

CHEIM & READ

# Art in America

April 1995

## Counter-Resolution

*Oddly provisional compositions and visual boldness characterize Jonathan Lasker's oblique approach to abstraction. Recently, an exhibition of earlier paintings and several shows of new work charted this artist's steady development.*

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

I think I'd better begin with a confession. For a long time, whenever anyone asked me what I thought about Jonathan Lasker's paintings, I'd answer that I couldn't make up my mind. On the one hand, I'd always walk away from his shows feeling vaguely unsatisfied. "He doesn't develop his compositions," I'd say; "they're too arbitrary," I'd complain. On the other hand, there was clearly something that kept drawing me to his paintings—at least since I saw one called *The Realm of the Quaint* in a 1988 solo show at the now-defunct Massimo Audiello Gallery—and kept me thinking about them. I was sure Lasker's awkwardly assembled and stridently colored abstractions were doing something unlike anyone else's, I just didn't know if I thought the doing worthwhile.

Then one day—I'm not sure exactly when, but it wasn't so long ago—I finally got it. Or rather, I realized that I'd been getting it all along: this uncertainty, this hard-to-pinpoint dissatisfaction, this prolonged ambivalence, was precisely the point (or one of the points) of Lasker's paintings. A fall '94 exhibition at Bravin Post Lee Gallery of 10 paintings made between 1978 and '82 was enormously helpful in clarifying, for me at least, the difficulties and pleasures of Lasker's work. While providing the absorbing spectacle of a young painter gradually assembling, from canvas to canvas, the elements of his mature style, the show also offered an excellent overture to Lasker's new paintings, shown regularly at Sperone Westwater in New York and recently seen in solo shows at Lars Bohman (Stockholm), L.A. Louver (Los Angeles) and Soledad Lorenzo (Madrid).

The most visible influence in Lasker's early work is New Image painting—hence the simplified shapes against flat grounds and the deliberately unvirtuosic paint-handling—but in contrast to the elemental '70s images of painters like Susan Rothenberg or Denise Greene, Lasker's paintings are filled with cultural signifiers of postwar American life. At their most subtle, these signifiers appear as allusions to Abstract Expressionism; they can also evoke '50s and '60s design. In one of the most culturally explicit early works, *5 of Spades* (1978), the central shape is clearly a TV set with rabbit-ears antennae. Three of the other shapes are recognizable as a high-backed armchair, a female nude and a spade symbol, and I think the shape in the lower left-hand corner is part of a sofa. The blue ground against which these images are set is filled with a meandering pink line. This linear element remained puzzling until the artist revealed its unlikely source: shag carpeting. What else, for a painting so redolent of a cheap motel?

Another odd thing about the pink line is how it seems to inexplicably peter out. Did the artist just get bored? Or



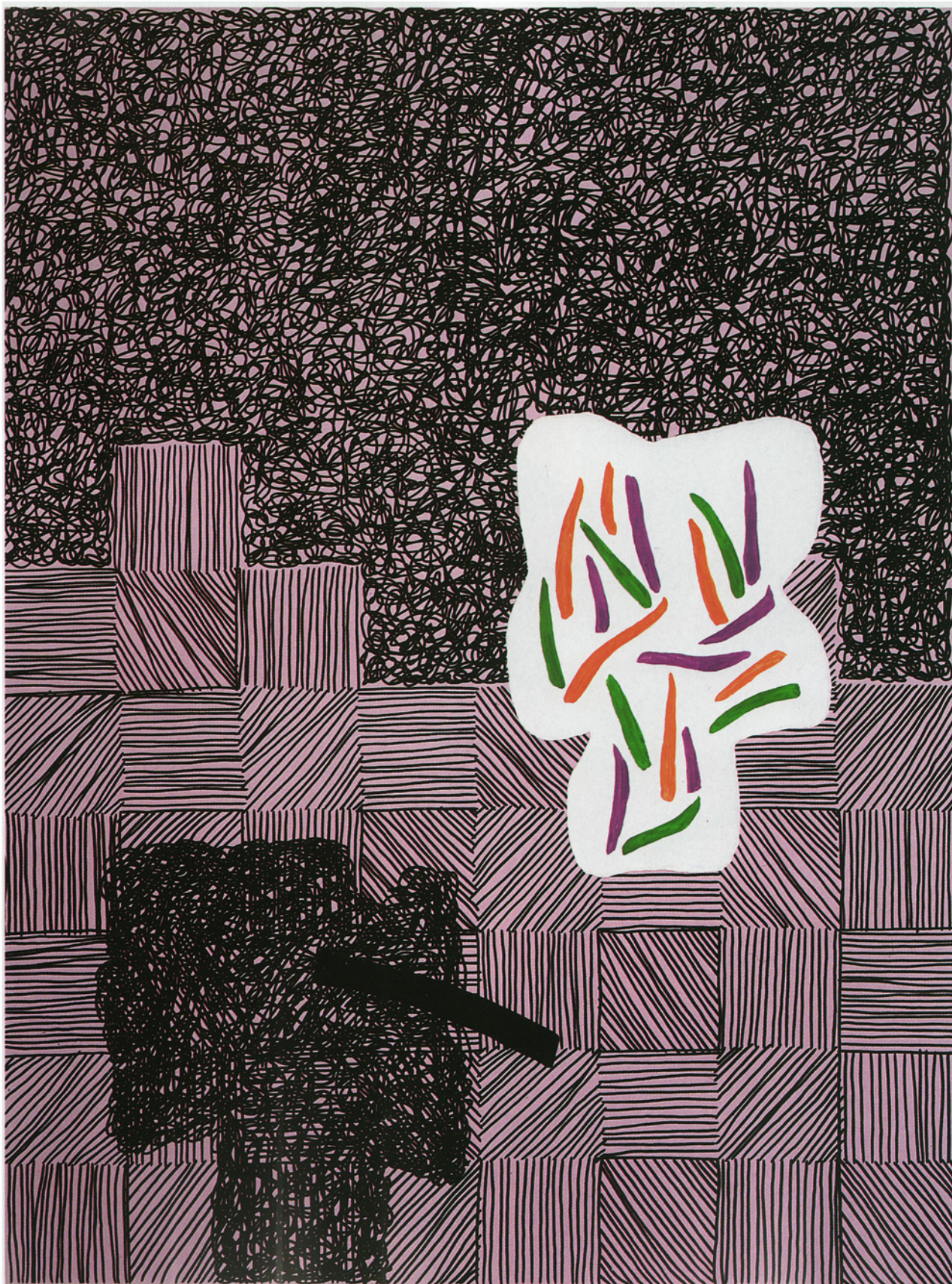
*5 of Spades, 1978, oil on canvas,  
59 by 48 inches.*

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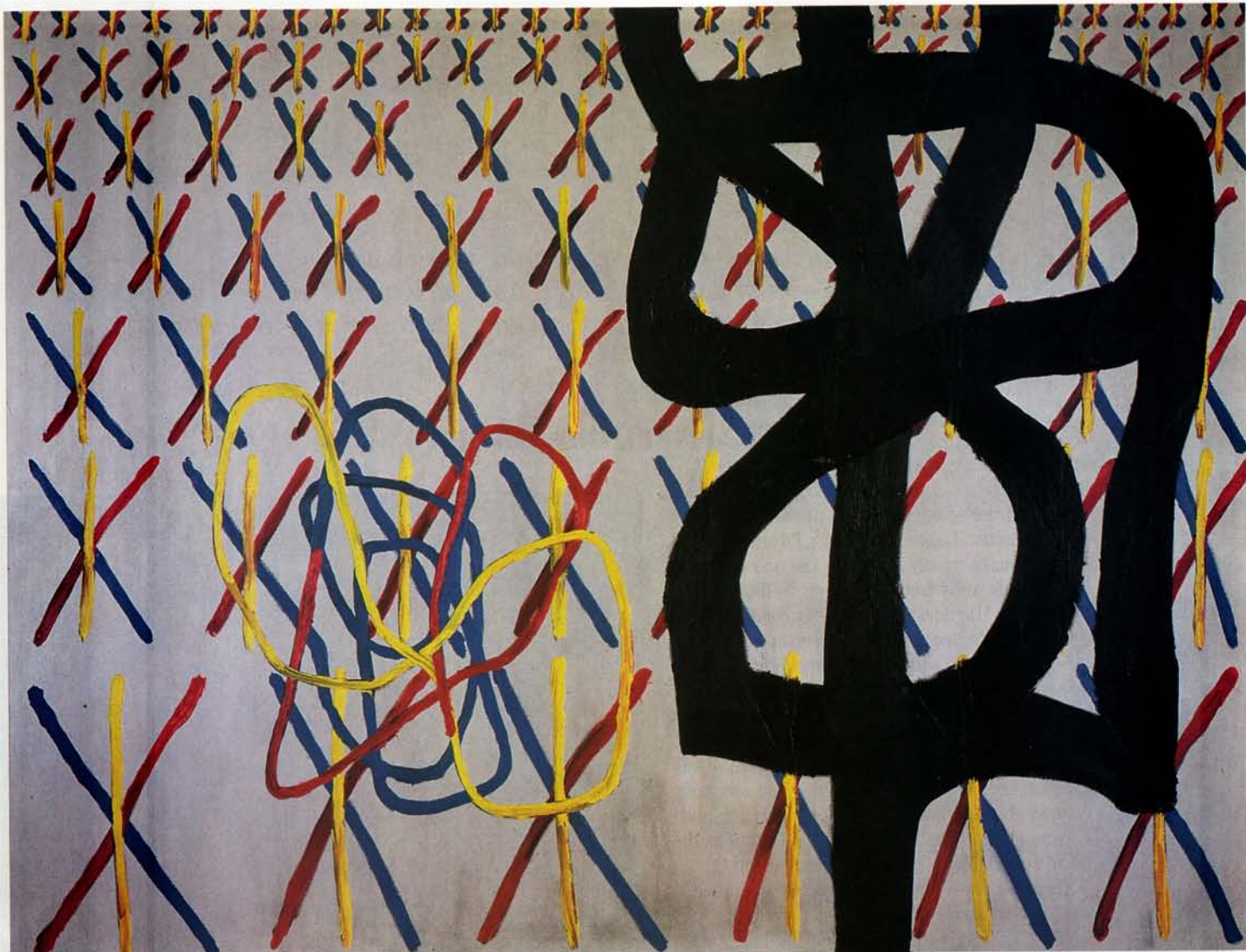
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*Jonathan Lasker: Hermeneutic Picture, 1994, oil on linen, 80 by 60 inches. All photos this article courtesy Sperone Westwater.*





*The Realm of the Quaint, 1988, oil on canvas, 96 by 126 inches.*

did he leave off to give the painting an unfinished look? Actually, there's a logic to this incompleteness: the line stops short of the only symbol—the spade—that pertains to the composition's playing-card source.

By taking the design of a playing card as the structure of a painting, the 30-year-old Lasker sidestepped both formalist and expressionist approaches to painting. Gone are an earlier generation's anxieties over the placement of forms, and gone, too, the notion that every mark on the canvas must reflect the artist's raw subjectivity. In the work that followed *5 of Spades*, Lasker dispensed with such found structures, achieving a similarly arbitrary order through other means.

From the beginning, Lasker not only made little effort to relate figure to ground, but in paintings like *Heath* (1978) he went out of his way to differentiate them as much as possible. (It's interesting to note how *Heath* recalls the contemporaneous paintings of Julian Schnabel, who, before he discovered figuration and crockery, was exploring similar New-Image-derived abstraction.) Here, an all-over pattern of painterly bursts of yellow, purple and brown—which could be an allusion to de Kooning's brushy, landscape-inspired canvases of the same period—forms a backdrop for two roughly modeled white shapes, overlaid by scrappy black lines, that seem patched in from a completely different painting.

In a recent essay, Saul Ostrow suggested that when they were first shown—in January 1981, at the Landmark Gallery in New York—Lasker's paintings must have been viewed by many as “the works of a reactionary, a traditionalist or a misfit ignorant of the issues facing paint-

ing, who was stubbornly swimming against a tide that was irresistibly drawn towards depiction, narrative and pastiche.”<sup>1</sup> If the heyday of Neo-Expressionism was not the moment for Lasker's paintings to find a warm reception in New York, the general shift from figuration to abstraction in the second half of the decade created a more hospitable environment.

Even so, there remained a problem of context. At that time, his works were often seen in group shows alongside those of Neo-Geo painters like Peter Halley and Philip Taaffe. While Lasker shared Neo Geo's skepticism toward the formalist and idealist claims of earlier abstraction, he never shared the tendency of his colleagues to work programmatically (as when Halley used abstraction to represent precise sociological concepts) or to blatantly borrow images from earlier artists (as when Taaffe appropriated from Bridget Riley). In 1986, Hal Foster correctly pointed out that the work of painters involved with appropriation and simulation was “not at all derived, genealogically, from critical abstract painting—that of Stella, Ryman, Marden.”<sup>2</sup> In clear contrast, Lasker has explicitly connected himself to such painting, naming Ryman, Marden and Robert Mangold as his forebears.<sup>3</sup> But Lasker did not aspire to the phenomenological purity of the post-Minimalists; the peculiar working method he developed (of which more in a moment) would have precluded this.

**L**asker's paintings quickly make their presence known. A coldly bright background color, rows of nervous squiggles or patterns that veer from geometry to chaos, a surface disrupted by erratically placed pas-



**Imagine, if you can, Stuart Davis and Hans Hofmann collaborating, both under the influence of mescaline, on paintings for a 1960s airport lounge.**

sages of thick paint—everything in the paintings jostles with graphic tension, in colors that clash acidly against each other. Imagine, if you can, Stuart Davis and Hans Hofmann collaborating, both under the influence of mescaline, on a series of decorative panels for a 1960s airport lounge and you'll have some idea of the work's initial impact.

Probably, all of Lasker's paintings since the mid-'80s—with their meandering, apparently improvised lines and heavy impasto that conjures spontaneous gesturalities—have been painstakingly copied from small studies. This procedure is rather different from the conventional use of preparatory drawings. While most painters might use drawing to work out ideas that will later take different, more developed form on canvas, Lasker's studies are more like a sculptor's maquettes, suggesting as closely as possible what the final, full-scale version will look like.

But the relationship between the studies and the canvases is not merely one of scale. Since the studies are made with ballpoint and felt-tip pens, small brushes and the tips of palette knives, when Lasker comes to re-create the compositions on a larger scale he must drastically change his technique. To a great degree, the physical appearance of Lasker's paintings is determined by the need to find equivalents to the studies' smaller marks.

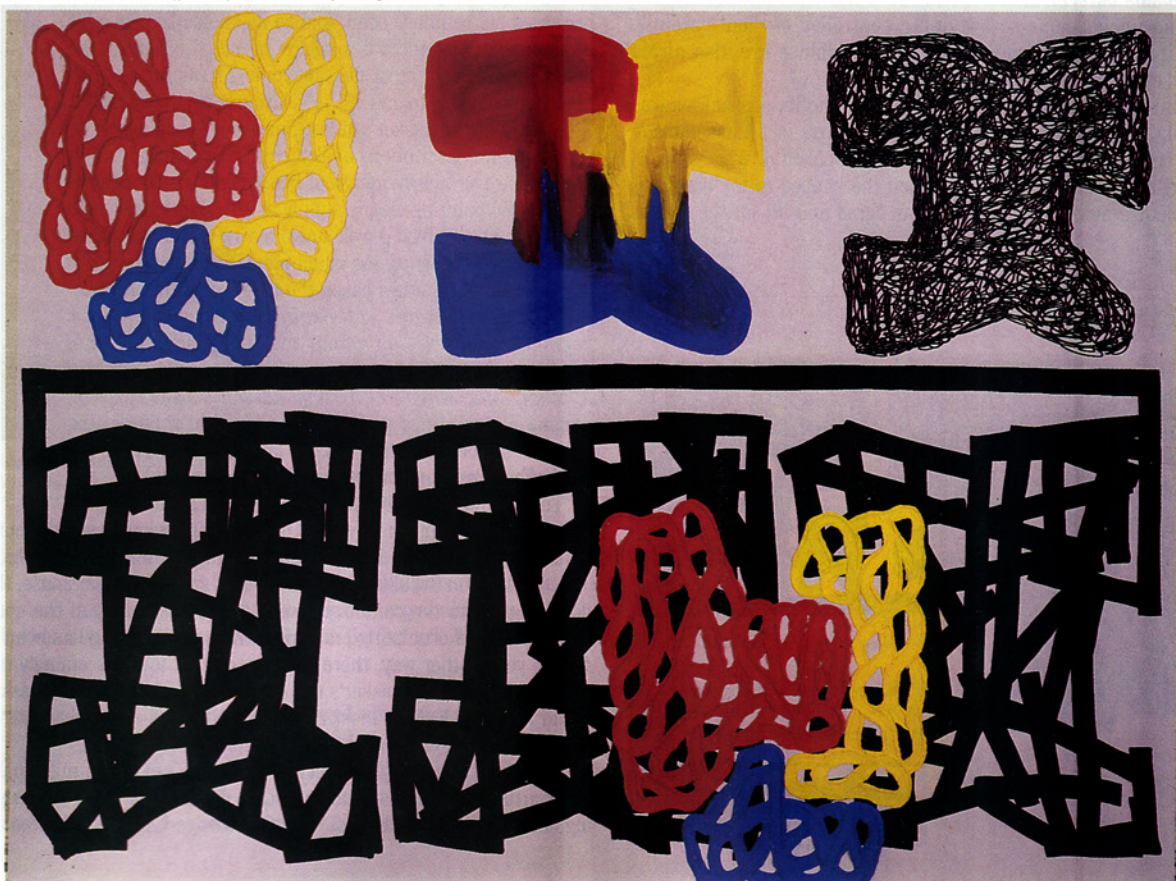
The use of studies is one part of Lasker's formula; another is his conscious isolation of three basic elements of abstract painting—figure,

ground and line. (A lapsed musician, Lasker sometimes compares these three elements to the standard rock instrumentation of bass, drums and guitar.) The "grounds" are slickly applied, almost metallic, monochrome skins of paint (although some of the recent ones are more painterly) while the "lines" range from faultless geometrical patterns to endlessly overlapped scribbles. The "figures" are blocky shapes usually loaded with knots of thick, heavily impastoed brushstrokes. Together, in the constantly shifting balance among them, these three elements give Lasker a precisely defined, but essentially unlimited vocabulary.

In Lasker's paintings things are and are not what they seem. The apparently automatist lines, for instance, have been painstakingly achieved. As Lasker explains: "I would draw them out free hand and then carefully trace [over] them. I was editing my own subconscious . . . rendering it in such a manner that it became very clean and orderly."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the impasto brushstrokes are indeed brushstrokes—only instead of the rapid gesture usually associated with a brushstroke, these unwieldy, pastelike forms have been created (in emulation of the studies' marks) in a kind of slow motion. In a recent work like *Interpretive Painting* (1994), Lasker further complicates matters by creating in two different parts of the painting an identical trio of red, yellow and blue gestures (recalling Rauschenberg's pair of nearly identical 1957 paintings, *Factum I* and *Factum II*). Everywhere, even when marks are repeated, the different parts of the paintings operate at wildly different speeds.

Lasker also likes to use geometric forms to suggest a crude perspective. In his paintings, the rough-hewn bars, blocks and stripes which we have learned, through countless purveyors of geometric abstraction, to read as flat designs, are meant to establish receding space. In *The Realm of the Quaint*, this is achieved by the rows of crossed red, yellow and blue strokes which grow progressively smaller as they near the top of the can-

*Interpretive Painting*, 1994, oil on linen, 75 by 100 inches.





**There is a seemingly endless give-and-take among Lasker's trio of basic pictorial elements: figure, ground and line.**

vas; in last year's *The Consciousness of Animals*, perspective is created by the relation of the two "figures" (one closer, one farther) to the explicit horizon line.

**D**ynamic variation of his figure/ground/line format is everywhere in the 1994 paintings that were included in Lasker's recent solo shows. In the 5½-by-7-foot canvas *Articulate Ecstasy*, the thin black line executes precisely plotted zigzags within rectangular boundaries, but in the smaller *Expressions of an Uncertain Universe* it appears as a tangled mess. In *The Consciousness of Animals* there is no such dark filament—the only linear elements are thick black strokes pushing at the inner boundaries of a yellow "figure" in the upper right. (Similar strokes also appear in *Expressions of an Uncertain Universe*, alongside a painterly pink line.)

The grounds of these paintings range from the perfectly finished yellow of *Expressions of an Uncertain Universe* to the more loosely painted multicolored checkerboard of *The Consciousness of Animals*, and the "figures" move from sculptural blocks (*Uncertain Universe*) to something approaching figuration (*The Consciousness of Animals*). In all his new paintings, Lasker continues to use his three categories as a counterbalance to his need to construct pictures from radically heterogeneous elements.

But even within a single category, you can see Lasker's love of playing opposites off against each other. For instance, he uses line to evoke, on a single canvas, the Abstract Expressionist struggling for the authentic gesture and the distracted student doodling on a notepad. In the scribbled lines that dominate *Hermeneutic Picture* (1994), we are looking simultaneously at an unconscious scrawl and a controlled element carefully integrated into a larger composition. (The scribbles are also direct descendants of the shag-carpet line in *5 of Spades*.)

Throughout these constant permutations, the motifs on each canvas remain oddly distinct, almost as if they were parts of an assemblage rather than an oil painting. Indeed, Lasker has spoken of what he calls his work's "three-dimensionality," in which the shapes in his paintings resemble "picture puzzle elements" he can "grab and lift off the canvas

and hang on the wall for a second."<sup>5</sup> This sense of separateness and contingency that enters into the making of the painting persists through the viewer's experience of Lasker's work.

But if Lasker's paintings were merely concerned with shuffling together incongruous elements, they would be too predictable. Along with his taste for disassociation, Lasker knows how to connect. Notice, for instance, how the elements in *Expressions of an Uncertain Universe* seem to be commenting on each other. The painting's pink gestures (streaked with green and brown from having been painted wet-on-wet over the underlying "figure") might be a crude amalgam of the three imposing linear maxi-doodles inscribed behind them. Alternately, the scribbled line is at once a sleeker version of the impasto strokes and a calculated insult to the perfectly painted ground.

The categorical boundaries of the paintings are also fluid. For instance, lines frequently break out and slip geometric confines, but not in order to make any dramatic statement. Their break for freedom runs out of steam, leaving the mark dangling like a useless appendage, as in *Articulate Ecstasy*. Lasker is surprisingly able to construct strong paintings from the accumulation of such seemingly ineffectual gestures.

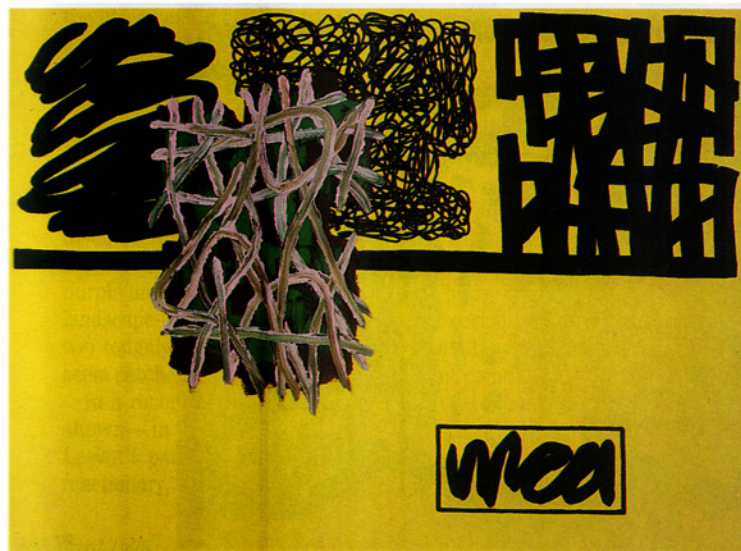
**I**n front of a Lasker painting all the usual methods we use to classify abstraction are useless: geometric and biomorphic elements clash; the oil paint, so often a sign of nature, looks like pure plastic; flatness and perspectival space trade off; improvised passages are contained in precisely calculated structures. But throughout this cacophony of crossed signals, the painting retains an eerie clarity—probably because Lasker is perfectly aware and accepting of the contradictory messages his paintings send. And so he should be, since his experience in the studio is similarly mixed: "I believe in the marks that I make. Yet, at the same time, I think I have a distanced relationship to myself as I'm laying down the marks."<sup>6</sup>

(A word about Lasker's titles. Sometimes they ask to be read as literal descriptions of elements in the paintings they name. The two nearly identical black gestures that dominate a 1986 painting clearly supply its title, *Look Alike*, and the blocks of scribbled purple lines in a 1991 painting called *The Division of Happiness* could plausibly be a diagram of the title. In many other cases the titles are general philosophical hints—*Brain Anti-Brain*, *Non Sequitur Psyche*, *Formalities of Self*—or catchy tags for various facets of contemporary life: *Fashionable Obscurity*, *Digital Affection*, *After Right and Wrong*. Lasker is also capable of naming his paintings with the kind of grand rhetoric that went out of fashion in the '50s. My favorite in this genre is a 1992 effort: *Painting for an Invisible Generation*.)

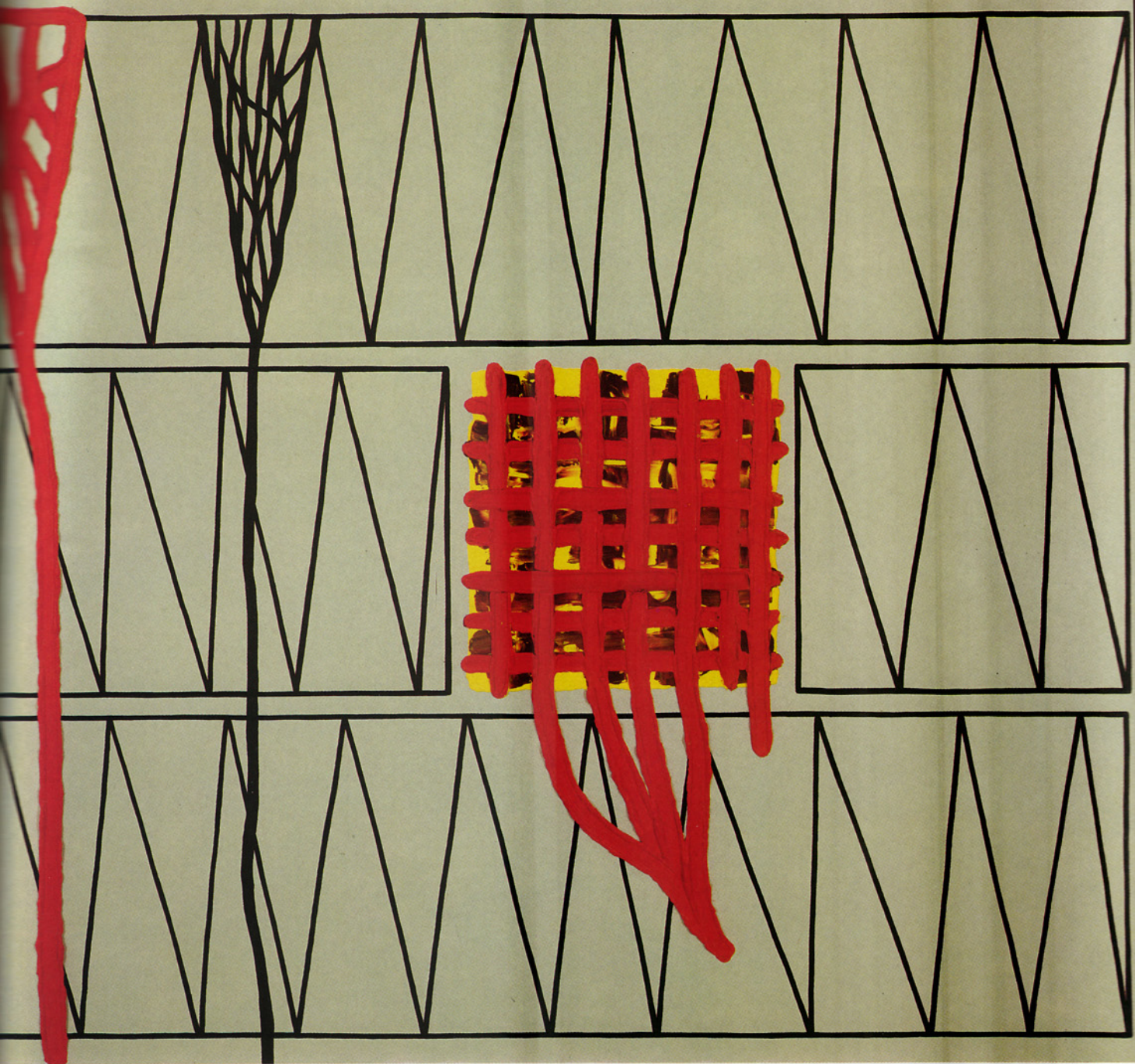
"There is no resolution in my paintings," Lasker has said. He's right, in a number of ways. On the most obvious level, the compositions seem to follow no immediately recognizable formal logic, which was what kept me on the sidelines initially. In a second, deeper sense, there is no resolution to the conflict between the provisionality of the compositions and the excruciating craft with which the painting has been made. And in yet another way, there is no resolution to the seemingly endless give-and-take among Lasker's trio of basic pictorial elements. Lasker has found that simplest yet most elusive of artistic phenomena: a set of elements with apparently inexhaustible visual interest.

Judging by the signs of Lasker's influence among younger painters, other artists seem to have taken notice of this. Nonetheless, I keep coming across critics who hesitate to acknowledge Lasker's achievement.<sup>7</sup> If

*Expressions of an Uncertain Universe*, 1994, oil on linen, 30 by 40 inches.







**Articulate Ecstasy, 1994, oil on linen,  
68 by 85 inches.**

this painter has been slow to gather admirers perhaps it is because he asks of viewers something hard to give: the willingness to sustain uncertainty and doubt, what Keats called "negative capability." Come to think of it, *Negative Capability* sounds like the perfect title for one of Lasker's paintings. □

1. "Jonathan Lasker: A Pre-Fab View" in *Jonathan Lasker Paintings from 1978 to 1982*, Bravin Post Lee Gallery, New York, 1994.
2. Hal Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," *Art in America*, June 1986, p. 82.
3. "A conversation with Collins & Milazzo" in *Jonathan Lasker Cultural Promiscuity*, Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome, 1989.
4. Interview with Shirley Kaneda, *Bomb*, Winter 1989/1990, p. 17.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

7. See, for example: Jerry Saltz, "A Year in the Life: Tropic of Painting," *Art in America*, Oct. '94, p. 101; "The Art of the Matter: Curating the Whitney Biennial, Jack Bankowsky Talks with Klaus Kertess," *Artforum*, Jan. '95, p. 104.

"Jonathan Lasker Paintings from 1978 to 1982" was seen at Bravin Post Lee Gallery, New York [Oct. 13-Nov. 12, 1994]. One-person shows of Lasker's new work were recently mounted at three galleries: Lars Bohman, Stockholm [Sept. 1-Oct. 2, 1994]; Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid [Feb. 3-Mar. 13, 1995], and L.A. Louver, Los Angeles [Feb. 24-Mar. 25]. Recent paintings have also been seen in several group shows, including "Emblems and Contours" at Sperone Westwater Gallery, New York [Jan. 7-Feb. 11] and "Ars Helsinki 95," Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki [through May 28].