream of Warhol – that is between depth (literal and figurative) and surface, only surface? In *Public Love* of 1990 two shapes float across tower-block grids. These shapes, these actors, echo those in Lasker's earlier works, but after the eighties they appear more as though in conversation with each other. They hold the stage rhetorically like an actor posing, or as if performing a dramatic monologue; the rhetoric structuring language into sculpture. Imagine these as Othello with Iago trailing behind, or Hamlet and Ophelia; or imagine them as corollaries or equivalents to the speeches volleying out across the time and space of the theatre.

The question 'How to paint?' became synonymous with 'What to paint?'. The answer? A doodle? But a doodle seems the very opposite of painting, for painting is serious and considered, while doodling is petty and vacuous. It does not seem to compare well with the gestural labyrinths of Pollock, the psychic/sensual overloading of De Kooning, or the monumental scaffolding of Kline. And yet, while Sigmar Polke is the only other artist to have made serious art from it – with his majestic yet simultaneously inane *Telephone Drawings* of 1975, perhaps doodling is not such an unfit subject for art after all.

According to Lasker, this doodling creates 'a cat's cradle of black lines, a little like knitting that's come unstitched'. 'It comes from the sketches which I make and from which the paintings are copied more or less verbatim. It's like frenetic drawing, subconscious doodling. I use it as a space-filler ... I reference the subconscious in a very conscious way. I take

something from the subconscious and reprocess it. I go from direct subconscious mark-making to graphic reproduction.'³

In the mid-eighties there was a subtle change as Lasker began to work from small sketches or doodles. Each painting is now preceded by several studies. It is not just a matter of scaling up initial doodles: they *are* scaled up, more or less, but details or colours may be changed. When we see completed paintings and compare them to the initial studies, they are always clarified, distilled. In a sense Lasker begins with romantic, expressionistic material – the sketch, the automatic – but he edits it in a highly classical way. In this he is not unlike Philip Guston who, in his late works, transmuted scruffy, scrofulous, cartoony drawings into large paintings of great formal integrity (Guston was ultimately influenced by Piero della Francesca and Poussin, not Robert Crumb). Doodling is pleasurable: we do it in secret, for our indulgence. It is irresponsible, not loaded with spiritual or psychological expectations, unless we claim we are exercising the unconscious. In the most clichéd interpretations, abstract expressionism lets the unconscious through: translates it, displays it directly, candidly. To 'reference' the subconscious as Lasker does, instead of stating it or letting it 'pour out', is an ironic position, but irony is not necessarily sardonic or insincere. However punky or funky his paintings look, they always have *gravitas*. They often have an almost processional dignity.

Moreover, although his paintings may initially suggest the type of paintbox drawings we do in idle moments on the computer, nothing is further from the truth. Lasker's is a humanist position. He never uses computers or computer graphics; even when cybergraphics are apparently used, they are biased towards what Lasker sees as the 'integrity of the human hand'.⁴

The monochrome that each set of shapes or actors or speeches materialises out of and floats against is an abstraction



opposite: JONATHAN LASKER, *To Regain Virginity*, 1986, oil on canvas, 163 x 182 cm. Private Collection, Sweden

left: JONATHAN LASKER, *Public Love*, 1990, oil on linen, 244 x 335 cm. Courtesy: Sperone Westwater, New York

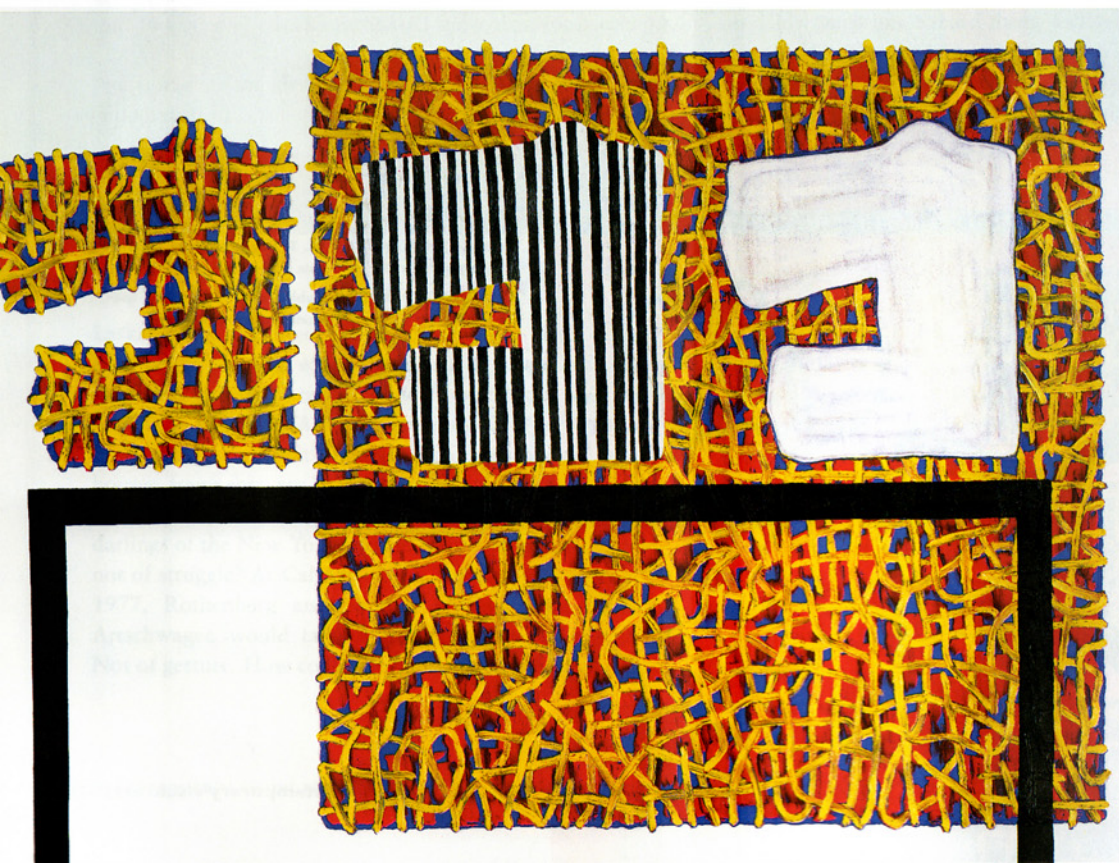
like a screen saver on a computer. How many of us do not spend long hours each day before the screen of our PC or console? The blank white page has been replaced by the deep blue Microsoft opaque shimmer. The computer clipboard has become the metaphor for the human consciousness in expectation, not the *tabula rasa*. In 1993 Lasker wrote: 'Although my paintings appear to be almost quotational, like a cartoon of themselves, they insist on their physical presence: as a viewer you are forced to deal with their perceptual complexities. That conflict is a very intense, very contemporary conflict: we are all here, bound by our bodily functions – and yet at the same time we live a cybernetic existence'.⁵ We mesh and unmesh from computers all through the day: the way a computer makes the world affects the way we know and make the world.

Jonathan Lasker is a man of the present, his work a critique of a world dominated by computer representations. But he is not a nostalgic artist lauding some prelapsarian past: he is simultaneously horrified and fascinated by the landscapes of Boucher and Gainsborough, which seem to him to be from a genetically altered universe.⁶ Boucher's landscapes are apparently made of Meissen, their bluey-green coloration as fake as that of his vermilion-nipped nudes. Gainsborough's later landscapes, symptomatically, were often based on drawings of models constructed with mirror for water, coal lumps for rock and broccoli for trees. There is an equal detour from actual, visceral experience.

'My work', Lasker remarks, 'has an idiosyncratic dialogue with the history of painting'.⁷ Escaping the tyrannies of modernism has meant assuming an eclectic but highly educated take on history. He has an interest in minor masters such as Magnasco, an eclectic artist whose work seems tangential to mainstream painting but is extremely intense;⁸ and an interest in the eighteenth-century Venetian Longhi, as well as in late-mannerist artists slightly out of key with the mainstream, for whom the canny and uncanny seem curiously interchangeable.

I have liked and been intrigued by Lasker's work ever since he showed a group of paintings in *New York Art Now* at the Saatchi Gallery in 1987. I liked them because of their clear, unclouded colours. The likeability of his work is important: these are pleasurable paintings. Lasker seemed and was out of place with Koons and Steinbach and the rest of the artists in the show. He talks of desire, but that desire is a more evasive concept than it is for Steinbach and Koons with their good objects, their sublimation through consumerism, normalisation, etc. A painting he showed then, *Blobscape* (1986), featured a flesh-pink blob against a sea of horizontal lines. It was scarcely a landscape, yet the schema related to landscape and the blob to a nude figure in the landscape. There was a tinge of the liminal to it, as though we had dreamt this scene.⁹ But it is the materiality of the pinkness that is key. Lasker has always been a physical painter. Another paradox: the paintings are very graphic,

JONATHAN LASKER, *Domestic Setting with Post-Partum Anxiety*, 1999, oil on canvas, 244 x 325 cm. Courtesy: Sperone Westwater, New York





JONATHAN LASKER, *The Big Picture*, 1988, oil on canvas, 244 x 335 cm. Courtesy: Daros Collection, Switzerland

but somewhere in every painting the paint is applied in a highly palpable manner – gunky, gloopy, sploogily. However untouched or untouchable his paintings may seem initially, the act of touch is always inscribed.

Although Lasker's paintings are always very recognisably his own, he does not work in series. Each painting is individual. Each is unique, worked for. He doesn't do that many paintings in a year, and only a few of them are large. 'Painting is always slow', he remarks, 'they are arduous to do'. There is an intensity to his paintings that belies their seeming cartoon elegance. This has much to do with Lasker's complex rereading of painting's history. Witness not only his idiosyncratic take on mannerism but his sophisticated restaging of abstract expressionism and his rereading of Mondrian, whom he sees as soft, not hard – with 'desire overwhelming truth'.¹⁰ Lasker's squigginess does not just disrupt the grid: it transmutes it.

To misquote Marx, painting repeats itself firstly as tragedy (*vide* abstract expressionism) and secondly as farce. But if Lasker's works are farces, they are highly serious ones. Farces are not necessarily dumb: farce is the province of Samuel Beckett as much as it is of Brian Rix.

Lasker's paintings are at once sensuous and philosophical. They are about delight, wit, dandyism, the impish use of acid colours; but they are also about living in the here and now. The complex conscious/unconscious split that his work seems to articulate (painting/sketch, ground/figure) is also a

public/private split. In this his work can be seen to articulate a problem encountered in everyday life. We are private individuals permanently under public scrutiny. The empty, deep but seemingly shallow space of his paintings is like that of the postmodern urban experience. The information highway of the Blair years is, perhaps unsurprisingly, like the nothing-scape of the urban motorway or shopping mall.

- 1 Moskowitz is an artist that Lasker feels has been seriously underrated
- 2 Lasker spent a year at this most famous of American postmodern colleges run by the conceptual artists Baldessari, Asher and Huebler; here painting, as Eric Fischl, another ex-student, remarked was treated as a necrophilic activity
- 3 Jonathan Lasker interviewed by Tony Godfrey in *Chance Choice and Irony* (John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, 1994)
- 4 Phone conversation with the author, December 1999
- 5 Jonathan Lasker, 'Cherchez la Femme Peinture' (*Parkett* 37, 1993)
- 6 Phone conversation with author, December 1999
- 7 Jonathan Lasker interviewed by Francesco Bonami (*Flash Art* 176, May/June 1994)
- 8 Jonathan Lasker interviewed by Tony Godfrey in *Chance Choice and Irony*, op. cit.
- 9 It also recalls Peter Lanyon's weird late painting *Clevedon Bandstand*, where a pink blob likewise floats across an abstracted landscape. Lanyon claimed this pink blob was Eurydice at the gates of Hell
- 10 See Jonathan Lasker, 'Piet Mondrian: Soft Squares' (*Artforum*, October 1995)

Tony Godfrey is a lecturer and critic. His book **Conceptual Art** is published by Phaidon Press, London