

: appreciation

## HELEN LUNDEBERG

**Celebrated in a new museum retrospective, the pioneering West Coast artist proudly wore her classicist label in an expansive career that evolved from Surrealism to hard-edged, landscape-based abstraction.**

**By Suzanne Muchnic**

Helen Lundeberg and her art were all of a piece—serene and silently profound. A private artist with enormous inner resources, she seemed to have little need for anything outside her tightly circumscribed life. But she had many public moments during her long career. At her debut, in 1931, she submitted her very first figure painting, *Apple Harvesters*, to a competitive exhibition at the Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego and won the judges' approval. Four years later she produced what would be her most famous painting, *Double Portrait of the Artist in Time*. The captivating self-portrait, encapsulating her growth from a sweet little girl to an accomplished artist, was in such demand for exhibitions and reproductions that she called it her *Mona Lisa*. As decades passed and Lundeberg became known as an extraordinary painter of pensive Surrealism and ambiguous abstraction, she compiled an enviable record of exhibitions in museums and galleries nationwide, from Los Angeles and San Francisco to New York and Washington, DC.

Even so, at her death in 1999, at 91 years of age, she had yet to receive the credit she deserved. That's still true. Her introverted personality and misfortune of being a female artist who lived and worked in Southern California before it emerged as a major art center severely limited her exposure. But her work never completely faded from view, and now her star seems to be rising. As Louis Stern Fine Arts has continued to show her work at the West Hollywood gallery and at international art fairs, museum curators have discovered Lundeberg or renewed their interest in her work. The result is growing recognition of a body of work that is easy to appreciate but difficult to categorize. A quietly adventurous modernist with a classical sensibility, Lundeberg was highly creative but thoroughly grounded. She was a disciplined dreamer who became a master of equivocal space, magical vision and exquisitely orchestrated color.

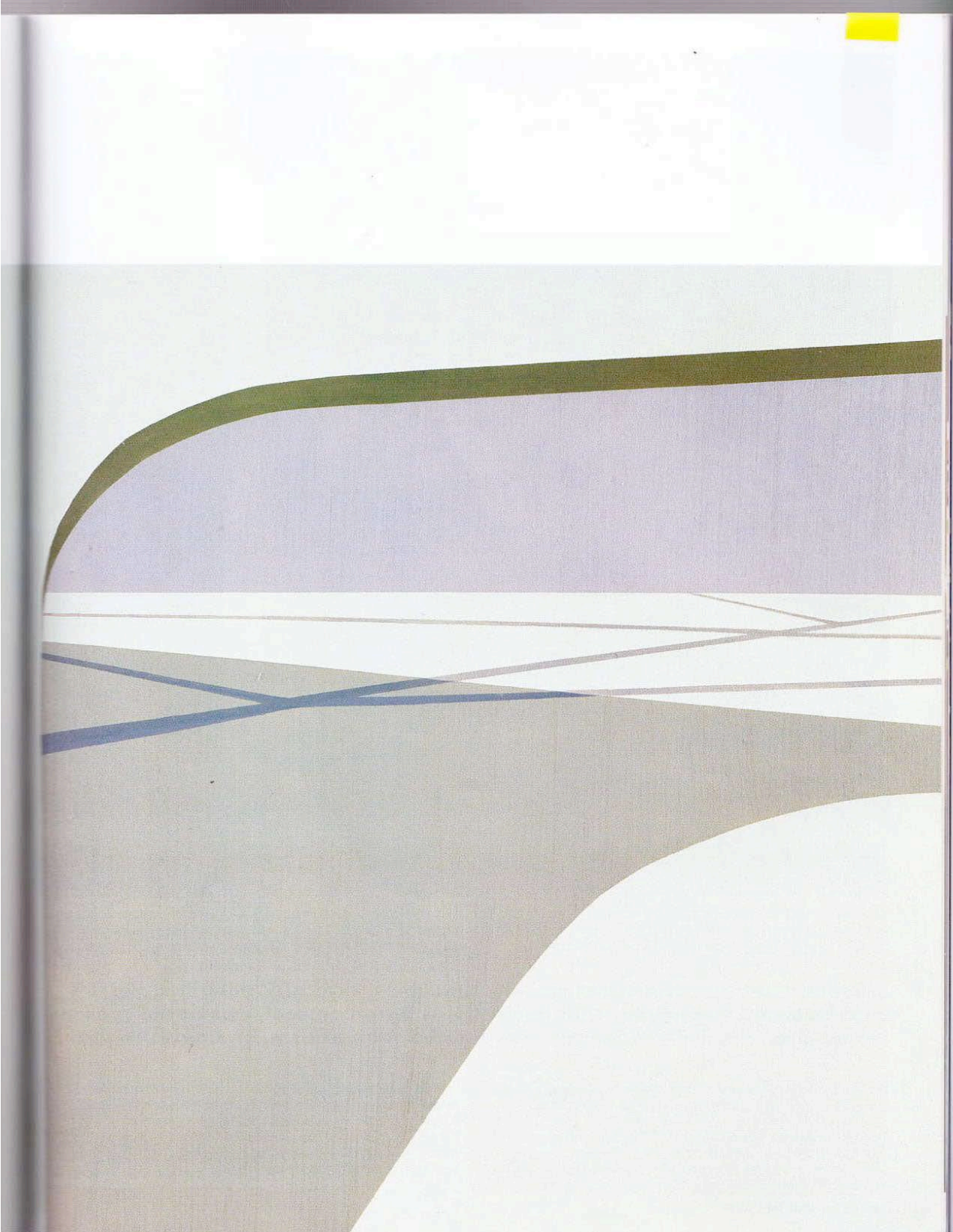
Among her most important exhibitions in the last decade, "The Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury," a 2007-2009 national traveling show organized by the Orange County Museum of Art, placed Lundeberg at the heart of a seminal modernist movement. The Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time initiative, a landmark exploration of the long-overlooked breadth and depth of art history in postwar Los Angeles, featured her work in three 2011-2012 exhibitions. They included the keystone presentation, "Crosscurrents in LA Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970" at the Getty Center. "In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States," an eye-opening show launched in 2012 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art before it traveled to Mexico and Canada, celebrated Lundeberg's connections to international Surrealism.

And now, the Laguna Art Museum is presenting (through May 30, 2016) the first full-scale museum retrospective of Lundeberg's work since her death. Guest curator Ilene Susan Fort, who is senior curator of American art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and co-organizer of "In Wonderland,"

"SHADOW OF THE BRIDGE," 1962  
OIL ON CANVAS, 50" x 50"

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LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART,  
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has selected about 50 paintings that track Lundeberg's progress from 1933 to 1987. Visitors see a dramatic evolution, from *The Mountain*, an earthy, sexually suggestive scene of nude and diaphanously

even the most abstract—refer to reality, or alternate realities. A spare, hard-edge composition that appears to be non-objective at first glance soon reveals itself as an interior/exterior conundrum. The spaces

**When pressed to account for herself, Lundeberg typically described herself as a classicist, explaining that her art was based on cool, calculated reason rather than intuitive outbursts, over-heated romanticism, or slavish realism.**

draped women intertwined with gnarly trees, to *Tidelands*, a breathtakingly luminous skyscape over a slip of pink and gray horizon.

Despite the diversity, strains of continuity tie the works together. From the beginning to the end of her career, Lundeberg drew most of her subject matter from memory and imagination, rarely painting directly from models, studio set-ups, or nature. Yet all of her works—

created by Lundeberg can shift from domestic containment to heavenly freedom, from empty rooms to borderless land or sea. A reclining nude can double as a ridge of rolling hills. A still-life or portrait can materialize as a picture within a picture, within another picture. As the artist sometimes said, she did not paint what she saw, she painted what she wanted to see.

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Born in 1908 to second-generation Swedish-Americans, Lundeberg spent her early childhood in Chicago and moved to Pasadena, California in 1912 with her parents and baby sister. An exceptionally bright, bookish youngster, Helen Margaret Lundeberg did well in Pasadena's public schools and junior college, developing interests in writing, science and art. But with no money for college and no clear direction, her future was uncertain until a family friend offered to pay for three months of classes at the nearby Stickney Memorial School of Fine Arts. Lundeberg enrolled in 1930, found her professional path and lost her heart to Lorser Feitelson, her "only real teacher," as she put it. A worldly artist 10 years her senior who had lived in New York and spent several years in Paris, Feitelson became her mentor and partner in art and, eventually, her husband.

Lundeberg owed a great debt to Feitelson, as she always said. A prominent painter, educator and advocate of modern art, Feitelson offered essential encouragement to Lundeberg and opened many doors. But apart from early collaborative ventures—most notably their co-founding of a movement initially called New Classicism and later known as Post-Surrealism, which offered a rational West Coast response to the irrationality of Surrealism—they created independent bodies of work.

Feitelson's place in history has been enhanced by his inclusion—along with Karl Benjamin, Frederick Hammersley and John McLaughlin—in "Four Abstract Classicists," a widely publicized exhibition presented in 1959 at the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art. Lundeberg's absence from the show has been criticized as a sexist slight because she was equally engaged in hard-edged abstraction at the time. But she insisted that her work was different from the non-objective paintings of the four featured artists. Her intention, she said, was to create three-dimensional illusions that put viewers in mind of streets, buildings and landscapes.

After Feitelson's death in 1978, Lundeberg did not crumble, as expected. She gathered her strength, took care of practical matters and got back to work. Her final painting, *Two Mountains*, made in 1990, is a stunning abstraction of a snow-capped peak with its mirror image reflected in a lake, but it can also be seen as a memorial double portrait.

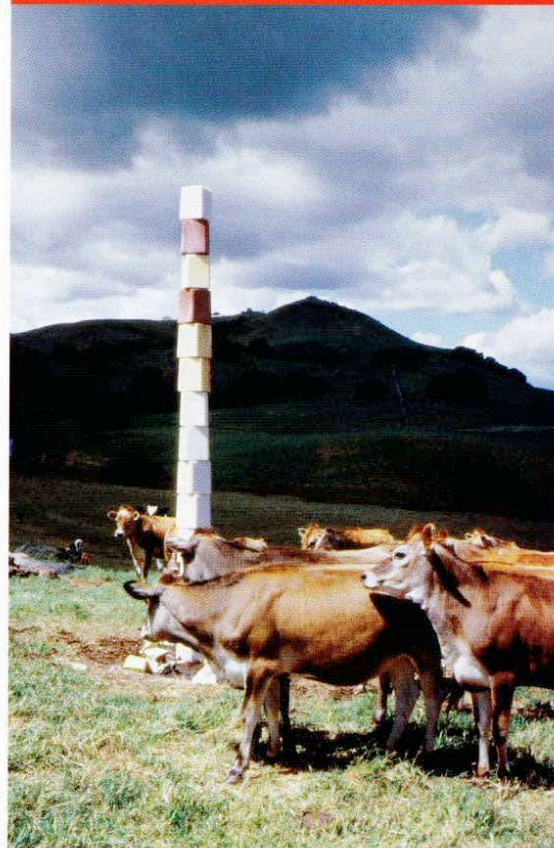
When pressed to account for herself, Lundeberg typically described herself as a classicist, explaining that her art was based on cool, calculated reason rather than intuitive outbursts, over-heated romanticism, or slavish realism. Her philosophy took shape in 1934 when she wrote the manifesto for New Classicism. But no matter how her work changed, the classicist label continued to suit her. It provided a structure for an expansive point of view.

"Lundeberg's ties to visual reality imbue her paintings with metaphorical specificity," critic Michael Duncan writes in the catalogue of the Laguna Art Museum's retrospective. "Carrying inherent psychological weight, her paintings seem charged with a primal power and a fully fleshed sense of the sublime. Light delineates Lundeberg's spaces, and she uses its gradations and shadows for illusionistic effects. Her art describes senses of vastness, emptiness, crepuscule, and dawning that spark a variety of moods and attitudes. Finally, however, it is the uniquely tempered mood of her work—its sense of intellectual serenity and calm control—that conveys its mesmerizing power."

OPPOSITE:  
 "AEGEAN LIGHT," 1973  
 ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 60" x 60"  
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 PHOTO: COURTESY LAGUNA ART MUSEUM

## Equilibrium: A Paul Kos Survey

April 16–October 2, 2016



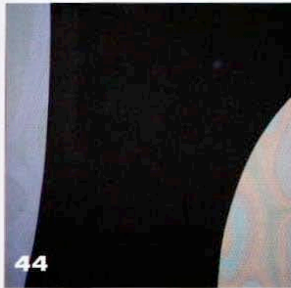
Beginning with Paul Kos's breakthrough early works on the di Rosa property in the late 1960s, *Equilibrium* surveys the Bay Area Conceptual artist's longstanding engagement with the natural landscape and use of materials in relation to a site, including works not shown in over 40 years.

Image: Paul Kos, *Lot's Wife* (installation view), 1969. Salt, Jersey cattle, dimensions variable. di Rosa Collection, Napa.



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PHOTO: HENRIK KAM

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WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK; PURCHASE,  
WITH FUNDS FROM FRANCES AND SYDNEY LEWIS BY  
EXCHANGE, THE MRS. PERCY URIS PURCHASE FUND  
AND THE PAINTING AND SCULPTURE COMMITTEE 87.7.  
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