

Sven Lukin: Paintings, 1960–1971

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BY JOHN YAU DECEMBER 7, 2010

Peter Saul and Sven Lukin are lone wolves in extremis. Both were born in 1934, Saul in San Francisco, CA, and Lukin in Riga, Latvia. They belong to the generation of Pop and Minimalist artists that began gaining attention in the turbulent '60s. By any standard they have done everything wrong throughout their careers. Saul lived in Europe from 1956 until 1964, long after New York had supplanted Paris as the center of the art world. Early in the 1960s, while living in Paris, he became friends with Matta and began using cartoon imagery. However, in contrast to Roy Lichtenstein, who preferred the wholesome, antiseptic side of comic strips, Saul loved comics for their vulgarity and tastelessness. In touch with his dark and contradictory feelings, Saul has done more paintings of people strapped into electric chairs than anyone else in history. They make Warhol's images of electric chairs seem like a cop-out, which they just might be.

Lukin and his family immigrated to America in 1949. After graduating from high school in 1953, he studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, where he attended lectures by Louis I. Kahn. In 1958, he moved to New York to be a painter and soon after began showing at prestigious galleries, starting with Betty Parsons and culminating with Pace Gallery, where he had four exhibitions during the 1960s. During this period, his work was included in landmark museum exhibitions that focused on shaped canvases. Within a short time, he pushed the shaped canvas into a territory all his own, aggressively entering into the viewer's space. In 1972, at the height of his fame, Lukin did the unthinkable. He left Pace Gallery and has refused to show his work in a commercial gallery until now.

Saul and Lukin have never fit into any of the narratives that painstakingly detail the progress of art. They aren't considered part of the story, as museums and institutions—keepers of the eternal flame of culture—present it. And yet I would advance that anyone who relentlessly attacks the story of modern art without a trace of nostalgia (Peter Saul) or thoroughly undermines its unspoken assumptions (Sven Lukin) deserves not only a second look, but a third and fourth. If you buy into a history of postwar art in America that leaves out or marginalizes Saul and Lukin, then you are content to elevate linear simplicity over complexity, contradiction, and vitality. Pabulum befits you.

Saul has stated that he learned from Dalí and Thomas Hart Benton, outré figures whom no one in their right mind would take seriously. This is just one reason why Saul is so important. He challenges received wisdom on every level. Jackson Pollock, if we remember, was Benton's most famous student. In "Custer's Last Stand I" (1974) Saul has found a way to channel Benton as if Saul were Pollock's greatest student. His orchestration of the intertwining, overlapping, cartoony figures could only have been done by someone who absorbed the all-over compositions of the Abstract Expressionists. He juices the painting up to a fever pitch with a jarring, manic palette of bright reds, blues, and greens. And then there are the details that one finds within the painting—the mayhem and violence, all precisely and lovingly depicted with hair-raising glee. Jaunty colors, precise distortions, and exaggerated cartoony violence shouldn't add up, except in a Peter Saul painting.

By locating a slew of puerile fantasies—Saul loves bodily excretions—within hot-button issues, he raises them to a highly sophisticated aesthetic level. No other artist is as urbane, ferocious, and funny as Saul. One has the sense that he is always trying to see how much he can get away with, how far he can go in his paintings before they come back to bite him, and bite him they did. His skewering of Clement Greenberg and "abstuck arts" in the hilariously nasty "Clemunteena Gweenburg" (1971) probably didn't help. The mistake too many people make with Saul is to focus on his subject matter, separating it from the way each painting is done. By emphasizing the literal, these observers are tacitly paying heed to the academic theorists who have dominated the discourse for the past 30 years—a discourse Saul finds laughable, at best. After all, to be literal about Saul's paintings is to suppress one of the more difficult aspects of his work, the nature of their pleasure. It is a disservice to focus on the "what" of Saul's paintings without seeing the particularities of the "how." His deft use of color and drawing to pictorially distort and liquefy solids are unequalled. Think de Kooning channeled by Dalí channeled by Saul, and you get an inkling of his many strengths. Saul's unruliness and anarchic imagination is comparable to that of the great Alfred Jarry. The fact that he isn't more highly celebrated is an indication of how staid and cowardly the art world's institutions are.

Sven Lukin's exhibition is titled *Paintings, 1960–1971*. Until this exhibition, the only work of his that I had seen was in the Empire State Plaza in Albany. It was there, in 1970, that I first saw his "Untitled," a flat, wall-hugging, deep-blue, green, and orange snake that is more than 11 feet high and nearly 120 feet long, alongside works by David Smith, Alfred Jensen, Ronald Bladen, Joan Mitchell, David Novros, and Nicholas Krushenick. It seems the art world wasn't always made up of ghettos. A logo gone wild, this giant, physical, sleek, animated, calligraphic form is contained only by the physical space in which it exists.

Having waited 40 years to see what else Lukin was up to in the 1960s, I can say that I am not at all disappointed—in fact, just the opposite. The work feels remarkably fresh, funny, smart, and eye-catching. You want to walk around and examine it. There is something wacky, marvelous, and just-right about it. Whereas Frank Stella, who got oodles of mileage in the 1960s and '70s out of shaped canvases and wall reliefs, never strayed from Cubism and planarity, Lukin owes more to architecture, visual conundrums, and his imagination. He didn't stay within the academic confines of shaped canvases, like Stella and so many others. He wasn't afraid to venture into unknown territory.

Done during the '60s, this selection shows Lukin moving quickly and confidently, from rectangles which protrude along a seam, to rectangles to which another rectangle is attached, to a loopy pink calligraphic form abutting a corner and hugging a wall, to what looks like a big blue tongue with red sides hanging down from the vertical rectangle to which it once belonged, to what looks like an odd model for a table in a upscale diner, but which is clearly non-functional. If painting had fallen, as some people in the '80s claimed, Lukin was responding to its fall with verve and humor 20 years earlier.

In contrast to other artists working with shaped canvases, Lukin kept pushing his forms further out into the viewer's space without ever letting go of the wall. Every part of his forms is painted a solid, saturated color. There is a dashing flair to his combinations of color, such as gray, tropical orange, and fiery red. He gets viewers to examine something whose identity eludes them. His protrusions, stylized calligraphic forms, and lolling tongues stop just short of becoming lewd. They suggest bodies undergoing transformation; and in this they share something with certain works of Eva Hesse, such as "Ringaround Arosie" (1965). The difference is that Lukin's pieces are often funny and self-mocking about male desire, while Hesse's are rooted in the female body.

Simultaneously volumetric and flat, sculptural and pictorial, "Disneysque" (1970–71) is a large two-dimensional gray base on which a stylized "D" or a looping, supposedly three-dimensional form rests. In truth, a piece of painted masonite, with a hint of perspective along one side, supports a logo-like form filled with flat brushwork, which has been simulated to suggest weight and density. "Disneysque" is a painting and a sculpture that gently mocks the historical constraints of each. (This is another point of contact that Lukin has with Hesse). And yet, more than being witty, there is an elegiac current running through the work, but even that doesn't take itself too seriously. Lamentation and celebration go hand in hand.

By making all kinds of contradictions inseparable, Saul and Lukin explode the perceptual conventions and historical assumptions that govern so much of the way we view both art and reality. People want to believe the world they inhabit is secure, and that there are unassailable zones of safety and comfort within reach. They want to believe that logical conclusions can be reached, and that there is a resolution to the story. Call it the "Penthouse Syndrome." Saul and Lukin do not fall for this malicious malarkey, and neither should we.